

What We're Hearing: "The Last Year Really Opened My Eyes"

Why We Need a Socialist Revolution

By Luke

It's been a year from hell. Make that 18 months. What we're hearing from students now finally returning to campus is that the experience has really made them think about the society we live in. A lot of them are saying, "The last year really opened my eyes." How? Many were struck that, as one put it, "The healthcare system wasn't able to handle COVID."

"We still face the same things as when we were out in the protests after George Floyd was killed" in May 2020, others point out. Racist police terror led *millions* to take to the streets then, yet it continues unabated today. It's "endemic to the system," many came to see. Democrats used rhetoric about "reforming" the police to gain votes, but just as the Democrats have long been the bosses of the killer cops in cities across the country, today with the Democrats back in the White House the cops keep killing.

And in this coronavirus pandemic, the media and politicians praised essential workers, who in fact are treated as disposable; ruthless exploitation and the effects of deep-rooted racial oppression mean many have been risking their lives for poverty pay. It's what we revolutionary Marxists have



Internationalist contingent at May Day 2021 rally in NYC's Union Square.

called U.S. capitalism's triple pandemic of racist repression, COVID and economic crisis. Meanwhile, amidst all the suffering, perversely, billionaires saw their wealth increase as inequality got even starker.

When we ask new students, "Are you

interested in revolutionary politics?" a strikingly large number are answering not just "Yes" but "Hell yes." So, our work is cut out for us. Poverty and skyrocketing inequality; imperialist war abroad and growing repression "at home"; racial, eth-

nic and gender oppression and all the ways capitalism is devastating the world we live in – these are rooted in the system of production for profit, not human needs, and the ruling class that lives off it. Capitalism

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Democrats: Overseers of Racist Pandemic Capitalism

Capitalist Profit System Kills

"Africa Starved of Vaccines": An Imperialist Crime

By Maeve

For many young people, the COVID-19 pandemic has been a crash course in the dysfunction and chaos of capitalist society, exposing fundamental truths about how this system works. For starters, profit trumps everything. At the start of the pandemic in the U.S., widespread testing, extensive contact tracing and quarantining those infected were on the order of the day. But this was deemed too costly and disruptive to the flow of profits. Instead, those who tested positive (if they could get a test at all) were sent home to infect their families, facilitating the rapid spread of the virus.

When it became clear that COVID was

not going away, local and state governments cobbled half-measures together seeking to stem the tide. Hospital ICUs overflowed with patients and the dead were stashed in storage containers.¹ This is not only the case in the U.S., where, at the time of printing, over 600,000 people have died from the virus, and many more have lost their livelihoods and loved ones. Worldwide, as we go to press, over 4 million have died from the virus and over 200 million cases have been confirmed. And that does not account for unconfirmed deaths and infections.

When vaccines were developed and fi-

¹ See "Coronavirus and Capitalism" in *The Internationalist* No. 59, March-April 2020.

nally available for widespread distribution, this was a big advance. But the tragedy did not end. Predictably, rich countries gobbled up the lion's share of supply. This is not some random "inequity," as liberals would have it. It is the workings of *imperialism*, which Russian revolutionary leader V.I. Lenin explained is "the highest stage of capitalism."²

A stark example is the situation in Africa. At this critical point in the pandemic, where wealthy nations are approaching 60% and 70% vaccination rates, only about 4.6% of people in African countries have been even partially vaccinated. All this while the

² See V.I. Lenin, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916).

world's richest countries hoard 1.9 billion surplus doses – enough to vaccinate the entire adult population of the African continent.³ Citing the COVID crisis in Africa, on July 30 the World Health Organization's chief scientist stated: "Inequitable manufacturing and distribution of vaccines is behind the wave of death, which is now sweeping across many low- and middle-income countries that have been starved of vaccine supply."

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³ See Center for Strategic and International Studies: "Africa Reacts to U.S. Vaccine Distribution at Home and Abroad," July 29, and ONE Campaign: "Data Dive: The Astoundingly Unequal Vaccine Rollout."

Bernie Sanders and AOC Peddle Biden's Bitter Brew

By James

Revolutionaries “speak the truth to the masses, no matter how bitter it may be,” as Leon Trotsky emphasized in the “Transitional Program” of the Fourth International.¹ When in 2016 and again in 2020 Bernie Sanders ran in the Democratic presidential primaries promoting a politics of the “99%” against the “billionaire class,” we described his “political revolution” as a means to rope disaffected youth and workers back into voting for the Democratic politicians.

Today Sanders, the spiritual grandpa of “leftists” busy rebranding the same old arguments for Democratic Party electoralism, has stopped even pretending to oppose the “establishment” Democrats he gained popularity by denouncing.² When he dropped out of the 2020 presidential race and endorsed Biden, we noted that this is Sanders’ modus operandi:

“[Sanders] revved them up, registered them as Democrats and lined them up for the November 2020 vote. In April, Sanders dropped out of the primaries, throwing his weight behind the embodiment of the ‘Democratic establishment’ his followers had reviled: Joe Biden. Like we said from the beginning: Sanders’ so-called political revolution was and always has been a political scam, in the service of the Democrats.” – “Like We Said: Bernie Sanders’ ‘Political Revolution’ Was a Scam,” *Revolution* No. 17, August 2020.

His “insurgent” campaign over, his voters duly delivered to Biden, he has been given the new job (by the same Democratic “establishment”) of being head of the Senate Budget Committee. Yes, he’s one of the team. According to Sanders, Biden’s budget bill is “the most consequential piece of

¹ The Transitional Program was the founding document of the Fourth International, written in 1938 by Leon Trotsky, who co-led the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 with V.I. Lenin. The Fourth International was founded as the new world party of socialist revolution, when the Third International, after years of political degeneration, failed to mobilize the working masses of Germany against fascism to stop Hitler’s rise to power.

² See “No, Bernie Sanders Is Not a Socialist,” *Revolution* No. 12, March 2016.



Tamir Kalifa / New York Times

Biden and Sanders at the January 2021 Democratic primary debate in Iowa.

legislation for working people, the elderly, the children, the sick and the poor since FDR and the New Deal of the 1930s.”

While Sanders is reluctant to label himself as “pragmatic,” his former campaigners are willingly adopting it for him. Joseph Gevarghese, the executive director of Sanders’ Our Revolution PAC, announced the group’s new vision as that of “pragmatic progressives,” focused on campaigning for “progressive” Democrats, like former Ohio state senator Nina Turner, as “part of the overall ecosystem of the progressive movement” (*Associated Press*, 29 July).

The vacuous term “progressives,” no matter how obsessively it is repeated, cannot hide the fact that capitalism has been a thoroughly reactionary system for well over a century. Like the Republicans, though with different rhetoric and sometimes different tactics, the purpose of the Democratic Party is to administer and defend that system. As Nancy Pelosi said back in January 2017, “we’re capitalists and that’s just the way it is.” A big part of why capitalism has survived this long is that misleaders of workers and the oppressed have kept subjugating them to this party of the bosses. Along the way, pseudo-socialists always keep coming up with new excuses to lend them a hand.

Against them, we Trotskyists highlight Karl Marx’s point that the working class needs its own party, which “must never be the tagtail

of any bourgeois party; it must be independent and have its own policy” (1872). Building such a revolutionary workers party is crucial for a socialist revolution that will overthrow capitalism and usher in a workers government.

Then there’s Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC), who together with the rest of “the Squad,” is venomously accused of being “communist,” “unpatriotic,” etc., by misogynistic and racist rightists. In reality, they are liberal Democrats who have pledged allegiance to the red, white and blue, in words and deeds, over and over.³ Similar to Sanders, they advance the illusion that the Democratic Party can be made to “serve the people.” When Ocasio-Cortez bested longtime Democratic congressman and power broker Tim Cowley in the 2018 Democratic primaries, going on to win his Congressional seat, we made the point that, like Sanders’, her campaign sought to rebrand the Democratic Party, to make it palatable for a new generation of youth.

AOC was promoted by the “Justice Democrats,” and nominally joined the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), which at the City University of New York, for example, plasters her image on its leaflets. From the beginning, we told it like it is. A “socialist” in the Democratic Party? No way:

³ See “Dangerous Racist Provocations in Pre-Election Maneuvering,” *The Internationalist* No. 57, September-October 2019.

“Far from seeking to bury the world’s oldest capitalist party, the ‘democratic socialists’ ... seek to rescue, rebuild and refurbish it. That has always been the reason for existence of the Democratic (Party) Socialists of America, which Ocasio-Cortez joined after the DSA endorsed her campaign....”

– “Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to the Rescue of the Democratic Party,” *The Internationalist* No. 53, September-October 2018.

In contrast, reformist groups on the left tailed the DSA as an express ticket to the political big leagues. Two examples of this are Socialist Alternative (SALT) and the misnamed International Marxist Tendency (IMT). Both these groups share the political heritage of the “Militant” tendency that submerged itself in Britain’s ultra-reformist Labour Party, in which it claimed that socialism could be inaugurated through a parliamentary “enabling act.” (This social-democratic outlook is also why both of these tendencies have long claimed that cops are “workers” and even supported police and prison guard “strikes.”⁴)

For its part, SALT wrote of AOC that she could “provide a bold lead” as a “socialist” in office (*Socialist Alternative*, 4 October 2018), while the IMT characterized her as a “socialist” who defeated the “Democratic machine” (*Socialist Revolution*, 1 July 2018). When AOC groaned that in any other country, she and Joe Biden “would not be in the same party,” both of those groups latched on, launching flights of fancy that landed them in opportunist fantasy land.

SALT declared that “Bernie and AOC could lead millions of working class and young people out of the corporate straight jacket of the Democratic Party and into a new, truly democratic, party for the working class” (*Socialist Alternative*, 17 January 2020, italics in the original). Similarly, the IMT pretended she was threatening some kind of break with the Democrats, and built their own fantasy scenario on that basis: “if a mass socialist-labor-workers’ party

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⁴ See “Real Marxists Don’t Support Police and Prison-Guard ‘Unions,’” *Revolution* No. 17, August 2020.



Kena Betancur / Getty Images

Ocasio-Cortez endorses Sanders for president at his 19 October 2019 campaign rally in NYC.

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Revolution



Newspaper of the Revolutionary Internationalist Youth,
youth section of the Internationalist Group, and CUNY students from
the Internationalist Clubs, for the program of Marx, Lenin and Trotsky,
published in accord with the Internationalist Group, U.S. section of the
League for the Fourth International.

EDITOR: Julius Drago

Revolution is published by Mundial Publications, P.O. Box 3321, Church Street Station, New York, NY
10008, U.S.A. Telephone: (212) 460-0983 Fax: (212) 614-8711 E-mail: cunyinternationalists@gmail.com

No. 18



GCC/IBT 1162-M

September 2021

“From Black Nationalism to Maoism to Trotskyism” In Memory of Joe Johnson (1948-2021)

Joseph “Lil Joe” Johnson, whose youthful activism during the rise of the Black Panther Party in Los Angeles was an opening chapter in his life-long dedication to socialism, black freedom and Marxist education, died on June 5 at the age of 73. Born in Louisiana in 1948, he came of age in Los Angeles, where his self-education in the ideas of Marx, Lenin and Trotsky led him to become a mentor to generations of young radicals seeking a road to socialist revolution.

At a commemoration of Joe’s life on June 27, organized by his close comrade Connie White, she described him as a revolutionary “universalist” devoted to freeing all humanity from exploitation and oppression. Unaffiliated since the demise of the Socialist Collective he organized in the early 1970s, in recent years he became a frequent participant in Marxist study groups of the Internationalist Group/Revolutionary Internationalist Youth. With his boundless and contagious enthusiasm for political reading and debate, he combined the forthright, sometimes angular presentation of his views with dedication to political clarification as essential to revolutionary politics.

On 7 August 2020, comrade Johnson gave the following talk, titled “From Black Nationalism to Maoism to Trotskyism,” to the IG/RIY New York study group. Edited for publication with footnotes and subheads added by The Internationalist, it first appeared on internationalist.org. Given its importance for our readers, Revolution is printing it here.

It’s been a long period since we were recruited in the 1950s, ’60s, ’70s. If we go further back, the 1920s, ’30s, and ’40s were a transitional period from when blacks had been enslaved, and had then become sharecroppers. Racism was the racialization of relations of production; relations of production between the slave owner and the slaves who worked for them. In the movies they show slavery, black people being beaten and oppressed – but they never show them working. They don’t show them in the cotton fields, in the tobacco fields or in the cane fields. You don’t see the actual relations of production that were going on, where a slave owner owns the person and consequently owns whatever the slave produces.

Black Proletarians and Racial Oppression

I asked a comrade to send you all the song “John Henry.”¹ In this song, John Henry is a proletarian, but he had been a slave, or maybe his parents were slaves, and subsequently they had become sharecroppers. With the sharecropping system, it wasn’t feudalism like in Europe. The people, once they were freed or emancipated from slavery, they were no longer property, but they had no land, they would work the land of the former slave owners. Now they would exchange the surplus of their produce in order to keep access to the farm that they tilled with their families. Sharecroppers subsequently, a lot of them started leaving, others had just enough money to leave.

The Ku Klux Klan terror was going on in the 1930s and 1940s – like lynching; as you know, the Democrats didn’t really oppose it and Roosevelt didn’t do anything to stop it. For its part, the Communist Party (CP) had taken up the case of the Scottsboro Boys. A lot of blacks had gone to the Second World War, and before that the First, and when they came back were able to get into another class: the proletariat. So in the 1950s, for the black people that lived in the urban centers, the proletariat, working-class, wage-laboring, black proletariat concentrated in the cities, it was a different reality than when blacks lived as sharecroppers, working in the countryside, in the rural areas.

As I mentioned, the Second World War brought a lot of black people into the proletariat, like my mother, for example. I was born in Shreveport, Louisiana, in the Charity Hospital. My grandmother was a day laborer, she worked at the home of a white person, I don’t know if they were a slave owner or whatever, but she was a cleaner, she was a maid. And my mother was going into the same occupation. My father was a lumpen who would beat her and all that kind of sexist bullshit. But his father was a minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, which came about in the early 1800s as a black church.

The interesting thing is that my grandfather’s father was an abolitionist who

¹ A popular rendition of the song by Harry Belafonte is online at [youtube.com/watch?v=ydTRk110ZqI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ydTRk110ZqI)

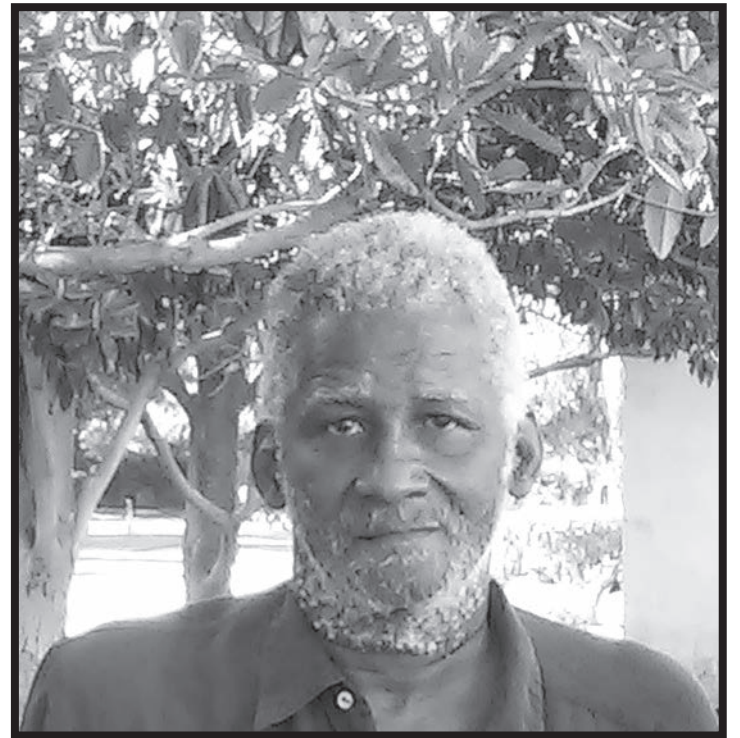
married the slave woman that he emancipated during the Civil War. Consequently, his son, who was my grandfather, his name was Horace Greeley Johnson. Horace Greeley! My father didn’t understand the significance of that. His father had a master’s degree, he spoke Latin, he was named after the abolitionist Horace Greeley, who worked with the *New York Tribune*, which Marx wrote for.

Later on, these connections became important to me, not from the standpoint of learning my history going back to African kings or something like that, but just in terms of the class struggles. What I’m trying to say is that the transition from the rural areas into the urban setting was also the proletarianization of black people who lived in these cities, and that in the 1950s it was the urban black people, the working-class black people, the wage-earning black people who formed unions, participated in unions, and who formed the Civil Rights movement. At the same time, you had the NAACP, which was contesting racial segregation and discrimination in the court system.

The Montgomery Bus Boycott started in 1955. It was the same there as in Louisiana: the blacks had to sit in the back of the bus and they had no rights, they couldn’t vote, they were not really citizens: if you can’t vote, what kind of citizenship is that? They wanted citizenship, they wanted to break down the racial barriers, they were definitely not into identity politics.

The other tendency at that time was the black racialists and the black petty bourgeoisie in the Nation of Islam. Originally Malcolm X was the articulate spokesman for this movement which was headed by Elijah Muhammad, its so-called prophet leader.

The Nation of Islam made deals – as before them the Universal Negro Improvement Association of Marcus Garvey (who called himself the “Emperor of the Kingdom of Africa”) made deals with the Ku Klux Klan. They denounced desegregation. They’d talk about the n-word – I’m not using that word. So the black petty bourgeoisie getting their own business was their objective and they said it was only the “house Negro” who wanted to “integrate with the white man.” Black nationalists, as they called themselves, who didn’t confront the state at all; they didn’t challenge a damn thing. They could say I’m black and I’m proud, and criticize the non-violent confrontation tactics of the Civil Rights movement, and make legitimate criticisms of the Democratic Kennedy administration, but they supported segregation and collaborated with the Ku Klux Klan.



Joe Johnson (1948-2021)

The American Nazi Party was invited to a Nation of Islam rally that they attended in their uniforms, where Elijah Muhammad gave a speech; the American Nazi Party praised the Nation of Islam, and the Nation of Islam praised the American Nazi Party. Previously, Marcus Garvey had worked with the Ku Klux Klan and praised them as “honest” white folks. At the same time, he attacked the CP, and black Communists specifically, as supposedly wanting to be around the white masters. It sounded militant, but was really reactionary. They didn’t achieve anything.

They lumped all white people together as “the white man.” Like the white cats in the Mississippi Three – the two Jewish men killed by the Klan in Mississippi together with an African American man? What white people would black workers work with other than white communists? The Nation of Islam was working for the ruling class by not just keeping black people and white people divided physically but also intellectually and ideologically, so “the white man” was your enemy. That’s what we were taught.

Cold War and Segregation

So this was the situation in which I grew up, in this anti-communist period. The socialization and education in this country were a process of brainwashing Americans about the Communists brainwashing people in Korea; about Khrushchev banging his shoe at the U.N.; the confrontation between U.S. imperialism versus Cuba and the Soviet Union in 1962 that nearly led to nuclear war; the movies they had.

This anti-communism was very deep and was part of our socialization in the 1950s. The schoolchildren, seven-year-old kids would be in a classroom and all of a sudden a buzzer goes off and we had to jump off our chairs and hide under the desks with our backs to the windows, as if that would protect us from a nuclear attack. They promoted the fear of communism, “Russian aggression” – the kind of shit

² On 21 June 1964, “Freedom Summer” activists James Chaney (21), Andrew Goodman (20) and Michael Schwerner (24) were arrested by police, then “disappeared” and brutally murdered by the KKK in Philadelphia, Mississippi.

PBS



Sharecroppers in Georgia, 1907.
September 2021

they're saying today about China³ – and that communists were basically *evil*. So it wasn't just the "white man," including trade-unionists, but the communists were also supposedly devils.

I grew up in the projects, in inner-city South Central Los Angeles. It wasn't as impoverished then as it is today. My mother came to L.A. from Louisiana, because black people were recruited by the military to come to California because men in the "white working class," quote unquote,⁴ were drafted into the army. Since the military needed weapons and equipment, they brought in blacks, including my mother, who started working at Lockheed Aircraft – she became one of those Rosie the Riveter women. It was a different reality from the South. My father also came from Louisiana. They were living in a hotel in downtown L.A., and at first the only skill she had was domestic work, cleaning houses for people. Later my mother moved into housing projects in Watts; I lived in Nickerson Gardens and Imperial Courts in Watts, and Pueblo del Rio. They had "Dogtown"; and in East L.A. it was the White Fence gang's territory.

At the time, in the black community in South Central L.A., in Watts, Compton – as in Oakland, parts of San Francisco and other places around the country – it was all black people. You would walk down the street, or take a ride, go downtown on the freeway and look to the left, to the right, and what you saw was black people. There was no integration, it was called *de facto* segregation. When we thought about white people then, we thought it was like the "Leave It to Beaver" family.⁵

The ghettoization separated working-

³ Comrade Johnson's views on the "Russian Question" and China had changed sharply from the period when his Socialist Collective merged briefly with the "third-campist" International Socialists in 1974.

⁴ This is a polemical reference to present-day leftists who claim there is a separate "white working class"; comrade Johnson had circulated among friends and colleagues our article "The Myth of a 'White Working Class' – 'Identity Politics' at a Dead End," *The Internationalist* No. 46, January-February 2017.

⁵ "Leave It to Beaver" (1957-63) was a TV sitcom purveying an image of white middle-class Cold War "normality."

class blacks and Chicanos.⁶ There had been the really brutal conflict of sailors versus the "pachucos" in East L.A. during World War Two. There was no conflict at the time between the black and Chicano people, there were the "zoot-suiters," who were trying to be cool. Then there was the violence originating with a white racist street gang called the "Spook Hunters."⁷ The Chicano gangs, the black gangs were basically organizations of working-class youth in South Central Los Angeles, Watts, East L.A., that were fighting each other, selling drugs, etc. And no one really had any money.

Nationalism in the 1960s

So to be a nationalist back in the 1960s, when I was a teenager dealing with nationalism, there *seemed* to be a material basis for it, when people said "We want black control over the black community." We didn't say what "black control of the black community" meant. The Progressive Labor Party then was talking about "community control," and so were others including the Young Lords Party in Chicago and then New York. It seemed natural that you had these ethnic communities and the consciousness and organizations that we went through. That is because we were working-class and unemployed young people, but consciousness and the organizations weren't based on our participation in social labor, in social production. What they were then was neighbor-

⁶ See the article by Charles Brover, "'American Apartheid' By Design," on the website of Class Struggle Education Workers, which reproduces the federal government housing map of Los Angeles showing in red the areas to which black, Latino and Asian populations were largely confined, hence the term "red-lining."

⁷ Mexican American youth who wore a style of clothing known as the "zoot suit" were sometimes known as "pachucos," and were the targets of racist attacks spearheaded by white sailors in Los Angeles' so-called "Zoot Suit Riots" of June 1943. (This is the topic of the 1981 film based on Chicano playwright Luis Valdez's play *Zoot Suit*.) Originating in the 1940s, the white racist gang that comrade Johnson refers to sought to violently enforce racial boundaries against African Americans newly arrived in L.A.

hood groups.

And like it says in another song I sent out, "Tobacco Road": "I was born in a dump.... Bring that dynamite and crane, blow it up, start all over again." So like that song, the idea was saying, OK, we're going to rebuild the black community and make it as comfortable and decent as possible. Whereas "John Henry" talks about labor as social production. When they were building the railroad, there were workers of every ethnicity, mainly Chinese – they called them "coolies." And we need each other in the labor process. Class consciousness brings workers together.

After the Watts Riot, the uprising in 1965, nationalism was put on the agenda as something practicable: people were talking about how we want black police to patrol the neighborhood, the slums, talking about a black mayor. I was out in Compton, and I was thinking, "You know, we could have a black mayor of Compton, someone like [Black Panthers] Elaine Brown or Bunchy Carter, and we could have Huey P. Newton as chief of police in Compton – you get the picture. At the time it seemed rational because it seemed possible.

And I read some stuff about ancient Greece and Rome. I read Plato about the *polis* [ideal city], independent city-states, and also material about kings in Africa. But what practically can we do with this? Can we make Compton or South Central L.A. an independent republic? Would that mean when you travel from Compton to Long Beach, you have to have a passport? That they would have an army? Would it be like the bantustans in South Africa⁸ – or like Gaza and the West Bank with the Palestinians, or like Native American reservations? When you begin to think about what it means to talk about black control of the black community, it breaks down.

But after Watts in 1965 and rebellions in other cities, you got black mayors: Tom Bradley in Los Angeles, Harold Washington in Chicago, the black mayor in [Tallahassee] Florida, etc. They were all part of the Democratic Party. A friend of mine used to say Jesse Jackson is not the representative of the black community in the Democratic Party, but a representative of the Democratic Party in the black community. And we said the same thing about the labor lieutenants of capital, the labor officials who are not representatives of the working class in the Democratic Party, but representatives of the Democratic Party inside the trade unions.

That was the substance, the essence, the reality of the black nationalists with

⁸ Bantustans were the supposed black "homelands" that apartheid South Africa set up as reserves of black labor and a means of police-state control.



Woman riveter at Lockheed Aircraft in Burbank, California where Joe Johnson's mother worked during World War II.

black mayors, black chiefs of police. Empiricism: you change the appearance, the color of the skin. Like my comrade Dedon said, "A change in the color of the skin does not change the essence of the state, which is still the state of the capitalist ruling class." And so you've really got to understand political demographics and class realities.

Malcolm spoke to the resentment of black people. We were dealing at that time based on appearances: you see a man beating a man, that is an empirical observation. The man doing the beating is white and the man being beaten is black. That's an empirical observation. And also the man who is doing the beating has got on a badge, which gives him the authority to beat citizens, to hurt people, to jail people, to kill people. You do not just empirically recognize authority, that takes a deeper understanding of these relationships.

In the '60s, I spent a lot of time in the California Youth Authority.⁹ I was doing stuff there that the staff didn't like and I was thinking of myself at the time as a black nationalist; I didn't like white people. Then I said I was a Muslim, I stopped eating pork, stopped masturbating, the whole bit. I was doing time; I was 17 years old. They put me in solitary confinement for about 6 months, like with Geronimo.¹⁰

They wanted anybody that had any kind of critical thinking separated from the rest of the population and put in solitary confinement. Although I was not really thinking I was a revolutionary, I was thinking at the time as a black nationalist, which is not revolutionary. Black nationalism had the appearance of being revolutionary but in essence it was reactionary. When I got out, I was strictly a nationalist, thought white people were the problem, the whole thing.

⁹ The California Youth Authority was the notoriously brutal incarceration system for "youth offenders" in California, renamed Division of Juvenile Justice in 2005.

¹⁰ Los Angeles Black Panther leader Geronimo Pratt (1947-2011) spent 8 years in solitary confinement during the 27 years he was imprisoned on frame-up murder charges as part of the FBI/police COINTELPRO program; in 1997 his conviction was overturned. (See "Geronimo Is Out! Now Free Mumia!" *The Internationalist* supplement, June 1997.)



Racist attack by white sailors on Chicanos in East L.A., part of the "Zoot Suit Riots" in 1943.

I considered myself a follower of Malcolm X. Then he was assassinated in 1965.

Malcolm had been arrested and judged. We were the victims of white racism. And it was all white folks as far as we were concerned then. We didn't at the time look behind the appearances to understand the relationships: the state as special bodies of armed men – but you don't see "the state"; you see the police, you see the guards, you see the judges, you see white men oppressing black people. You don't see the basis of the social relations; it's something you have to learn, through struggle and through analysis and through study.

Maoism and the Panthers

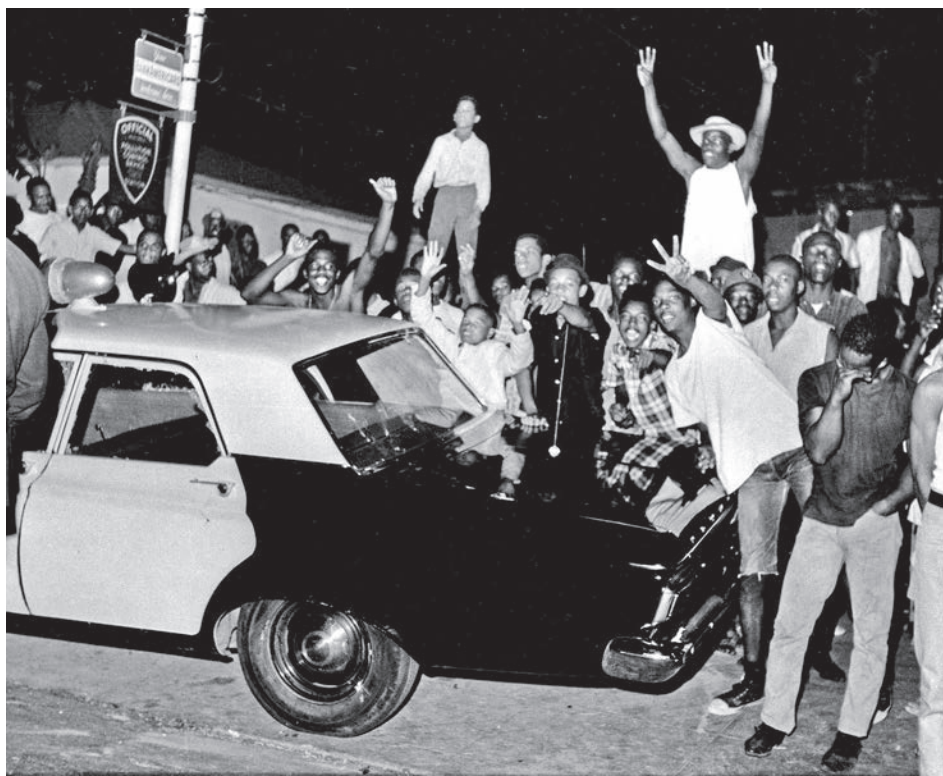
During the Watts uprising in '65, for the first time, the police were backing up – they weren't moving forward killing us.

In the '50s we'd had gangs – Bunchy Carter, he was with the Slauson gang; my friend Baba and another friend from the Youth Authority, it was the gangs called the 20s and the Outlaws; there was the Gladiators, etc. But all those gangs dissipated after the 1965 rebellion. I didn't do any looting; I was 17 years old; I didn't have any analysis, but we were saying: "Hey, rather than a gang to protect our neighborhood from another gang, let's organize to protect our people from racist attacks and from police brutality."

And that's when the Black Panther Party (BPP) came into existence. Bunchy Carter started it here in Los Angeles.¹¹ At that time I was around a fellow who said he was Malcolm X's cousin; he looked like Malcolm X, with a little hat and a beard. Malcolm said that a revolution overthrows the system, and he talked about armed self-defense. It seemed to jibe with Mao's Red Book, where Mao was saying political power grows out of the barrel of a gun. So people associated Malcolm X with Mao Zedong.

In one of the films on the Black Panther Party – I'm not talking about the movie about the cartoon character – they present it as opportunistically purchasing Red Books in order to get money to buy guns. I know that the Panther Party did not buy Red Books to sell them to make money off of what they then

¹¹ Alprentice "Bunchy" Carter (1942-1969), together with fellow L.A. Panther leader John Huggins (1945-1969), was shot dead on the UCLA campus by members of Ron Karenga's "cultural nationalist" US (United Slaves) organization in a COINTELPRO-instigated assassination.



Protesters rise up against police terror in Watts, Los Angeles, August 1965.

called "white mother country radicals" – they bought the Red Books to read.

In terms of Maoist groups then: there was one in L.A. led by Michael Laski, called the Communist Party USA (Marxist-Leninist); and the Progressive Labor Party, they were Maoists; there was the Republic of New Afrika. The Panthers were putting [Maoist ideas] together, and we listened to the recordings of Malcolm X's speeches and we thought, "Yeah!" But Malcolm didn't really understand revolution as destroying a particular set of social relationships and ushering in different ones in terms of production and distribution of material objects.

We were for the most part very young, in our late teens or twenties – so don't judge us too harshly. When we first saw Mao's book *On Contradiction*, I thought it was about people contradicting themselves in an argument. When I first picked up Lenin's *State and Revolution*, I thought it was about the state like the state of California. When Mao was talking about the peasant masses, I thought he was talking about farm workers in Los Angeles County, in Long Beach. When Mao talked about the landowner class, I thought he was talking about people who owned apartment buildings. We were interpreting all this material for ourselves with no knowledge of what

they actually were and what they meant objectively, materially.

I was running from the police, they were trying to get rid of me in Compton.¹² That's when I started dealing with the Black Panther Party in Los Angeles. I also dealt with the Panthers in Oakland. Masai Hewitt,¹³ myself and others – we were struggling to understand black nationalism and what it would actually mean to be a "liberated black nation." The Black Panther Party maintained that the black community was an oppressed nation, but also occupied, that the police were colonial; they called it a "domestic colony." We watched movies such as *The Battle of Algiers*, which I encourage people to watch, because it was very important to what we thought it meant to be revolutionaries and the idea of an "armed struggle" for liberation.

The Panther Party, as you know: it was suppressed. We all know about George Jackson, killed in San Quentin. You know about Fred Hampton being assassinated together with Mark Clark. We know about Mumia Abu-Jamal, and how the black Democratic mayor of Philadelphia, Wilson Goode, dropped bombs on the MOVE house.¹⁴ They started calling the house a bunker. When you hear the media talking about a person's home as a bunker, you

¹² A letter to the Socialist Workers Party's *Militant* (2 August 1968) describes the arrest of Joseph Johnson and two others by Compton police who found them with leaflets by a local "Black Nationalist Party" as well as "some books by Lenin"; it quotes Johnson as attributing the felony charges of assaulting a police officer to "the cops 'remembering Watts'."

¹³ Raymond "Masai" Hewitt (1941-1988) was a leading Black Panther in Los Angeles and a target of a notorious COINTELPRO smear campaign.

¹⁴ George Jackson (1941-1971), one of the "Soledad Brothers," became an influential voice of black radicalism before prison authorities murdered him while he was trying to escape San Quentin prison on 21 August 1971. Targeted by COINTELPRO, Chicago Black Panther leaders Fred Hampton (1948-1969) and Mark Clark (1947-1969) were assassinated by police in a COINTELPRO operation on 4 December 1969. On 13 May 1985, with the approval of Mayor Goode, Philadelphia police dropped an explosive incendiary provided by Ronald Reagan's "Justice" Department on the MOVE commune, killing 11 black men, women and children. For more on the MOVE massacre, see "It Will Take Workers' Power to Free Mumia Abu-Jamal!" *The Internationalist* No. 26, July 2007.

know the bombs are going to drop soon.

The Black Panther Party down on Central Avenue was raided in '69; I had been dealing with them for maybe a year or so, but I was in East L.A. doing other stuff.¹⁵ The reason that the Panther Party on Central Avenue survived, that they came out alive, was because we were able to bring out the community and bring out the press. Geronimo, he was in the building, along with others – Roland Freeman, "Peaches" [Renee Moore], different people. They survived the shoot-out, but a factor in this was that the media was there and consequently a tank wasn't brought in like in Waco, Texas,¹⁶ or aerial bombardment like in the case of MOVE. So the struggle was real.

"In Love with Theory"

In the intervening period, I had the good fortune that I was always in love with theory. I had already read Plato's *Dialogues*, but I also got a lot of help from Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* – he analyzed the scriptures and materialism – as well as Thomas Paine's *Age of Reason*, as I was trying to figure out what was going on. That's when I read the *Communist Manifesto* and it was, "Wow." Everything became clear. And it's still clear.

I didn't have a phone then, so I ran to the telephone booth and got the directory, to get me the phone number for the Communist Party, because the pamphlet was called the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. I said, "Hey, I want to be a part of this"; but on the phone they were hemming and hawing and kind of suspicious. But in this group with [Hakim] Jamal and the Malcolm X Foundation,¹⁷ I was talking about the *Communist Manifesto* and Lenin's *State and Revolution*. I had an idea of what revolution is and that black nationalism wasn't revolutionary.

So, I came to understand that it's not about individuals getting rich and improving the conditions of black people in the inner city, it's about the necessity for what Lenin called the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat. From reading the *Communist Manifesto* and *State and Revolution*, I was hooked, I was convinced.

In 1968, Martin Luther King was assassinated and we had the uprisings all over the country, about 120 cities in flames. The music was encouraging too, Bob Dylan, the beginnings of rock and roll anti-war culture, which was developing together with the black liberation movement. I was about 19 years old then, I was not even old enough to see my man John Coltrane, since you had to be 21 to go see him.

In terms of reading, at that point I

¹⁵ Four days after the police murder of Fred Hampton and Mark Clark in Chicago, the L.A. Black Panther office on 41st and Central was targeted by the world's first major raid by a SWAT (Special Weapons and Tactics) team. Cops demolished the office, wounded 6 Panthers and arrested 13 in the 8 December 1969 raid.

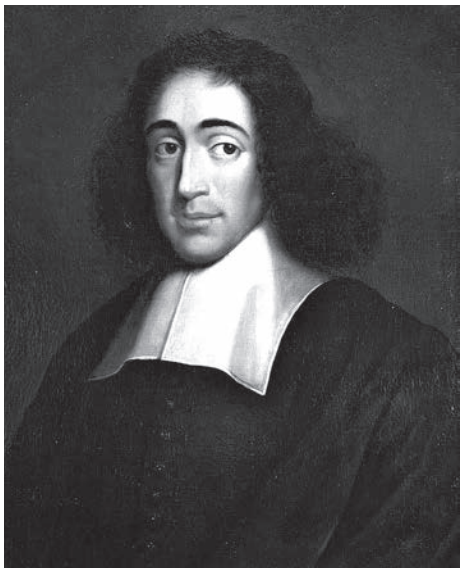
¹⁶ Early in the Democratic administration of Bill Clinton, in a siege culminating on 19 April 1993, the FBI, ATF (Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms) and other federal and state agencies used tanks and other weaponry against the "Branch Davidians" compound in Waco, allegedly in search of illegal firearms, killing 76 members of the religious sect, including 20 children.

¹⁷ The Malcolm X Foundation was established by Hakim Jamal (1931-1973), an activist then based in Compton, around 1968.



Black Panther Party leader Fred Hampton speaking in Chicago's Grant Park in September 1969. Three months later, he was murdered by Chicago police working with the FBI in an infamous COINTELPRO operation.

September 2021



Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677)

hadn't read anything from the SWP.¹⁸ Just Mao's Red Book and stuff from the CP. But reading Marx and Lenin made a big difference: I was able to transition away from racialism, what they called nationalism – though I really didn't understand class struggle and class consciousness until the 1970s. But I want to emphasize that people wanted to be revolutionaries; we wanted to be revolutionaries, but didn't know how.

There was a Maoist bookstore in Watts. There was the Communist Party bookstore, Mike Davis was working there at the time.¹⁹ The CP bookstore had a lot of good Marxist literature from Progress Publishers, and Laski and his group had *Peking Review* and some Maoist works, posters and little badges everyone would wear.

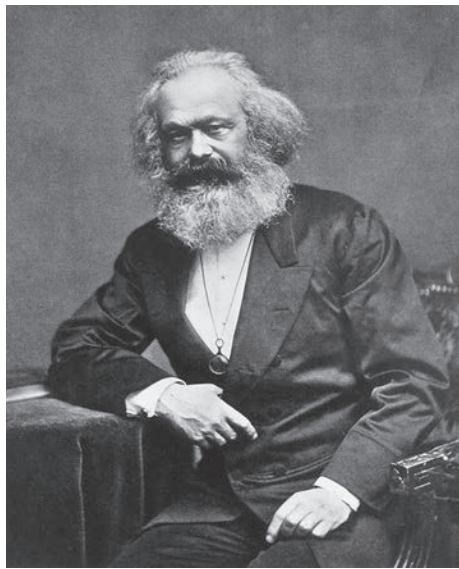
The SWP had their bookstore in East L.A. Me and my comrades from Compton would go there and they would direct us to their black literature section, where they would give us books by Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Richard Wright and others; nothing wrong with those books. W.E.B. Du Bois' *Souls of Black Folks*. But we were not introduced to Trotskyist literature! So we didn't have a coherent political analysis. We didn't even know what to analyze, though black nationalism was bankrupt.

Around that time, the students at Carver Junior High School got beat up by the police,²⁰ and I had been driven out of Compton by the police. So I was out in Los Angeles in the underground working with a group called the Black Students Alliance when there was a city-wide student strike protest. Responding to what we saw occur, I repeatedly came into conflict with the Communist Party, because they were always working with the Democratic Party and attempting to water down what we were trying to do. I didn't understand it in class politics/party terms; I thought of it then as what the Maoists called "Khrushchev revisionism." I didn't understand it yet as Stalinism.

¹⁸ Though it had turned decisively to reformism in the early 1960s, the Socialist Workers Party was still the largest organization claiming the heritage of Trotskyism at that time.

¹⁹ Former CPer Mike Davis is a prolific leftist writer and historian; most recently he co-authored *Set the Night on Fire: L.A. in the Sixties* (2020).

²⁰ Los Angeles-area high schools and junior highs were rocked by a wave of student walkouts in 1967-69, the best known of which are the 1968 "East L.A. walkouts" or "Chicano blowouts" depicted in the 2006 film *Walkout*. Carver Junior High was one of the schools where protests involved large numbers of young black (and some white) students. In 1969, Joe Johnson was one of the speakers who made the rounds of schools in solidarity with these protests.



Karl Marx (1818-1883)

"Trotsky Was What the Doctor Ordered"

A few years later, I happened to go to a conference against the killing of the students at Kent State.²¹ I saw a poster there saying, "Rebuild the Fourth International." I knew about Marx and the First International; I knew from Lenin about Karl Kautsky and the Second International; I didn't know what became of the Third International, but the idea of a new International sounded wonderful to me. I wanted to investigate, what the hell is a Fourth International?

It turned out the poster was for a conference organized by the Workers League, so I had some discussions with Tim Wohlforth.²² He had an analysis of black nationalism from a Trotskyist working-class perspective, and they had a list of books that I was able to hunt down on my own. I took about six months or so in order to get this Trotskyism thing, reading *The Revolution Betrayed*, which was difficult because I wasn't familiar with any of the categories about the Soviet Union in the 1920s and '30s. I read *In Defense of Marxism*, which I loved, particularly the part called "The ABC of Materialist Dialectics."

That was because I had already been interested in philosophy, with Mao's "On Contradiction" plus Plato, Spinoza – and I really wanted to learn something new philosophically, so I really loved that item by Trotsky; not only that, but it was useful! Now I was able to understand and do combat with the Communist Party! I was able to understand the labor bureaucracy, I was able to understand the connections between the CP and the Soviet Union. Trotsky at that time for me was what the doctor ordered, and I needed that.

Later on, the 1980s brought the repressive era of the Reagan administration [starting with] the breaking of the PATCO strike; then the 1990s, beginning with Bill Clinton's attacks on the singer/

²¹ On 4 May 1970, the Ohio National Guard opened fire on a protest at Kent State University against Nixon's invasion of Cambodia, killing four students and wounding nine.

²² The Workers League (WL), led by Tim Wohlforth (1933-2019), was the U.S. affiliate of Gerry Healy's "International Committee of the Fourth International." Lil Joe became a member of the WL, whose *Bulletin* (15 March 1971) published his analysis of the Panthers' split between followers of Huey Newton (1942-1989) and Eldridge Cleaver (1935-1998). Joe broke with the Healy/Wohlforth brand of "Trotskyism" over several issues including their support for the 1971 New York police "strike."

rapper Sister Souljah.²³ Clinton did this at a rally organized by Jesse Jackson, who had been a Civil Rights worker in Chicago in the 1960s, but in the '80s ran for president. Jackson was a Democrat, as were most of the former Civil Rights leaders who had participated in struggles with the SCLC [Southern Christian Leadership Conference], Martin Luther King, the NAACP; then the so-called Black Congressional Caucus which is nothing but black Democrats, so-called "progressives."

All of this stuff back in the 1980s was different from the experiences we had in the 1950s, '60s, '70s when we were actually confronting the state power and the racialized institutions that existed – segregation, Jim Crow, discrimination in jobs and hiring, against not only blacks but also women. You can look back at the protests in Birmingham, Alabama, where the state tear-gassed and turned water hoses on black children protesters.

So like Marx said in his "Theses on Feuerbach," theory is a practical thing, it's not just sitting around and interpreting phenomena; it's revolutionary. To understand the world and change it requires theoretical investigation and depth of knowledge. What Marx does is like The Wizard of Oz, exposing what is behind the curtain. You hear the wizard's voice, you see the smoke, but you don't understand that it's a show, that there are things going on behind the curtain that you don't have access to. Almost like the tradition of the ancient Israelites, who carried the "Ark of the Covenant" [supposedly containing the Ten Commandments] behind a curtain; while in ancient Egypt, the priests would carry representations of the gods, but only they had access to the inner sanctum.

So theory, Marxism, enabled me to take a peek behind the curtain. And I'm still peeking behind the curtain.

²³ In 1981, Ronald Reagan kicked off his first presidential term by firing more than 11,000 striking members of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO), escalating the anti-union offensive of his Democratic predecessor, Jimmy Carter. Campaigning for the presidency in 1992, Bill Clinton gave a speech to Jackson's Rainbow Coalition in which he infamously compared Sister Souljah to the notorious Klansman David Duke.



Leon Trotsky in Coyoacán, Mexico, 1939.

* * *

Some of comrade Johnson's comments responding to the question/discussion period:

I just want to point something out, about identity politics, for young people that grew up, say, in the '90s and thereafter: the motives of identity politics are not the same as the black nationalism of the latter part of the 1960s.

Connie and I were talking about the DSA, Freedom Socialist Party, some group that calls itself Marx21. And there are people talking about "white skin privilege." The identity people are not the same as the Black Panther Party back in the '60s and '70s. Now you've got these opportunists on TV, you know the type. They have programs with a black person explaining to the camera how black people feel about police killings, with Al Sharpton and with Cornel West talking about the "black prophetic tradition." And there are people who get paid to be experts on what it means to be a Negro; they get paid to push identity politics and denounce the working class as a bunch of racist SOBs.

The media in this country don't tell viewers what's going on in the world; they tell them what they're supposed to think about what's going on in the world. They encourage the bombing and destruction, coups in Latin America, etc. Meanwhile AOC talks about Venezuela.²⁴ You know, these people represent the Democratic Party, and that's what this identity politics stuff is all about. And as part of it, when working-class people go to the university, white students coming from the working class are made to feel guilt.

So the identity politics people are not the same people as the Black Panther Party, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, etc.; they don't have the same interests, they are not of the same class. So much for identity politics...

The movement in the 1960s and '70s, we had to deal with concrete problems because we were very serious about revolution. We read Lenin, we

²⁴ Democratic Socialists of America congressperson Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez chimed in with the rest of the Democratic caucus backing U.S. "democracy" promotion in Venezuela, voting \$20 million for the failed coup attempt of 2019.

read Marx. We saw what was going on in Vietnam, with the burning of villages, the picture of the little girl running after being burned with napalm.

We understood that this state will do anything to maintain their power. And with the murder of Fred Hampton and George Jackson, some of us were coming toward an understanding of class struggle. Masai Hewitt and John Huggins and others of us dealt with these questions, and I was basically assigned to work with the Black Students Alliance.

So I was free to do a critical analysis. [Eventually] we found our way to Trotskyism. We had no help. The CP certainly didn't help us.

In 1969, I had a falling out with the Black Panther Party, when I was giving a speech at their "United Front Against Fascism" conference in Oakland.²⁵ The Spartacist League and the Progressive Labor Party and other Marxist groups were there. But the Spartacist League was being physically attacked for doing a critical analysis of the Communist Party. And I said, "Don't do that, don't attack these people." And I diverted from where my speech was, there in Bobby Hutton Park, and addressed the conflict.

Recall that the Panthers and others who talked about Maoism in the black community did not discuss Mao's "bloc of four classes" or what a popular front was. To refer to Maoism initially meant political power brought "from the barrel of a gun"; and later on, "serve the people."

During the civil war in China, Mao's Chinese Community Party and People's Liberation Army, based on the peasantry, set up "liberated zones" in which they would organize production, distribution, medical aid, etc. That's what they meant by serving the people, in the context of guerrilla warfare.

Whereas the concept of actually "having power" in black communities was not really dealt with by the Panther Party or other groups. "Serve the people" meant sickle-cell anemia testing, breakfast for children – all this is good, wonderful stuff. But it ain't revolutionary. I put it this way around the time of the United Front Against Fascism, it could sound cynical, but what they were calling "socialism by example" became a black militant version of the Salvation Army.

How could the working class come to power? How will we win state power? These were revolutionary concepts that were not dealt with by any of the organizations that I was familiar with in the '60s. Eventually we did read Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution*, in particular the chapter called "Five Days," where he talks about how the military ranks were won over to the revolution. What a soviet means; and state power, how you confront and overcome it. But back in the '60s this wasn't really discussed, we weren't really aware of it.

What about the situation today? "Black Lives Matter" is a complaint, about police killing black people; and you hear people talking about "Defund the police." The state won't defund itself! We didn't have ignorant statements like

²⁵ As repression against the Panthers continued to escalate, in July 1969 they held a "United Front Against Fascism" conference in Oakland, a bloc with the CP and Peace and Freedom Party in a largely unsuccessful effort to cement an ongoing alliance with reformist left and liberal forces.

Remembering Lil Joe



At the memorial meeting, "Lil Joe Johnson, Celebrating a Revolutionary Life," 27 June 2021.

The following remarks were made by Los Angeles transit worker Joe Wagner, a supporter of the Internationalist Group, at the June 27 commemoration for Joe Johnson.

¡Luchar por el socialismo! ¡Que viva Lil Joe!

I first met Lil Joe at a Marxist study group, almost 20 years ago. The office we would meet at was up a massive flight of stairs. It was work to make it up those stairs, but he was happy to do it. He knew that at the end of the struggle to make it up 77 steps (I counted them), he would be in a room with youth and others that were interested in every word and every carefully crafted sentence that he would formulate.

He was a natural debater. A worldly man who made complex ideas accessible. He loved getting to know the youth and learning as he was teaching complex ideas. Marxism, he would explain in intricate detail, is not a dogma but a guide to action; theory is never to be denigrated. He encouraged the youth to read what he had read. He

would say that one's experience with oppression is not enough to develop a plan to overcome it.

At a recent talk Lil Joe gave on the lessons of his political development, "From Black Nationalism to Maoism to Trotskyism," he explained to the youth of today that revolutionary politics did not just come to him, like a premonition, but it was a process of hard struggle and hard theoretical study and debate.

He knew that the ruling class would never, ever allow the exploited and oppressed to be taught in their institutions what it would take to overthrow their rule. So he saw it as his job to seek out the knowledge he needed, to educate himself and then to raise the level of political consciousness of the oppressed. Not just the consciousness that they were exploited as workers or oppressed as an oppressed community but a far deeper level of understanding. The objective that Lil Joe had was to prepare the young worker for the coming to power of the proletariat; the consciousness that the workers should rule and bring all the oppressed up with them.

To his last days, he was reading and studying and analyzing his previously held positions. He was steeled but remained flexible to challenging even his own preconceived notions in the course of debates, and happily learning new things.

And all the knowledge that he learned, that he understood, that helped point out the road forward to revolution, he wanted to share it with others, so that the youth of today could likewise get closer to finding the road to revolution. That's what made him light up with joy: knowing that in Marxist theory he could see a light at the end of the tunnel for humanity and that he had a key role to play in passing on important lessons to the youth of today, who could, armed with that knowledge, better continue forward on that road to liberation.

We must carry forward this fight: let's continue reading, studying, debating and putting what we learn into action, to follow the revolutionary road to victory. Long live Lil Joe! ■

that, "Defund the police." And, "Speak truth to power": what the hell does that mean? There's nothing revolutionary about speaking truth to power. Revolution is for the working class to become the power!

Historically, when you look back at the French Revolution, you see they had the guillotine. Proletarian revolution would abolish capitalist commodity production and wage labor; it would replace markets and circulation of commodities with "from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs."

I wanted to mention that in 1919, two years after the founding of the Soviet state, while there was civil war in Russia; Rosa Luxemburg and the Spartakusbund in Germany; troops from France also in mutiny – while the working class was rising up against capital and struggling for power throughout Europe, in America you had the

"race riots" against blacks in 1919. They had revolutions, we had race riots.

In his book *Black Bourgeoisie* (1957), E. Franklin Frazier talked about how racial divisions were used. And blacks were brought into the military. You need to attack racism, but that doesn't mean black people should be applauding or proud of the fact – like identity politics people – that black soldiers were sent to kill workers in Europe or Japan, or that the Tuskegee airmen were used to drop bombs across the goddamn world.²⁶

So again, identity politics is bourgeois.

In the late '60s they started talking about black capitalism. And Fred Hampton

²⁶ The U.S. sent approximately 200,000 black troops, in segregated units, to Europe during World War One; during WWII, 1.2 million African Americans were in the armed forces; the first black flying squadron, known as the "Tuskegee airmen," was deployed to North Africa, and then to Italy.

said, when there was discussion of black and white, and class struggle: We do not fight fire with fire; the best way to fight fire is with water. We do not fight racism with black cultural nationalism; we fight racism with interracial working-class solidarity. We do not fight capitalism by promoting black capitalism; we fight capitalism by producing socialism.²⁷

But in this sense, he was talking about the social programs of the Black Panther Party. Myself and others in the movement at that time, we still weren't referring to the expropriation of the expropriators and the forces of production; a planned economy – these kinds of discussions were kept from us by the CP and others. And I was in jail at the time. I'll leave it there. ■

²⁷ A video of the famous 1969 Fred Hampton speech referred to is online: [youtube.com/watch?v=jn1YA00Ffwo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jn1YA00Ffwo)

Revolution...

continued from page 1

can't be reformed; it must be overthrown. Only revolution can bring justice.¹

We Marxists are fighting for a socialist revolution, unlike the raft of fake-socialists who help tie the oppressed to the Democratic Party. We call to break with the Democrats and all bosses' parties and to forge a revolutionary workers party. Helping win young people to the program of socialist revolution by the multiracial working class, here and around the world, is why the Revolutionary Internationalist Youth (RIY, youth section of the Internationalist Group) and the Internationalist Clubs at the City University of New York publish *Revolution*, organize forums and Marxist study groups, help build revolutionary contingents in anti-racist protests as well as solidarity actions with labor strikes, immigrant workers' organizing campaigns and much more.

Us: Break with the Democrats! Them: Maybe... Later... Never

For many, 2020 was a year when it seemed like a decade was being compressed into a few weeks – while in other ways, it seemed to drag on forever. On March 13 of last year, after petulantly downplaying the threat posed by COVID-19, then-president Donald Trump was forced to declare a state of emergency. Within a few short weeks the pandemic was raging throughout the country. Almost overnight, life changed drastically. Many wondered if it would ever be the same again.²

Then on 25 May 2020, Minneapolis cops headed by Derek Chauvin murdered George Floyd, and yet again the unendurable images of racist terror and lynching were burned into our brains forever. During the mass upheaval sparked by this horror, multi-racial crowds, largely young and often coming to their first-ever protest, filled the streets. The energy on those streets was electric. Despite bitter anger, many hoped “real change” was possible; some even thought the old order of racist America was on its last legs. Yet Democratic politicians, pro-Democrat Black Lives Matter leaders and the Democratic (Party) Socialists of America, tailed by a range of pseudo-Marxist groups, sought to funnel this into votes for the oldest capitalist party in the world. (Having emerged as the party of the slaveowners, the Democratic Party formally adopted that name in 1844 and for the past century and a half has alternated in office with the other main ruling-class party, the Republicans.)

Amidst the upheaval of 2020, Bernie Sanders did his job – for the Democrats. Just as he had in the previous presidential election, the Vermont senator endorsed and rounded up votes for the candidate of the Democratic “establishment” against which he, joined by a new wave of “progressives,” had waged his phony “political revolution” campaign. With Joe Biden now facing off against Trump, 2020 was presented as “the most consequential election of our lifetime.” (Of course, this is a very old line going back at least to the face-off between the loony Re-



Kamala Harris in Guatemala in early June 2021, where she told migrants fleeing desperate conditions in Central America: “Do not come.”

publican reactionary Barry Goldwater and Democrat Lyndon Johnson – the “lesser evil” of 1964 who, after winning, massively escalated the genocidal U.S. war on Vietnam.) A hip and youthful spin to the timeworn pitch was provided this time around by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. After denouncing Biden as the personification of the corrupt and discredited “Democratic establishment,” “AOC” joined “Bernie” in campaigning for Biden and his vice-presidential candidate Kamala Harris, the former top cop of California.

So the appeal was made yet again to hold your nose and vote for the Democratic nominee – including by those “left”/“progressive”/DSA *et al.* Democrats, who made their name by railing against the “Democratic establishment,” Biden and all he stood for. Against this, the Internationalist Group/Revolutionary Internationalist Youth highlighted the call to break with the Democrats, Republicans plus any and all other bourgeois parties (such as the Greens) and build a revolutionary workers party on the program of international socialist revolution.³ This expresses the bedrock Marxist principle of fighting for the revolutionary *political independence of the working class*. To unchain the power of the working class, and bring that power into the fight to uproot every form of oppression, it is key to break the political chains subjugating the workers and oppressed to the Democratic Party of U.S. imperialism.

Before and during the presidential campaign, where Donald Trump constantly outdid himself in spewing racist and xenophobic filth to any reporter within 100 feet of the White House, Biden promised to restore “decency.” Claiming that “our best days lie ahead,” he pitched himself as an experienced leader – a “steady hand” who, in contrast to the erratic Trump, could reverse course on the botched response to the pandemic, “heal” the country’s racial divisions and refurbish U.S. imperialism’s image worldwide. Biden-Harris won, and the Democrats gained control of the White House as well as (slim) majorities in both houses of Congress.

Now, a year after the mass protests of summer 2020, optimistic hopes for “change” that many felt during the first weeks of that upsurge have largely dissipated. It’s all too apparent that nothing fundamental has changed, while some things threaten to get even worse. Despite the widespread availability of COVID vaccines in the U.S., the virus continues its grim march from hotspot to hotspot, with the Delta variant complicating the picture. The merciless drumbeat of police killings continues, with 1,308 so far this year (as of August

18).⁴ Where last year many Democratic politicians vowed to “defund” the police, now they are not only upping police funding but unveiling their “new midterm [elections] strategy: knocking the GOP for vote against police funding” in Biden’s American Rescue Plan (*The Intercept*, 28 July).

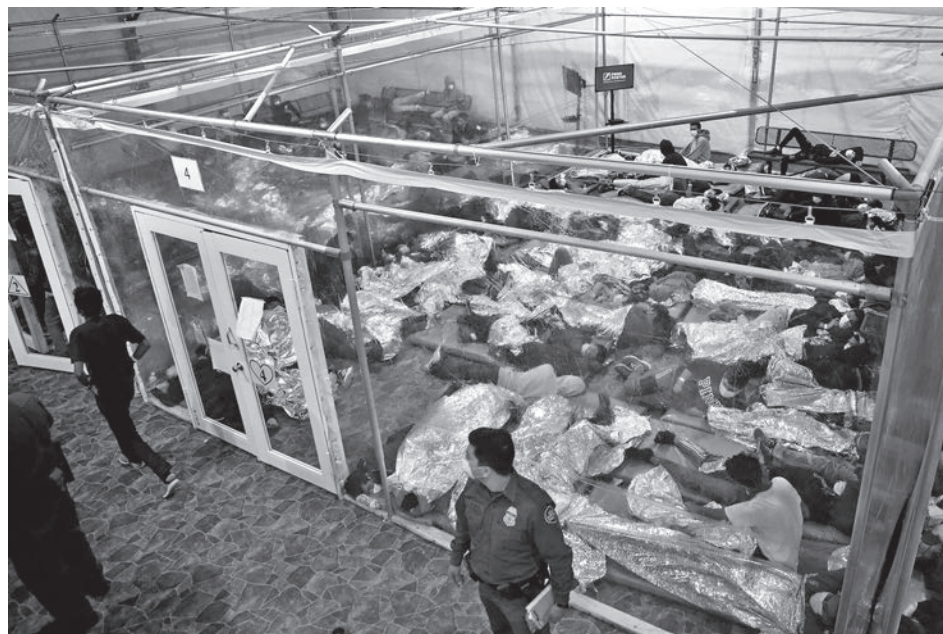
With the Biden presidency well into its first year, many are drawing the conclusion that Biden’s “build back better” bullshit means “business-as-usual” when it comes to ensuring mega-profits for the bourgeoisie – and unceasing suffering and devastation for the masses in this decaying capitalist system.

What has been the role of the Democratic Socialists of America in all this? The Bernie boom and revulsion against Trump led to the ballooning of the DSA, which went from a moribund group to one now claiming 92,000 members. This growth of young new members jazzed up by Sanders “socialism” would, opportunist leftists claimed, increasingly pull the DSA to the left. With this argument, they dreamed up ever new excuses to jump on the bandwagon of this social-democratic pressure group in and on the Democratic Party.⁵

As we predicted, however, far from this lessening (let alone ending) the immersion of would-be leftists in Democratic Party electoral politics, they sank even deeper in that morass. The DSA’s new members, together with the supposedly Marxist groups tailing them, were pulled not to the left but increasingly to the right as “democratic socialism” turned out to consist of door-knocking and envelope-stuffing for both “progressive” and “establishment” Democrats. The skids were

⁴ See fatalencounters.org

⁵ See Internationalist Group pamphlet, *DSA: Fronting for the Democrats* (2018).



Children crammed into a “pod” at Donna, Texas migrant holding facility on March 30. Designed for 250 people, over 4,000 were held there.

greased for this process by a lot of hokum theorization about a “dirty” (as opposed to “clean”) break with the Democrats that would supposedly happen, someday, just not now. Their task accomplished, these rationalizations have been discarded. No surprise there; the process repeats what happened with previous generations of reformists. For her part, Ocasio-Cortez bitterly denounces leftists who don’t go along. (See article on page 2).

Against all varieties of reformists and pro-Democratic “socialists,” we fight for the genuine communism of Marx, Lenin and Trotsky. Today, quite a few youth have been left with a bitter taste by the phony promises of Sanders’ “political revolution” (which we characterized from the beginning as “a big fat scam”) and the bourgeois electoralism of the DSA. Some of them are looking for revolutionary answers. We invite them to investigate the great issues that have shaped the different tendencies on the left, take nothing for granted, read everything (including our publications) and get in touch if you like what we have to say.

The Biden-Harris Deportation Machine

Perhaps nowhere has Joe Biden stayed the course of his predecessor Donald Trump more than at the U.S.-Mexico border. Trump largely based himself on and escalated the practices of Barack Obama, who earned the moniker “deporter-in-chief” for having deported over 5 million immigrants (over 8 million if you count those “voluntarily” removed). From Trump’s grotesque “Muslim ban” to the sadistic policy of “family separation” at the border, regular raids on immigrant communities by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (I.C.E.) agents and constant reports of abuse and brutal treatment inside the concentration camps holding immigrants at the southern border, every day seemed to bring word of some new atrocity.

During his 2020 campaign, Biden sought to win votes by making immigration a central issue. He called Trump’s immigration policy a “moral failing and a national shame.... It’s wrong, and it stops when Joe Biden is elected president.” Of course, it didn’t. In its first month in office his administration deported over 29,000 people, not including those picked up near the border and “returned” to Mexico. Biden has been using Trump’s pandemic emergency rule to expel any adults or families that the Border Patrol encounters, including refugees seeking asylum. Unaccompanied children and teens are not turned away at the border, but they are

¹ See “The Racist Police Murder of George Floyd: Only Revolution Can Bring Justice,” *Revolution* No. 17, August 2020.

² See “Coronavirus and Capitalism,” *The Internationalist* No. 59, March-April 2020, and “‘We’re All in This Together.’ You Think? Top Ten Lies in the Time of Coronavirus and Mass Protests,” online at <http://www.internationalist.org/top-10-lies-in-time-of-corona-virus-2008.html>

³ See “Repression Elections 2020,” *The Internationalist* No. 61, September-October 2020.

left to languish in Border Patrol-run jails and euphemistically labeled “influx facilities.” More than 9,000 arrived at the border in February, triple the number in 2020, with 19,000 more in March (CBS News, 8 April). Meant to house 250, a facility in Donna, Texas, held over 4,000 children that same month. We call for “Workers Action to Shut Down I.C.E. Concentration Camps – Stop Biden’s Deportations, Let the Kids Go!” (*The Internationalist* No. 62, January-March 2021).

Under Trump, many were shocked by photos of children and teenagers, forcibly separated from their parents and crowded together in cages, lying on concrete floors under flimsy space blankets. (In fact, some of these photos were taken during the Obama administration’s 2014 immigration crackdown.) Claiming that Biden’s was not a continuation of Trump’s policy, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki claimed in February that this isn’t “kids being kept in cages.” Actually, that’s exactly what it is. The only difference? Now they’re huddled together in the midst of a deadly pandemic.

Among the Democrats crying foul over kids in cages under Trump was then-Senator Kamala Harris, who called it “a crime against humanity.” Now, as Biden’s VP, she tries for an Academy Award in the hypocrisy category, solemnly admonishing “Do not come” to immigrant families fleeing poverty and violence caused by U.S. imperialism’s depredations. The message is clear: whether a Democrat or Republican occupies the White House, U.S. imperialism’s brutal and often deadly treatment of migrants and refugees shall remain. The Paris Commune of 1871 and the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 granted all immigrants *full citizenship rights*.⁶ Fighting for workers revolution today, we raise this same demand, together with asylum for refugees fleeing the ravages caused by imperialism.

From “Defund” to “Defend”

Last year, mass outrage at the murder of George Floyd sparked the biggest sustained protests in U.S. history, convulsing the country and holding center stage in politics for much of that summer.⁷ While racial oppression has been a defining characteristic of U.S. society going back to its origins in the system of chattel slavery, in recent years the inescapable truth that U.S. “policing” is racist by nature – a daily reality for black people and other doubly oppressed sectors – has been brought home to increasing numbers of youth throughout the country. In 2014, the murder of Eric Garner in NYC and Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, brought the Black Lives Matter movement to national prominence. With the rise of social media, an unending series of horrifying images and videos of police terror reach the screens of millions.

From Tamir Rice in Cleveland to Freddie Gray in Baltimore, to Philando Castile in Minneapolis and Breonna Taylor in Louisville, and so many more, public outcry over this terror mounted. The Internationalist Group has fought to bring the *power* of the multiracial, multiethnic working class into the struggle. On May Day 2015, the West Coast dock workers (International Longshore and Warehouse Union) shut down the

⁶ See “The Workers Struggle Has No Border: Immigrants’ Rights and Revolution,” *Revolution* No. 15, September 2018.

⁷ See “When Will It End? The Racist Police Lynching of George Floyd,” *Revolution* No. 17 (August 2020) and “To Uproot Racist Oppression: Socialist Revolution,” *The Internationalist* No. 60 (May-July 2020).



Biden holds court with local politicians and police brass from across the country to discuss “investment” in police departments and “community-based” reforms, July 12. Among those present was former NYPD cop Eric Adams, who is running for NYC mayor on a “tough on crime” agenda, and David Brown, superintendent of the Chicago PD, a department notorious for running CIA-style “black site” torture centers.

Port of Oakland and marched on city hall demanding “Stop Police Killings of Black and Brown People.” And on 19 June 2020, the ILWU shut down all 29 West Coast ports against police brutality and systemic racism, spearheading a march of thousands.

Innumerable Democratic elected officials and aspirants, aided by reformist left groups, worked overtime to keep the mass protests within acceptable bounds, manage down their expectations and above all direct the anger and energy into channels advantageous for the Democratic Party. However, this time the standard-issue calls for paltry “reforms” like review boards, “police accountability” and “better” training were finding a less receptive audience. In the past, many had put their faith in everything from “community” policing to body cams, black police chiefs, etc. But the bitter experience of watching these and countless other “reforms” being implemented with no results had left many yearning for more “systemic” change.

Now the call was to “defund” the police. The reformist appeal for the bourgeois state to “defund” itself – i.e., at most, shift some money around and make police repression cheaper – was adorned with a more leftist veneer by groups raising the illusory call for “abolishing” the police under capitalism.⁸ An early example of what “defund the police” actually boiled down to was provided in New York City, where, among other Democratic politicians, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez echoed the call to “defund the police.” (Republican yahoos jumped on this to rev up their raving that AOC, who cites FDR and Robert F. Kennedy as her heroes, is the red menace incarnate.) In July 2020, after much hullabaloo and an “occupation” across from NYC’s City Hall, \$1 billion in the NYC police budget was “shifted,” including by promising to move the funds for school “safety officers” out of the NYPD purview.

Such flimflam exemplifies how illusions in the reformability of the bourgeois state actually stand in the way of effective struggle against racist repression in the here and now. What’s required is the massive mobilization of workers *power* together with all the oppressed. Originating as slave patrols in the

⁸ See “Opportunist Word Games to Justify Tailoring Democrats – ‘Abolish the Police’ Under Capitalism?” *The Internationalist* No. 60, May-July 2020.

South and strikebreakers in the North, police forces are a central pillar of racist U.S. capitalism. No matter the rhetorical flourishes adopted for the occasion in 2020 by “progressives” of the Democratic Party, these politicians of the bourgeoisie will never give the cops anything less than what they need to guarantee that capitalist “law and order” prevails. And by the nature of capitalism in this country, that has always meant terrorizing African American, Latino and immigrant communities. As proclaimed on one of the large banners carried by Internationalist contingents throughout the summer of 2020: “The Police Can’t Be ‘Reformed’ – Black Liberation Through Socialist Revolution.”

Almost as soon as Biden took office, Democrats who had been talking about or even promising to “defund” the police changed their tune to: *defend and uphold* this key part of the capitalist state that they administer. In February 2021, the media reported that the Minneapolis City Council, run by the Minnesota affiliate of the Democratic Party, had completed its reversal of the pledge it had made after George Floyd’s murder to defund and supposedly dismantle the city’s police department. With no discussion, it approved additional funding that the department requested. As for AOC: in 2018, after echoing calls to “abolish I.C.E.” she voted to fund it on her very first day in Congress. Further flip-flops followed; it’s in the nature of the “progressive” game.

For his part, whatever else you might say about him, Biden has been consistent in never making any bones about his total and complete support for cops. In fact, that’s a big part of how he got his start in politics back in the ’70s as a hard-line “law and order” Democrat and rabid opponent of busing for school desegregation. Biden spent most of 2020 in a kind of “good cop/bad cop” routine with Donald Trump. Where they dis-

agreed, it was often a distinction without a difference. While Trump, in sinister incitement, bellowed “when the looting starts, the shooting starts,” Biden took a more “measured” approach and suggested protestors should “only” be shot in the leg. What a telling illustration of the difference between the Republican and Democratic parties. And in fact, one after another, most notorious cases of racist police killings in recent years have been in Democrat-run big cities (Atlanta, Baltimore, Chicago, Cleveland, L.A., Minneapolis, NYC, etc.).

What about Bernie Sanders? In June 2020 he reiterated his demand for pay *raises* for the cops, as well as his opposition to calls to “defund” the police. In August of this year, Republican Alabama senator Tommy Tuberville tried to set a trap for Democrats by offering an amendment to their \$3.5 trillion budget resolution. His amendment’s non-binding wording “suggested cutting federal aid to municipalities that defund the police” (AP, 11 August). Cory Booker jumped on this, saying Democrats should “not walk, but sashay down” to vote in favor of this and “put to bed this scurrilous accusation that somebody in this great esteemed body would want to defund the police.” Tuberville’s amendment “passed by a vote of 99 to 0,” noted the *New York Times* (25 August), “thus completing a canny political turn for Democrats on the tricky matter of policing.” Of course, trickery was what these bourgeois politicians were up to from the get-go. (And yes, Bernie “99%” Sanders was one of those 99 senators voting “Yea.”)

Today, the Democrats are presiding over widespread racist police murder, with cops killing at the same rate as under Trump. Biden is deporting as many or more immigrants as Trump. Yet there are almost no protests against police killings or deportations. Overwhelmingly, the left, black activist and immigrant rights groups that organized those protests under Trump are not doing so today. Why not? Because they voted for the Democrats. Thus Biden is their guy, so when the Democrats do the same thing as the Trump, you get massive silence.

Where Do We Go From Here?

If it’s clear that something needs to change, to most it is less obvious what needs to be done. Over the past period, everyone from protesters in the streets to opinion writers for the *New York Times* has been talking about systemic racism, systemic injustice, and systemic change. (For their part, right-wing reactionaries are obsessed with trying to *stop* any talk of this.)



Corey Booker on Senate floor urging fellow Democrats to vote for amendment against “defunding” police.

On Rejecting Anarchism and Joining RIY Radicalized By George Floyd Protests

Last summer's protests against the racist police murder of George Floyd drew millions into the streets, many of them young people getting involved in politics for the first time. In a period where that mass outrage and desire for change were being channeled into the Democratic Party, revolutionaries worked to counter reformist illusions and put forward a program for black liberation through socialist revolution. The following lightly edited and excerpted letter of application to the Revolutionary Internationalist Youth from comrade Lola, who joined recently, is an example of how RIY has been winning youth looking for genuine revolutionary politics.

The violent murder of George Floyd on May 25th, 2020 radicalized me and many others to the realities of policing in this country and around the world. I started attending protests and marches that first Friday, and went out almost every night from then on. Although I now understand the liberal attitudes prevalent in these protests, those first two weeks radicalized me in a way that nothing else really could. Multiple physical clashes were carried out by police, and me and my friends and others were being brutalized with what seemed like endless force. But in the moment, it felt like the only thing we could do.

Weeks went by, we continued marching, but it was starting to feel like the radical energy was being sucked from the movement. Groups started forming and organizing "peaceful" protests, telling us which candidates to vote for in the upcoming election, telling us to use our privilege to call our congresspeople to pass such and such a bill, telling us that if we disagreed with anything they said or did, we were probably racist and needed to check ourselves and our "internalized white supremacy." Identity politics were the number one rule of these new groups and marches,



Internationalists at 6 June 2020 protest in Brooklyn, New York against the racist police murder of George Floyd.

and it's taken a lot of work for me to come out of that mindset. But we continued marching, and we continued chanting and hoping that something tangible would come of this.

I was beginning to feel disillusioned with the protests and these groups, but didn't really feel like there was an outlet for me to voice that. It seemed like everyone else was still very on board with marching for five hours every night over the Brooklyn Bridge and being told to simply vote for Joe Biden at the end of it. I felt as if we were getting nowhere. It was around this time that I was sold my first newspaper by a comrade of the Revolutionary Internationalist Youth (RIY). Some person walks up to me and asks if I want a communist newspaper, and I feel like something has just clicked into place.

I have learned a lot since reading that

first paper, and I've had to unlearn a lot of things that I fully believed to be fact, things I never thought could ever be disproven. Specifically, learning the history or real meaning behind certain chants was very eye-opening for me. An example would be the extremely popular chant of "No Justice, No Peace." This feeds into the idea that there can be justice in a capitalist system, which we know is not true. And disrupting traffic on one city block for a few hours does not even register as a blip on the ruling class's radar.

While trying to figure out where I stood politically, I became close with a number of anarchists, and even organized an action in that line of thinking. Truth be told, I had no idea what I was doing. I was invested in the protests but disillusioned with the structure and stupidity of some of the things I had wit-

nessed from different groups. I felt like I personally had to do something in order to "wake people up." I think that if I had not met this group (IG/RIY) when I did, I would more than likely have become some sort of anarchist.

The entire point of the action I had "organized" (I created the poster for it) was that there was supposed to be no leaders or organizers and no hierarchy. There was a set route created beforehand, but right off the bat the cops prevented us from following it. They split up the group [of protesters] who couldn't find or get in contact with each other again. This action was almost a complete waste of time and energy. But it did show me that I wasn't an anarchist, although I will always appreciate the willingness of anarchists to show up against fascists and the far right. I had to learn that anarchists are extremely liberal in their beliefs and reliance on identity politics, despite their hatred of capitalism. Graffitiing banks will never bring an end to capitalism. Only the international organized revolutionary working class can bring about the end of capitalism.

I think my joining RIY shows that some who don't agree initially can be won over. I believed in what these organizers were preaching at the time, as I was given no other options, until I was presented with a communist newspaper at exactly the right time. I felt like I was wandering through these different actions and groups, like others who became disillusioned with the norm that had taken hold of the protests of last summer. I know of some anarchists who left their groups because of the constant infighting that would happen, as no one could live up to the "revolutionary" standards of their "idpol"-influenced moral purity, and they were tired of it. I know people are tired of the liberal norm, the same way I was. It's only a matter of taking the time with them. ■

But what is the "system"? The system is capitalism, which relies on the exploitation and oppression of the working class to function. Its cops, courts and jails are central to the capitalist state, the machinery of repression which exists to uphold the property, profits and power of the ruling class.

So *unless* we recognize that nothing fundamental changes until the capitalist system is overthrown, it's all buzzwords and empty phrases. Nothing fundamental changes until we recognize that in the fight against capitalism, working people can have no confidence in any parties or politicians of the ruling class, whether "blue" (Democratic) or "red" (Republican), big or small. Self-described socialists who run on the Democratic Party ticket perform a vital service to the bourgeoisie, helping spread the illusion that "this time, things *will* be different" if a Democrat is elected.

As V.I. Lenin stated in an article on the "Tasks of the Third [Communist] International," which was founded two years after he and Leon Trotsky led the 1917 revolution that overthrew capitalism in Russia: "It is impossible to accomplish the socialist revolution if you join hands with those

who pull in the direction of the bourgeoisie." To end the horror show of capitalism, which long ago became reactionary on a world scale, we need a socialist revolution. Capitalism's chaos and destruction must be replaced with international socialist planning, organized through the proletarian democracy of workers councils, to fulfill the needs of all humanity. The Revolutionary Internationalist Youth tells the truth – that the working class needs a party of its own. It needs to be a genuinely red one, like Lenin and Trotsky's Bolsheviks. Helping to forge that revolutionary workers party for socialist revolution is not an easy task, but is the most crucial one of all for those who have come to see the need for socialist revolution. The events of the last year and a half have emphasized just how urgent this is today. ■

Biden's Brew...

continued from page 2

existed in the US, we can be sure she would be on the reformist right wing of that party instead of in the capitalist Democrats" (*Socialist Revolution*, 24 January 2020).

What was the purpose of these ridicu-

lous daydreams? To justify their abject tailing of bourgeois politicians who seek to lead young people into the same old dead end of rejuvenating the Democratic Party. Along this road, generations of erstwhile activists have been made into Democratic hacks. Meanwhile, AOC's ruminations that by rights she oughtn't be in the same party as Biden have quickly been left behind. An interview with AOC by DSA magazine *Democratic Left* published on March 19 was enlightening. Far from "Talking Socialism" as the title claims, the core of the interview is Ocasio-Cortez going after Biden's critics on the left with a vengeance. When asked what her view is on those who "conclude that no progress is going to come out of the Biden administration," she had this to say:

"Well, I think it's a really privileged [!] critique.... For anyone who brings that up, we really have to ask ourselves, what is the message that you are sending to your Black and brown and undocumented members of your community, to your friends, when you say nothing has changed? ...When you say 'nothing has changed,' you are calling the people who are now protected from deportation 'no one'."

That interview has not aged well. Upon taking office, Biden immediately ignored his pledge of no deportations in his first 100 days, deporting almost 29,000 people in just his first month in office.⁵ So the "undocumented members of your community" that AOC referred to would be expressing "privilege" if they denounced Biden's deportations? And critics of pro-cop "shoot 'em in the leg" Biden, infamous for his long Senate career promoting segregation, are "privileged" to oppose him? Please.

It is the duty of revolutionaries to "tell the truth to the masses" about bourgeois politicians like Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, instead of opportunistically following along whenever they "talk left." Those groups that claim to be socialist but nevertheless indulge the idea that there are "socialist" politicians in the Democratic Party are entrenching illusions among workers and youth – the opposite of what genuine socialists are about. The urgent need today is to **break from the Democrats and build a revolutionary workers party.** ■

⁵ See "Stop Biden's Deportations, Let the Kids Go!" *The Internationalist* No. 62, January-March 2021.

Response to “Left Voice” Supporters

Real Reds Don't Bow to Anti-Communist Bans

Anti-communist bans and restrictions on free speech rights have been attempted by City University of New York (CUNY) authorities many times, from the 1930s down to the Board of Trustees' push to curtail “expressive conduct” amidst protests (initiated by the CUNY Internationalist Clubs) against war criminal David Petraeus, the former CIA chief and Iraq/Afghanistan war commander they hired in 2013 as a sinister provocation.¹ Sometimes they have succeeded for a time, but in almost all cases, determined activists have been able to either defeat these proscriptions outright or eventually overturn them.

Such censorship attempts are if anything even more alarming when carried out or backed by students or faculty themselves. This aspect features in historian Andrew Feffer's recent *Bad Faith: Teachers, Liberalism, and the Origins of McCarthyism* (2019), which documents the role of liberal and even “socialist” professors in the infamous Rapp-Coudert hearings that targeted hundreds of “subversive” and Communist faculty members, students and staff at Brooklyn, Hunter, Queens and City colleges (today all part of the CUNY system) from 1940 to '42.

In a previous issue of *Revolution*, we discussed the drive to impose blatant anti-communist censorship at an organizing conference on key issues facing CUNY faculty, students and workers, held in March 2019.² As the faculty/staff union's campaign for a new contract highlighted the unbearable inequalities of CUNY's “two-tier labor system,” the “7K or Strike” conference was slated to discuss strategy and perspectives in the fight for a minimum starting salary of \$7,000 per three-credit course for the over 15,000 adjuncts teaching most of CUNY's courses. Yet as the date for

the event drew near, intensive organizing efforts were disrupted by an anti-communist backlash against the Marxist activists who had initiated it – and it was suddenly demanded that participants adhere to an outright ban on all leftist literature. Of course, we refused.

Revolution's report on these events included an account of the role of “Left Voice,” (LV – part of the international “media network” of a current that calls itself the Trotskyist Fraction).³ LV had allied with a grouping based out of the university's Grad Center called “CUNY Struggle,” which had a track record of anti-communism and was the main force pushing adherence to the ban on leftist literature at the 7K conference. So, shamefully, LV helped ram through the anti-communist ban. After two Left Voice reporters spoke with comrades at a CUNY protest earlier this year, they exchanged correspondence with a CUNY Contingents Unite and Class Struggle Education Workers activist, whose 15 April letter to them is reproduced below. The title and footnotes have been added by *Revolution*.

Dear _____,

I had asked whether you had read the materials on the leftist literature ban at the “7K or Strike” conference in the CUNY Contingents Unite bulletin.⁴ Having not heard back, I am responding to the points that [you] raised in reply to the email I sent on February 15, after our conversation at a PSC-CUNY protest. I am taking the time to respond in detail to your email, because I think that fundamental principles are involved here, and that clarity on such questions is crucial.

The basic points I would like to emphasize are:

(a) There was an actual ban on leftist literature at the 2 March 2019 conference. This was stated and reconfirmed in unequivocal

³ See “Left Voice of Social Democracy,” *The Internationalist* No. 50, Winter 2017.

⁴ This refers to the CCU bulletin “For a Class-Struggle Strategy in the Fight Against Adjunct Poverty” (April 2019), online at cunycontingents.files.wordpress.com/2019/05/april-2019-ccu-perspectives-and-7k-bulletin-3.pdf



Daily Worker

Students protest anti-communist Rapp-Coudert Committee's witch hunt against instructors and staff at CCNY, Brooklyn and other NYC colleges, 1941.

terms. Such a ban violated the basic principles of workers democracy and hard-won rights gained and defended in struggles by generations of activists, notably at CUNY as referred to in my February 15 letter.

(b) The ban was embraced as a means of excluding the Internationalists, as it was clear that we would not go along with such anti-leftist censorship. No genuine leftist, let alone communist, could.

(c) The ban was virulently defended by the leaders of the “CUNY Struggle” group, notably its founder and central organizer Jarrod Shanahan, who also upheld the use of an anti-communist song by a band that [your letter] accurately refers to as white-supremacist, in response to the posting of a statement from a group of immigrant workers explaining why they could not agree to the literature ban.

(d) The role of Left Voice went beyond going along with the ban “without mentioning” it at the conference. In fact, James H. emphatically supported and justified the ban, in writing; demanded that “everyone” agree to adhere to it; and moreover demanded assurances that “every organizer of the conference agrees to respect the rules” there as a condition for his participation, when the “#1 rule” laid down was precisely the ban on leftist literature. This was not only explicit support to the prohibition of communist literature but a call for exclusion of those who did not agree to it.

And (e) Left Voice indeed did consistently promote CUNY Struggle (CS) specifically, including in the wake of the ban and of the methods CS used to impose it, as I will go into below. Left Voice has continued this as CS and its bloc partners formed “Rank and File Action” (RAFA).

Now I would like to go through the numbered points in your letter.

“1. Shortly before the conference was scheduled to happen, a time-limited vote happened to change the location from the GC to the People's Forum.”

CUNY Contingents Unite first called for

the conference in November 2018, initiating plans for it and building for it heavily over the following two months. In agreement with others involved in organizing for the conference, we reserved two large Graduate Center rooms where innumerable CUNY conferences have been held. In late January 2019, CUNY Struggle and its allies began to push to move the event to the People's Forum. On 30 January 2019, the CS member who initiated that push posted a message to the “Adjuncts for 7K” organizing group listserv, stating that at the People's Forum, the “#1 rule” would be that no “outside” groups could “pass out fliers, put them on the tables or sell newspapers. If anyone does, they will be removed from the space by staff immediately.”

It was because of this that the in-person 7K organizing meeting of 1 February 2019 passed a motion to “uphold the right of all in the labor and left movement to put forward their views, including by distributing or selling literature” at the conference. After that was approved, CS and its bloc partners pushed for a motion to move the location to the People's Forum, which passed amid claims that no actual ban on left literature would be imposed. But on 2 February 2019, a CS member posted quoting the Forum: “to be as clear as possible. We do not allow for left political formations to distribute their newspapers or literature in our space regardless of where they fall on the left political spectrum.” After this, another CS leader administered the “vote” on the 7K listserv to override the principle of the right of all to distribute literature at the conference that had been voted three days previously. Subsequently, those identified as Internationalist supporters were thrown off the listserv.

“2. IG-affiliates were surprised to learn that the People's Forum doesn't allow literature to be distributed in their space.”

Correct, we had no knowledge of this until the CS member announced the ban (the “#1 rule”) on 30 January 2019. CS

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CUNY Contingents Unite

CUNY Contingents Unite and CUNY Internationalist Clubs demand \$7K per course for adjuncts at December 2017 PSC protest outside Grad Center.

September 2021

Celebrating International Women's Day

Forum on "Women, Class Struggle and Revolution"

On March 10, the CUNY Internationalist Clubs held an online forum titled "Women, Class Struggle and Revolution" in honor of International Women's Day. U.S. capitalism's triple pandemic of COVID-19, economic crisis and racist police murder has thrown the triple oppression of black, Latina and immigrant workers into sharp relief. Meanwhile, pandemic profiteers gouged enormous profits¹ from the exploitation of "essential" workers, many of whom paid the price with their lives.

At a laundromat on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, immigrant women workers undertook an inspiring and difficult struggle against horrible working conditions and abuse by management, including wage theft, and on two occasions, industrial fires. Despite reprisals by the company, Wash Supply, the women formed their own union. Publicly launching their campaign with the Laundry Workers Center on 25 November 2020, the *compañeras* delivered a letter of demands to the management of the company, among which was recognition of the union they were in the process of forming. Rallying and marching with them were defenders of

¹ For example, the top 13 retailers in the U.S. saw profits rise by an average of 40%.



The Uprising by Diego Rivera, 1931.

labor and immigrant rights, including the CUNY Internationalist Clubs and Revolutionary Internationalist Youth (RIY).

Employing tactics from the classic union-busting playbook, the bosses waged a counter-campaign to silence and intimidate the

women – but failed. Last January, less than a week before the scheduled unionization vote, they fired Yuriana, one of the workers active in protesting unsafe and abusive conditions. Her supposed infraction was not meeting the new hourly quota of 100 pounds of washed and

folded laundry. This brought new protests, in which we and other activists joined in rallying to their defense outside the laundromat.

Less than a month later, the bosses fired all the workers and closed the laundromat in the wake of a victorious vote for unionization. Protests escalated. On February 27 and March 6, activists from many unions were among the hundreds that rallied outside another laundromat owned by Liox Cleaners, Wash Supply's parent company, in solidarity with the courageous fired workers. These protests were held on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, where in 1909, thousands of young, mainly immigrant women garment workers went on strike in what became known as the Uprising of the 20,000, which was key to the rise of International Women's Day. After rallying in front of Liox, we marched both times to the site of the former Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, where in 1911, 146 immigrant garment workers died in a factory fire.

A featured speaker at our March 10 International Women's Day forum was Jacqueline, one of the fired Wash Supply workers. (See below.) Her remarks are followed by presentations, edited for publication, by comrades Kaitlan and Noor of the Revolutionary Internationalist Youth.

Wash Supply Worker: "We Face Mistreatment and Discrimination"



Compañeras from Wash Supply laundromat before they delivered their demands to management, 25 November 2020.

Wash Supply worker Jacqueline's remarks to the International Women's Day forum were made in the form of answers to questions and are translated here.

Could you start by telling us a little about yourself?

Jacqueline: I am from Mexico, from the state

of Guerrero. What led me to come to the United States is the same thing that leads a lot of people here that come from Mexico. I came here to seek a better life and to have a better way of supporting my family. In Mexico, it has become very difficult to do so. Although people come here being told about the Ameri-

can dream, when they arrive, they find that it is very difficult to get by, particularly if one doesn't speak English. If one doesn't have papers, we face mistreatment, discrimination and not being afforded the same rights.

Could you tell us a bit about what life is like for you as an immigrant worker in

the United States?

Jacqueline: It means getting up very early, often at 4 a.m. Going into work, I would wash various loads of clothes, take them to the dryer, and then fold. Without having eaten before work, we would often have to wait until noon to have breakfast. Even then, we would be rushing and at times running to have time to eat. Sometimes we would not even be able to wash our hands before eating because we did not get a break. We could not even get ready to eat before having to return and start working again.

When did you start working at Wash Supply and what was it like to work there?

Jacqueline: I worked at Wash Supply for a year and a half before it got shut down. Before the pandemic, things were calmer since there was less pressure. With the pandemic, things at work got a lot worse. They would make us stand up while we were eating lunch and they increased the amount and speed of work we had. If we did not go along with these new requirements, they threatened to get rid of us and replace us with other workers.

Mahoma (organizer with the Laundry Workers Center): Something that I also want to add is an example of what a day working at Wash Supply was like for the workers. In the winter, there was no heat. In the summer, no ventilation. Especially in this current pandemic where places are required to be well ventilated. In addition to that, they have to handle clothes that

Revolution



One of the fired Wash Supply workers speaks at International Women's Day rally of hundreds outside laundry's parent company, Liox, March 6.

have human fluids like urine, feces, or vomit. It's very bad. This isn't only at Wash Supply; the whole industry has the same conditions.

Could you tell us about the work conditions, payment, and treatment from the management?

Jacqueline: In terms of the pay, it was very low. I was paid ten dollars an hour. In terms of management, they treated all of us very badly. Sometimes when we would try to talk to them, they would not respond at all and when they did, they would respond in annoyance. The manager always pressured

us and was constantly after us.

Could you tell us about the fires?

Jacqueline: I was there on two occasions when fires occurred. The first of the two fires was the worst of them. We were working and suddenly a fire broke out in one of the dryers. The managers didn't tell us to stop working or take any measures against the fire. We were told to go into the manager's office and huddle in there amidst all of the toxic smoke. Then, we were told to step out for a bit and come back in while there was still smoke present. We had to clean up and go back to folding the



On February 20, after firing all of the Wash Supply workers, the bosses closed the laundromat for good. A protest was held the same day outside the laundromat against this union-busting attack.



NYC's Union Square, February 20: Fired Wash Supply workers came out to rally in solidarity with Amazon warehouse workers in Bessemer, Alabama fighting to form a union.

September 2021



Protesters at the March 6 rally then marched from the Lower East Side to the site of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire.

laundry while breathing in all of the smoke which irritated our eyes and throats.

Could you tell us about the fire extinguisher and exit at Wash Supply? It is my understanding that management did not know how to use the fire extinguisher.

Jacqueline: Yes, exactly. They did not know where the fire extinguisher was and when someone found it, the manager did not know how to use it. One of the workers took the risk of opening the dryer where the fire had started and attempted to put it out. The flames were growing stronger and we all started yelling and shouting that we needed to get out of there immediately. To get out of the place was even more difficult because the manager had always kept the exit closed. The emergency exit door was always sealed shut.

Why did you and the other workers from Wash Supply decide to start the campaign to form a union?

Jacqueline: In order to have our rights respected and to be treated better.

Is it true that management was also

committing wage theft along with paying the workers below the New York state minimum wage and not paying overtime rates?

Jacqueline: Yes, it was wage theft. They paid us below the legal minimum wage of New York (\$15/hr) and often made us work 10 to 12 hours without ever paying us time and a half.

What would you like us, as students and people who stand in solidarity with your struggle, to know?

Jacqueline: Above all, that you give us your support in order to bring justice to what we are demanding and justice to all of our compañeras.

Is there anything else you'd like to say?

Jacqueline: Regarding the protests, I want to give a big thank you to all who have supported us and have come out to back us up and show solidarity. I would like people to continue to hear us out and listen to our voices. We want the whole community to hear our voices and the voices of all the compañeras. ■



At site of the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, Wash Supply workers receive painting by Internationalist Club member of Clara Lemlich, a leader of the 1909 "Uprising of the 20,000."

Black Women Face Capitalism's Triple Pandemic

By Kaitlan

This presentation and the one on the facing page were made at the online forum "Women, Class Struggle and Revolution."

We all remember the immense wave of protests that swept the country last summer in response to the murder of George Floyd. As they developed, those protests weren't solely about the vicious lynching of George Floyd, but came to be about all those who were murdered at the hands of the police – a list of names I could spend the next two hours reading and wouldn't get through. Black women are among those killed by the police as well, but their cases are rarely covered by the media and often, much of what we do know is largely due their families sharing the information and their own researchers gathering the information.

Two names which have become widely known are those of Sandra Bland and Breonna Taylor. Breonna's murder sparked mass outrage, which continued when only one of the officers was charged (not for killing Breonna, but for endangering her neighbors). The endless list also includes Eleanor Bumpurs, Mya Hall (a black transgender woman), Aiyana Stanley-Jones, who was only 7 years old when she was killed, and many more.

Last summer's protests connected the issue of racist killings by police to the everyday brutalization and violence that black people are forced to deal with under American capitalism. Black people face disproportionate levels of poverty and, within the past year, a disproportionate level of coronavirus infections that comes as a direct result of structural racial oppression. We learned from very early on in the pandemic that black and Latino people are twice as likely to die from COVID, and three times as likely to be hospitalized as a result of the virus, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. As of now, black people account for 14.9% of deaths where the person's race is known, while representing 12.4% of the population. That means that at this point, 1 in 555 black Americans has died of COVID.¹

This is due to many reasons, like overcrowded housing (which makes "isolating" when you have COVID virtually impossible) and the fact that black people hold many of the "frontline" jobs that come in direct contact with the public – like public transit, grocery and retail work, and maintenance. On top of this, the medical system often reflects concepts and assumptions stemming from long-standing racist ideology that imply there are biological differences between white and black people and that black people have "thicker skin," a higher pain tolerance, etc. This creates pretty deadly circumstances, particularly for women. Women frequently aren't taken seriously when they see a doctor about pain management, but black women have an even harder time because of such racist concepts, assumptions about their condition, etc.

What is the most deadly medical situ-

ation for black women? Childbirth. Pregnancy-related deaths occur for black women at three to four times the rate of white women. Black women are less likely to develop breast cancer but 40% more likely to die from it.² The situation is critical. As of now, little is known about how the pandemic has affected black women medically, but I'm sure we'll hear more about that soon.

As we've been discussing tonight, women workers are doubly oppressed in this society. Black women workers are triply oppressed under capitalism and it should come as no surprise that this pandemic has been crushing for black women. In most parts of the country, schools have been closed since March 2020. In New York, some schools have opened but it's been very disorganized and chaotic. School closures have been burdensome for women, among other reasons because the weight of making sure their kids grasp the material is primarily put on them. And if it's crushing for the population at large then, again, it is even more so for black, Latina and immigrant women.

Mothers who are also workers need to find – in the midst of a pandemic – someone to watch their children, as the children who are usually at school are now at home, and most black and Latina workers have jobs that don't allow for them to "work from home." Of course, this is if they still have a job. Black women are more likely than others to consider stepping away from their careers due to the pandemic and the issues it has created for them.³ Black people in general are twice as likely as whites to have lost their jobs, but black, Hispanic and Asian women accounted for almost all jobs lost by women in December 2020. Over the past year, 2.3 million women have left the labor force, but the unemployment statistics do not include these women. So, while the official unemployment rate for black women was 8.9% in February 2021 and 8.5 % for Latinas (still disproportionately high), the actual rate was 14.1% for black women and 13.1% for Latinas.⁴

So, if women are working, they're also dealing with finding childcare and supporting their children, who have suffered tremendously during the pandemic. Meanwhile, they try their hardest not to bring COVID home, which is hard in the small, overcrowded apartments that are classic in NYC. They're also grieving over friends and loved ones who have died. If women are not working, it's essentially just endless home drudgery (cooking and cleaning) and worrying about where the next meal is going to

² "Patterns and Trends in Age-Specific Black-White Difference in Breast Cancer Incidence and Mortality – United States, 1999-2014," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (14 October 2016).

³ "For Black Working Women, COVID-19 Has Been a Heavy Burden," *The Wall Street Journal* (30 September 2020).

⁴ "Unemployment rate understates what's going on, expert says, as millions of women remain out of workforce," CNBC (5 March 2021); "Why Black Women In the US Are Being Hit Hardest by Coronavirus," *Business Because* (7 August 2020).



Bebeo Matthews / Associated Press

Residents of Harlem wait in line for food and masks, April 2020.

come from. And black and Latina women, employed or not, face having to figure out how they and their family members can survive under U.S. capitalism's never-ending police terror.

So what do we do?

It's very clear that racial oppression is *systemic* and *structural*. It is ingrained in, intrinsic to and irremovable from capitalism. American capitalism cannot function or operate without it. Racism is an ideological expression of that structural double oppression of black people, and a manifestation of the immense social inequality that comes as a result of capitalism. So when we talk about structural racial oppression, we are talking about something that is embedded into the economic and social system that we live in today. When we factor in class society's oppression of women, in which the nuclear family is key, we get what Marxists refer to as the triple oppression of black and Latina working women.

We're talking about the United States, where capitalism was built on genocide against indigenous people and black chattel slavery, whose legacy continued under Jim Crow. With that understanding, while we fight it every day, racial oppression cannot be abolished within this system. What do I mean by that? Racism and racist oppression cannot be eradicated through the simple shifting of a couple billion dollars around, or changing the name of this street, or replacing the white CEO of this company with a black one. This all implies that there is a way to make capitalism "just" and favorable to all – but there isn't. Exploitation is the whole basis of the capitalist system.

Many liberals and reformists want to pretend that fundamental change can be brought about in a way that is either an internal change within oneself or within the system. But revolutionaries are honest in saying that what's needed to uproot racial oppression is socialist revolution. Structural racial oppression comes from the need of capitalism to keep a certain sector of the working class subdued and at the bottom of society, so that the capitalists can pay them poverty wages, throw them out of work and bring them back when needed (as part of the "reserve army of labor"), treat their la-

bor and their lives as if they're expendable, while fostering divisions within the working class.

In a similar way, as a comrade mentioned in the discussion, the oppression of women is not something that can be eradicated within the existing framework of capitalist society, as it is from the needs and structures of class society that the oppression of women arose historically and continues today. With this material oppression of women comes its ideological reflections, like sexism or male chauvinism, that among other things serve to "explain" and justify it. All of this is part of why the triple oppression of black, Latina and immigrant working-class women has brought deadly consequences in what we have called U.S. capitalism's triple pandemic of racist terror, COVID-19 and economic crisis.

Can we fight the oppression of women or the oppression of black people by calling on the rulers to establish "justice"? No, in the words of Rosa Luxemburg, we do not depend on or believe in the "justice" of the ruling class. There is no justice under capitalism. We cannot rely on, or put illusions in the Democrats, who in this country are perceived by many as the more "progressive" political party, nor can we put illusions in the Republicans, Greens, or any capitalist party.

Instead, we must rely on the politically independent, revolutionary power of the working class. The potential of that power has been shown on a small scale with the different workers mobilizations that have happened around the country, like the strike of the workers at the huge Hunts Point market in the Bronx, the unionization campaign at Amazon in Bessemer, Alabama (in which black women are playing a leading role), at Wash Supply and elsewhere. Such struggles need to be broadened, strengthened and developed into mass mobilizations of workers all around the country. That requires a revolutionary leadership.

We want women's *liberation*, we want black *liberation*! That is only possible through a socialist revolution waged by the multiracial, multiethnic working class, that will liberate all exploited and oppressed people, as part of the fight for a socialist world. ■

Revolution

¹ APM Research Lab, "The Color of Coronavirus: COVID-19 Deaths By Race and Ethnicity in the U.S." (5 March 2021).

Bangladesh, Mexico, NYC: Women Workers In Struggle



Frida Hartz



Andrew Biraj / Reuters

Left: Garment workers of the Sindicato Nacional de Costureras 19 de Septiembre. The union's name commemorates date of 1985 Mexico City earthquake. Banner says oppressors "seem huge to us because we are on our knees. Let us rise." **Right:** Garment workers on strike in Dhaka, capital of Bangladesh, 2013.

By Noor

We've heard a first-hand account of how a courageous group of Mexican immigrant women are giving voice to the struggle against the intolerable conditions, wage theft and abuse faced by thousands who work in laundry sweatshops across New York City. This industry is run on the labor of immigrants – mostly women – who are superexploited and lack many of the protections nominally afforded all workers. They have no job security, are paid well below the minimum wage and are forced to work under dreadful conditions.

Jacqueline, one of the women workers fired from Wash Supply for organizing a union, painted a grim picture of what life is like inside the sweatshop. The workers are treated as replaceable because, for the bosses, workers are nothing more than raw material to be exploited. These workers experienced two instances in which a fire broke out with fire exits blocked and no extinguisher in sight. This is eerily similar to the conditions that resulted in the Triangle

Shirtwaist fire of 1911, where 146 immigrant garment workers (123 women and girls and 23 men) died in a fire at a garment factory in New York City's Greenwich Village. The Triangle Shirtwaist fire wasn't a singular incident, by any means. Workers dying as a result of negligent bosses is a trend in the textile industry – it's a norm.

For example, in Bangladesh, where my family is from, textile workers (most of whom are women) work long hours in unsafe, unregulated sweatshops as breadwinners for their families, earning a meager \$64 a month on average.¹ In 2013, over 1,000 workers died in the collapse of Rana Plaza, a building housing garment factories near the capital, Dhaka, while about 2,500 were left injured. Many were trapped under the rubble. The building wasn't properly constructed and had too much heavy equipment for the structure to withstand.

In Mexico City, 1,600 women gar-

¹ "The dark side of fast fashion," UPF Webzine, 17 April 2018.

ment workers (*costureras*) died in their workshops in the terrible earthquake of 19 September 1985. Many were buried alive. In the aftermath, the bosses literally had the machines dug out but left the women workers to die.² Those who survived organized a union, the Sindicato Nacional de Costureras 19 de Septiembre.

I bring these examples up to make clear that the struggle of women workers is an international one. The similarity of conditions faced by these workers, as well as the callous disregard for their lives by the bosses, is clear. They are brutally exploited and vulnerable to losing their jobs and their lives. International Women's Day came out of the struggles and strikes by immigrant working women on the Lower East Side of New York City, in conjunction with working-class men as a means of pressing for their demands through class struggle.

² See "Mexican Women Workers – Class Struggle in the Global Sweatshop," *Women and Revolution* No. 34, Spring 1988.

The struggle that these women of the Wash Supply union are bravely engaging in is a continuation of that tradition, started by immigrant textile workers in 1909, right here in New York City.

It was clear then and it's clear now that the bosses care more about their machines than the workers. It's essential to learn from past struggles and to connect them up with the present. This is one aspect of internationalism – connecting the struggle of the worldwide working class, helping to mobilize and lead it in socialist revolution.

So of course, it goes beyond just one laundromat; the workers movement must help blaze a trail to organize the unorganized, from the workers at Amazon to small shops like Wash Supply to sweatshops in Bangladesh and Mexico, where starvation wages and deadly working conditions prevail. There's a chant we frequently use at protests – it's one of my favorites. It goes, "Asian, Latin, Black, and White – Workers of the World Unite!" ■

CUNY Faculty and Staff Union Protests for Safe Reopening



Internationalist photos



The CUNY Internationalist Clubs brought students out in solidarity with the faculty/staff union (Professional Staff Congress) at the City University of New York as it protested to demand a safe reopening and the rehiring of thousands of adjuncts and others laid off in Spring 2020. This included rallies at LaGuardia Community College on August 17 (left), Hunter College on August 26 (right), as well as CUNY's Hostos, Medgar Evers and Borough of Manhattan Community College campuses.

Anti-Red Ban...

continued from page 11

and its allies then went all-out to move the conference no matter what, unleashing a barrage of anti-communist vilification, red-baiting, “outing” activists’ affiliations and work locations, and treating African American comrades as “invisible,” as one of them noted. It was absolutely clear at the time that embracing the ban was being used as a factional club to oust the Internationalists. The tone for the hate campaign was set by postings such as those by Shanahan reviling us as “seasoned CUNY wreckers”; his response to an African American comrade stating “Some of us have read beyond the Manifesto. Cut the crap. Your behavior and that of your sect is the best evidence I can think of for the wisdom of PF’s policy,” designed to “keep unprincipled wreckers like you from doing what you do best” (3 February 2019), etc.

“3. IG-affiliated people representing various workers’ groups chose to not participate on principle, due to this ban.”

Due to the ban, CUNY Contingents Unite and Class Struggle Education Workers withdrew from the conference, on principle as you state. So did the CUNY undergraduate students from the CUNY Internationalist Clubs who had been scheduled to be part of one of the panels. So did Trabajadores Internacionales Clasistas (TIC), as well as the Laundry Workers Center (the LWC is not affiliated with the IG), both of which were scheduled to participate in a panel on “Other unions and immigrant workers organizing”; as a result, the latter aspect was eliminated from the conference entirely. A number of unaffiliated individuals, including by far the best-known scheduled speaker, also withdrew.

I will address points 4 and 5, on the role of Left Voice, below, but would first like to address point 6.

“6. Someone affiliated with CUNY Struggle used music by and supports the music of a white supremacist.”

A number of things are left out here. The “music of a white supremacist” was from the xenophobic “Cock Sparrer” band, which is part of the fascistic “oi” music milieu. This outfit is virulently English-nationalist, with a fan base of British football hooligans and songs like “England Belongs to Me,” including lyrics about “fighting all the

way for the red, white and blue,” and other titles such as “Secret Army,” “Take ‘Em All” (“put ‘em up against a wall and shoot ‘em”), etc. The song in question here rails against leftists who try to sell “your press” to put forward a “party line.” It was used by a CS spokesperson in direct response to the posting of the immigrant workers’ letter that explained why distributing “leftist literature” is vital to their struggles.

An adjunct wrote to the listserv, describing the nature of that band and its connections to fascist violence here in New York, where two leftists were badly beaten by fascist skinheads outside a Cock Sparrer concert after-party. In response to this posting, CS leader Shanahan wrote to the listserv on 21 February 2019 raging against the posting of these facts, calling for the adjunct who posted them to be “removed” from the listserv, proclaiming himself a “life-long Cock Sparrer fan” and upholding the xenophobic band as “a beloved fixture of working-class street culture.”

“4. James (with Left Voice) chose to still participate on his panel and still covered the conference in an article, without mentioning the literature ban.”

Left Voice did not mention the literature ban at the conference, where James H. was on a panel with the CS member who had first announced the ban, and another Left Voice editorial board member was on a panel with CS leader Shanahan.

However, Left Voice’s role regarding the ban was by no means confined to saying nothing on or against it at the conference itself or in articles on the LV site. To the contrary, at the decisive moment in the controversy, the day after CS announced that the People’s Forum did “not allow for left political formations to distribute their newspapers or literature in our space,” James H. posted to the “Adjuncts for 7K” listserv (3 February 2019) to “support having the event at the Peoples Forum” and “abiding by the policies of the Peoples Forum while using their space.” This escalated in his post on the following day, headed to “Sandor and All” (4 February 2019), demanding, “regardless of any other votes, or any seeming contradictions inherent in those votes,” that the conference be held at this venue that prohibited leftist literature, and that “everyone” agree to adhere to the literature ban, as a condition for attending the conference.

In that post he asserted: “This is not

censorship. It is not a gag order, it is not anti-communist, and it is not a violation of any principals of workers’ democracy, as you suggest.” It most certainly was censorship, a gag order, and a violation of the most elementary principles of workers democracy. A *ban on communist literature is an anti-communist ban*. To deny that means justifying and facilitating such a ban, which was exactly what the Left Voice spokesman was doing.

Denouncing us for “railing against this simple rule” – i.e., the ban that had been announced as the “#1 rule” – he justified the ban as “obviously meant to create a non-sectarian environment in a space where they have probably had problems with sectarian groups.” And he wrote:

“I am sorry, but before I can proceed to provide my support for this conference, I need to be assured that every organizer of the conference agrees to respect the rules of the space. That’s a pretty low bar. Anyone who cannot commit to that should abstain from attending the conference. If organizers can’t agree to commit to this simple agreement and insist on attending, then I will not attend. It’s as simple as that.”

In response to a recent request from a Left Voice member for documentation, I sent these quotations and noted: “This posting by someone prominent in CUNY activism for quite some time, author of many articles on the topic, with some involvement in discussions on conference planning, and even claiming the political authority of being ‘also a Trotskyist,’ most definitely had an effect in fulsomely backing the drive to steamroll through ‘agreement’ to the ban – despite and against ‘any other votes’ and contradictions.” It wasn’t some random blip. Writing publicly about the controversy months after the conference, James H. branded us – echoing Jarrod Shanahan – as “wreckers,” while characterizing the *Revolution* articles on it as “a pile of shit.”

It goes on. In October 2019, the CUNY Struggle member who had posted the Cock Sparrer song in response to the immigrant workers’ letter published a “story” online about [CCU activist Sándor John] presenting “a leftist’s wet dream” against a “commie-ban.” The adjunct who posted the facts about the white-nationalist band is described as having “jumped in bed with Sandork” (sic); our papers are referred to as “your rags”; and the piece goes on: “Cock Sparrer sang, You get your press with a pocketful of lies.” The publication of this item was met with public approbation by James H.

“5. We (Left Voice) still sometimes cover and promote events in which CUNY Struggle is involved.”

It’s not a question of reporting on events in which some group happens to be involved. Left Voice has specifically



After hiring war criminal David Petraeus, CUNY tops repressed student activists, then tried to curb “expressive conduct.” Protests stopped them.

promoted CS, as far back as the 2017 GC PSC elections in which it hyped the CUNY Struggle slate (see “CUNY, Where Do We Go From Here?” 20 May 2017). For its part, CS returns the favor, routinely promoting materials from what it describes as “our comrades of Left Voice.”

The mutual promotion actually *increased* immediately following the bitter struggle within the CUNY adjunct milieu over the anti-communist literature ban. In April 2019, a few weeks after the postings from Shanahan quoted above, he and another CS leader were featured as Left Voice launch party speakers (see “Left Voice Launches New Magazine in New York,” 10 April 2019). An LV interview then promoted Shanahan and other CS spokespeople as the voice of “Rank and File Revolt at CUNY” (13 April 2019). An LV piece on the PSC contract went out of its way to hail “CUNY Struggle, the rank and file caucus that launched the \$7KOS movement” (25 October 2019). And so forth, continuing apace when CS and its bloc partners formed “Rank and File Action,” and each new RAFA gimmick is hailed by Left Voice.

One of the most significant of all these articles was published shortly after the ban: “What Is the Role of Socialists in the Unions?” (25 March 2019), in which LV’s founding leader *denounces the “closed shop” or “union shop,”* citing for this position CUNY Struggle’s two most virulent red-baiters: Shanahan and Andy Battle. Given their record and positions, it’s not surprising that they would oppose the closed shop – which the notorious anti-labor Taft-Hartley Law outlawed in 1947.⁵ What’s astounding is that a “Trotskyist” group would echo this too.

⁵ “Closed shop” union contracts specify that union membership is a condition of employment. In the U.S., as part of the backlash against the post-World War One strike wave and the Russian Revolution, “the red scare was the heart of the open-shop drive of the National Association of Manufacturers,” which worked with American Legion vigilantes “in the breaking of strikes, and in the saving of the country from the Bolshevism of the closed shop,” notes left labor history classic *Labor’s Untold Story* by R. Boyer and H. Morais (1955). The hated Taft-Hartley law was passed by Congress after the post-WWII strike wave as part of waging the Cold War on labor and reds “at home.”



1964: UC Berkeley “on strike for free speech.” When administration banned “outside” political activities, historic Free Speech Movement erupted.

Regarding the query as to whether CUNY Struggle actually is anti-communist, this has been addressed above. I will just add here that, as described in the CCU bulletin on 7K, red-baiting was already a pattern for CS long before the struggle in 2019: it was how they responded to our emphasis on the importance of adjuncts voting “Yes” in the union’s 2016 strike authorization vote; and to our calls in 2017 for activists to forthrightly oppose threats made on the CUNY Struggle listserv to try to get the union decertified and to take it before the New York government agency that enforces the Taylor Law.

In your letter, you refer to the ban at the 7K conference as an “isolated event,” noting that there is no CUNY-wide or union-wide ban on distributing leftist literature. But just as we emphasized then, a terrible *precedent* was being set by imposing such a prohibition at a CUNY organizing conference. (When the “#1 rule” was announced, one of the ban’s enthusiastic backers wrote that it was going to be “refreshing” to have a CUNY event “without sectarian lit peddling.”)

But how and why had the freedom to distribute leftist literature become the established norm until that point? Because of the *whole history of struggles to reject and defeat anti-leftist censorship* – from CUNY in the 1930s and ’40s (when elements from the Socialist Party went along with anti-red censorship and purges) to the Free Speech Movement in 1964, to subsequent upheavals, down to the defeat of the CUNY administration’s attempts to limit “expressive conduct” in 2016.

Two last points that I think are important: The first is about the term “wreckers.” This is not just an insult or epithet, it is a phrase with a history, and a conclusion, namely exclusion. (The implicit logic: if they are just there to wreck, then throw them out.) It goes back to the time of Stalin’s Moscow Purge Trials of the 1930s against “Trotskyite splitters and wreckers.” But it isn’t just used by Stalinists; social democrats have used it, too, to get rid of “reds.” British Labour Party leader Neil Kinnock railed against “wreckers” in 1985 as he drove out the Militant tendency and went after the British mine workers leader Arthur Scargill, leading Labour to scab on the miners strike. The term was used in the CUNY adjunct milieu in the same way, to justify excluding the so-called wreckers who had initiated the conference, i.e., the communists.

The second is that we don’t put an equal sign between CUNY Struggle (and its representatives in RAFA), whose spokespeople like Jarrod Shanahan positively revel in red-baiting, as you have seen, and Left Voice. Rather I would describe LV’s role, tailing and promoting such supposed “rank-and-file leaders,” as that of enabler and apologist for these anti-communists.

The issues I have sought to address here aren’t about an “isolated” event but about principles which (like that of the picket line) must be defended in the here and now, if they are not to be blotted out. Many groups today claim the legacy of Leon Trotsky. Yet those that sacrifice hard-won principles of the revolutionary movement, in their eagerness to get

in on what seems expedient and popular at the moment, have no legitimate claim to it. Opposition to anti-communist censorship, and defense of workers democracy, are among the most basic of those principles.

I am appending the letter from Trabajadores Internacionales Clasistas, followed by links to the CUNY Contingents Unite bulletin and *Revolution* articles referred to above.

* * *

Letter from TIC; Spanish original sent 8 February 2019, English translation sent 10 February 2019.

From Trabajadores Internacionales Clasistas to the organizers of “CUNY-wide 7K or strike conference.” This letter to you was discussed and approved at our meeting tonight. We request that you confirm to us that you have received this. A translation will be sent to you soon.

To those in charge of the “CUNY-wide 7K or strike conference and organizing day”:

We are writing to you because we have found out that the conditions of our scheduled presentation and participation at this conference have changed, given that now it is required that we accept and abide by a rule that specifically prohibits the left from distributing, selling or even “putting on tables” any type of literature, on pain of being “immediately removed” from the space where the conference will be held.

When we were invited to participate in the conference, we were very glad to accept, because we know that the struggle of the adjunct professors of CUNY, who are badly paid and are lacking job security, is connected in a thousand ways with the hopes of our own sons and daughters, and of so many immigrant families, of receiving an education that is worthy of them. We have gone to many CUNY marches to give



Trabajadores Internacionales Clasistas members helped build unionization campaign of immigrant B&H workers, who marched on May Day 2017 calling to “strike against deportations.”

our support and connect our struggles together. So when we accepted the invitation, we never imagined that this would mean accepting this kind of condition of exclusion.

The program of our organization and its very name, Trabajadores Internacionales Clasistas, show that we are a “left formation”. Our word and our program, our activities and our opinions, these we make known through printed materials as well as in presentations, speeches, etc. At this time that is the case of our fliers and our pamphlet being prepared on the struggle of the taxi workers, the ones about our demand for full citizenship rights, and about solidarity with the Mexican teachers, with the Haitian immigrants, with Ayotzina-pa, and also with the new campaign of the women laundry workers.

We have never seen this kind of prohibition at the conferences and events we have participated in, notably at CUNY, which have always welcomed us fraternally and without conditions. Obviously, no such thing was demanded of us in March of last year at the “Conference in Defense of Immigrants and Muslims” that was held in the CUNY Graduate Center, where those speaking for the TIC were our compañeras the domestic workers Margarita and Rocío and the taxi worker Lucio, sharing the table with Mahoma López of the Laundry Workers Center, who is widely known in the

workers’ movement for his role leading the Hot and Crusty/Brod Kitchen struggle. At that conference, we placed our fliers on a table, we gave out copies of them, and we invited people to become acquainted with them.

So how can we now accept being required to surrender the rights of workers’ democracy, for ourselves or for any other formation in the labor and left movement? These are some of the only rights we have in this society, which excludes us as pariahs, calling us illegals and criminals, and deprives us of almost every form of expression because it wants to suffocate and silence our *rebeldía* (rebelliousness or rebellion) against this exploiting system. Almost all the founders of our organization have been repressed, discriminated against, or thrown out of their jobs for not obeying unjust rules and prohibitions, when we try to organize unions, workers’ committees, protests against wage theft, against sexual abuse, etc. (things which require distributing fliers where it is “forbidden” to do so).

A labor movement conference is almost the only “space” in this society where we would assume the norm to be that these rights are respected, not violated. We do not accept violating the principle of workers’ solidarity. As workers with consciousness and dignity we do not give up our rights, nor those of anyone else – not to anyone, much less to you.

“Ni ilegales, ni criminales, somos obreros internacionales”

Charlie M., TIC, student at Hostos Community College from 2006 to 2011; fired (from Hot & Crusty restaurant) for being vice president of the Hot & Crusty Workers Association, 2012

Antonio E., TIC, dismissed from Vegetable Garden restaurant when it closed in reprisal for the formation of a workers’ committee, 1996

Lucio, TIC, taxi worker

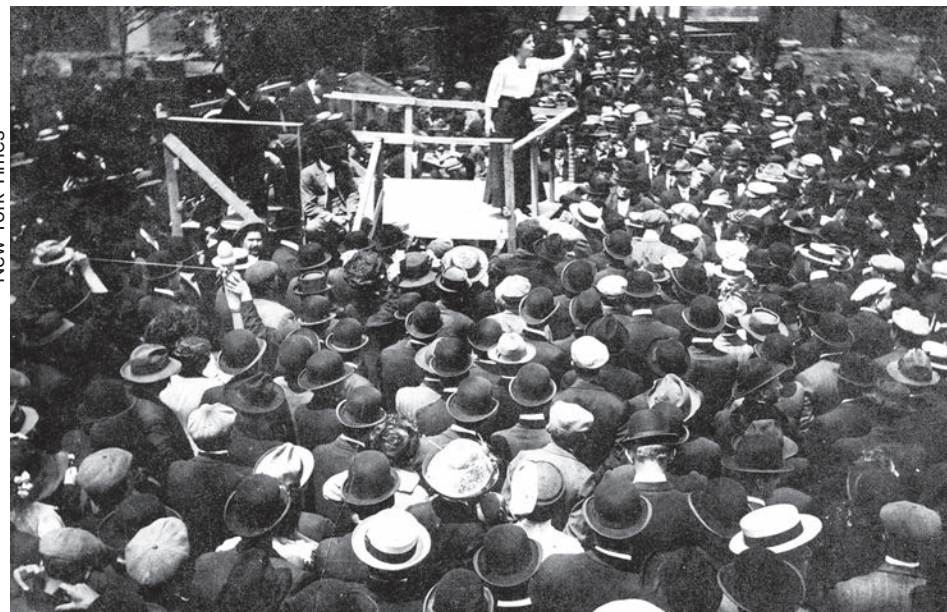
Rocío, TIC, house cleaning worker

Margarita, TIC, house cleaning worker, fired after asking for higher pay

Daniel, TIC, taxi worker

Lizette, TIC, fired after asking for payment of back wages in a NY laundry – February 8, 2019

P.S. Comment by Rocío: It is ironic that people from a *casa de estudios* (educational institution) would carry out this ban. ■



Industrial Workers of the World speaker Elizabeth Gurley Flynn (later of International Labor Defense and Communist Party) addressing Paterson silk strikers, 1913. Acclaimed novel *The Cold Millions* (2020) is based on Flynn and other reds’ groundbreaking “free speech fights” across the U.S., including Spokane and Everett, Washington, where in November 1916 the bloodiest battle in Northwest labor history occurred, in which cops and deputies killed as many as twelve IWW “agitators.”

Africa Vaccines...

continued from page 1

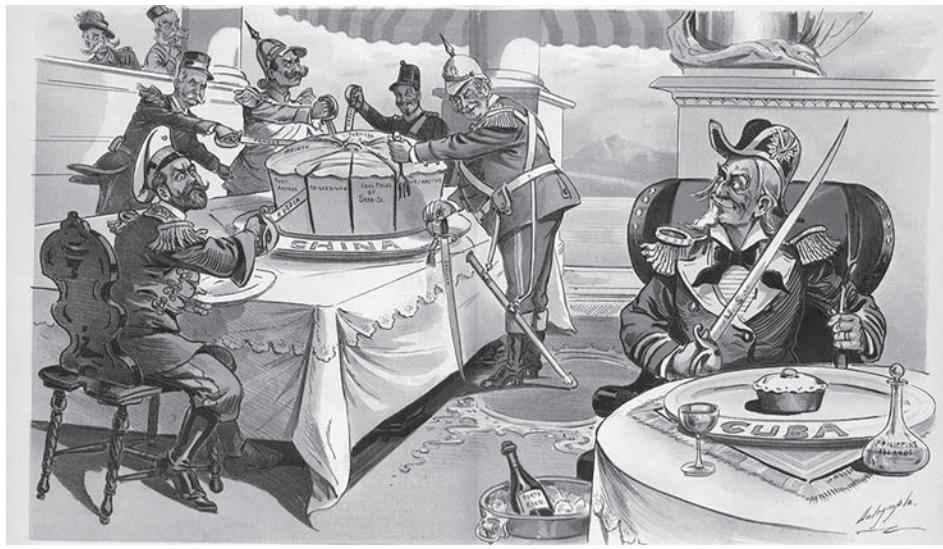
Profit from vaccine production has created *nine* new billionaires worldwide (*Gulf News*, 26 May). Key to those profits are intellectual property “rights.” These prevent the widespread dissemination of information on how to produce vaccines. And that means horrendously unequal distribution. That leaves poorer countries in the dust, lacking the infrastructure and capital needed to develop their own vaccines and without the resources to buy up enough doses to vaccinate their populations, and often lacking the facilities (like adequate refrigeration) to store and administer them. Meanwhile the U.S. purchased 653 million surplus doses, while states are now throwing away tens of thousands of stockpiled shots as they reach their expiration dates. An August 10 *NPR* article reported that Alabama tossed out 65,000 doses while Arkansas just got rid of another 80,000.

This is reminiscent of the Great Depression, when farmers dumped “surplus” milk while people starved, all because they could not sell it for a profit. However, unlike the dairy farmers of the Great Depression, the pharmaceutical companies have made killer profits selling to the highest bidders. This state of affairs is the result of what Marxists call the anarchy of production under capitalism, where the endless drive for profit governs production by individual capitalist firms, instead of production being guided by a rational plan, democratically decided on the basis of social needs. In fact, commodities are not produced under capitalism for human need but only for profit – and if they cannot be sold for profit, they are trashed. That means surplus vaccines aren’t ending up where they’re needed, in poor nations – they’re ending up in the garbage.

When COVID vaccine production was first beginning, placing orders to purchase vaccines meant the countries doing so faced significant financial risk. Wealthy nations could afford to take that risk by placing their eggs in several baskets, buying up stockpiles of multiple types of vaccines in numbers large enough to vaccinate their populations many times over. Meanwhile, countries such as Mexico and Peru, which had the money to buy them at full price but couldn’t take the risk of purchasing vaccines that might have proven ineffective, couldn’t make timely agreements with vaccine manufacturers. As the *New York Times* (31 March) noted: “Low-income countries made their first significant vaccine purchase agreements in January 2021 – eight months after the United States and the United Kingdom made their first deals...”

While not having access to vaccines has meant deadly risk for millions of people in Africa and elsewhere, pharmaceutical companies have been riding high. Pfizer made \$11 billion in sales in the first half of 2021, while BioNTech made a net profit of \$4 billion in that same period – a 355% increase over what it made a year earlier (*The Guardian*, 11 August). Moderna? \$4 billion in net profits. AstraZeneca trails the pack, raking in a meager \$1.2 billion in vaccine revenue. But all is not lost for “poor” AstraZeneca. According to CEO Pascal Soriot, the company will soon raise its prices, as “we cannot be a non-profit forever.”

As we go to press, certain sections of the population in the U.S. will be getting a third booster dose of the Pfizer or Moderna



1898 cartoon on imperialists’ division of world from China to Africa to Latin America. In Spanish-American War, Uncle Sam (in foreground) seized Puerto Rico and Philippines as colonies, *de facto* control over Cuba. In 1884-85 Berlin conference, U.S. joined European powers carving up Africa.

vaccines, while the vast majority of people in Africa have not gotten any doses. Not to worry, says Biden, as the U.S. has donated 110 million doses to the COVAX program, a World Health Organization initiative meant to counteract the unequal distribution of vaccines worldwide through donations from rich countries.

Yet the program has fallen flat. COVAX promised 100 million doses globally by the end of March, a goal not reached until July because of “supply bottlenecks” and “vaccine nationalism” (*Politico*, 5 August). And its goal of 640 million doses by August is nowhere on the horizon, with only 163 million doses delivered as of August 2.

But why does Africa have to rely on the supposed “magnanimity” of imperialist countries responsible for the continent’s historic colonization and “underdevelopment” (bourgeois economists’ euphemism for the effects of imperialist pillage)? The terrible obstacles to Africa producing, acquiring and distributing vaccines are rooted in the very nature of capitalist society.

In the late nineteenth century, Western European imperialist countries ramped up what is often called the “scramble for Africa.” Faced with the need to export capital to bolster the rate of profit, to acquire new markets as well as natural resources, almost all the continent was carved up by the rapacious colonialists.⁴ An infamous example took place in what was then called the Congo Free State, as its owner, King Leopold II of Belgium, cynically dubbed it. African people there were subjected to forced labor to produce ivory and rubber for the Belgian monarch and the U.S. financiers who were his junior partners. Workers, including children, had their hands cut off if they did not harvest enough rubber. Together with the horrendous exploitation of workers in the “mother countries,” the modern economies of Belgium, Britain, France, etc., were built on these foundations. The U.S. – where capitalism rose on the basis of genocide against Native Americans, the slave trade and mass chattel slavery – became a world power with its seizure of colonies in the Spanish-American War, becoming the dominant one via the two imperialist world wars.

Even after most former colonies gained their independence (though Puerto Rico still has not!), they became *semicolonial* coun-

⁴ This culminated in the infamous Berlin Conference of 1884-85, convoked by Germany and attended by Britain, France, Belgium, the U.S. and nine other imperialist countries. By 1900, all but 10% of African territory had been claimed by European powers.

tries. (The word “neocolonialism” is sometimes used to convey a similar concept.) Formally independent now, they are still subjugated to imperialism through the world market, while U.S., British, French and other imperialist banks (and their agencies and cartels such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank) largely call the shots. The imperialist nations’ corporations own innumerable factories, mines, agricultural and industrial enterprises in the semicolonial countries, so profits make their way back to coffers in New York, London and Paris. Their domination is backed up by their imperialist “diplomacy” and “defense” treaties, and enforced by their military might. (The U.S. alone has 29 “known” military bases and thousands of troops in Africa.)

As imperialist domination has meant “underdevelopment” of African infrastructure, this means massive obstacles to local vaccine production on the continent. Prior to the pandemic, only seven African countries had companies involved in vaccine production at any level, whether that be distribution or manufacturing.

Recently, New Jersey-based vaccine manufacturer Johnson & Johnson struck a deal with South Africa to bottle and package its vaccine locally to help inoculate South Africans more quickly and efficiently. But the opposite has occurred, with Johnson & Johnson shipping vaccines packaged in South Africa to Europe, while the rate of fully vaccinated people in the country, ravaged by the Delta variant, remains at about 8%. A J&J exec said that vaccines finished in South Africa would be exclusively available to South Africans later this year, but that might be too little too late for a country where the third wave saw vaccine-eligible citizens “dying by the dozens” (*New York Times*, 16 August).

On the other hand, China has supplied existing plants in several African countries with the raw materials and technology to produce their own vaccines. By July 6, Egypt was already producing 300,000 Sinovac vaccines a day, with plans to triple output if the supply of raw materials was maintained (*Global Times*, 6 July). China has also made plans with Morocco to help produce 5 million doses a month, and a deal has been reached between Algeria and China to produce the vaccines locally (*Medicalxpress*, 24 July). By June 20, China had administered 1 billion vaccines domestically and has delivered 770 million doses worldwide since September 2020, pledging to donate 550 million by the middle of next year. As part of its war drive against China, U.S.

imperialism under Democratic president Joe Biden is of course waging a campaign against the Chinese vaccine – which can save untold numbers of lives – while the profit-driven imperialists starve Africa of vaccines.

The reason China can mobilize its industry so swiftly is because it is what Marxists call a bureaucratically deformed workers state. It has a planned economy where resources can be shifted from one sector of the economy to the next as needed. The world got a glimpse of what a planned economy could achieve in January 2020, when two new, 2,600-bed hospitals were built in the city of Wuhan in 10 days – start to finish.⁵ Nevertheless, the Stalinist bureaucrats in charge have allowed significant capitalist inroads into the country that threaten the long-term survival of the world’s largest and most powerful workers state.

In the 1960s, the Soviet Union carried out its own large-scale medical aid program in Africa. The USSR pioneered a new freeze-drying technique for smallpox vaccines which allowed them to be distributed to countries with less developed infrastructures. 450 million of these vaccines were distributed to “developing” countries by the Soviet Union, leading to the eradication of the disease in less than two decades. But like China, the Soviet Union was also ruled by a Stalinist bureaucracy, with its anti-Marxist pretense that it could build “socialism in one country” – if only it could achieve “peaceful coexistence” with world capitalism. Instead, faced with imperialism’s relentless onslaught, the bureaucracy fragmented and caved to capitalist counterrevolution in the early ’90s, which devastatingly wiped out the remaining gains of the Russian Revolution of 1917.

The USSR’s destruction helped imperialism launch new attacks and wars on one semicolonial country after another to tighten its grip on the exploited and oppressed. This gives an idea of just how crucial was the Trotskyist position defending the USSR against imperialism and counterrevolution (together with workers political revolution to oust the parasitic bureaucracy), and why this remains the case with China today.

Revolutionary Marxists understand that the COVID pandemic is an international problem calling for an international solution. The anarchy of capitalist production has left hundreds of millions of unvaccinated people in the lurch, all to satisfy the appetite for profit. This highlights two of capitalism’s key contradictions: production has become more and more social (which society as a whole depends on) – but ownership remains private; while the productive forces’ increasingly international nature clashes with the national boundaries created when capitalism was a rising system. In its highest phase, imperialism, capitalism is reactionary on a world scale; today its terminal decay is a deadly threat to us all.

The pandemic has shown that capitalist societies cannot meet the basic needs of their own populations, let alone address a global pandemic. An internationally planned economy would put technology and resources to work to provide vaccines for all and eliminate world hunger – just for starters. But that requires “expropriating the expropriators.” The ills of the capitalist order cannot be fixed with reformist band-aids. They must be uprooted through world socialist revolution. If you are interested in joining the fight to make that a reality, get in touch and let’s talk. ■

⁵ See “A Tale of Two Cities: Wuhan – New York” in *The Internationalist* No. 59, March-April 2020.

A Review of *Trotsky in New York 1917*

“Bronx Man Leads Russian Revolution”

By Jacob

“Bronx Man Leads Russian Revolution,” read the headline of the *Bronx Home News*. “Trotsky, Now In Kerensky’s Place, Once Lived Here,” added the *New York World* four days after the Bolshevik Party led the working class to power in the world’s first victorious socialist revolution, the Russian Revolution of 7 November 1917.¹ Across the world the names of V.I. Lenin and Leon Trotsky became synonyms and symbols of the aspirations of the exploited and oppressed. But few people today realize that just months before becoming the principal organizer of the Bolshevik victory, and then founder of the Red Army, Leon Trotsky had been living here in New York City, uptown in the Bronx.

For years, fantastical rumors circulated that during his time in New York Trotsky had worked as a tailor, a dishwasher, even a film actor. Laying these legends to rest in his autobiography *My Life* (1930), Trotsky explained:

“In New York, where I stayed for two months, the newspapers had me engaged in any number of occupations, each more fantastic than the one before.... But I must disappoint my American readers. My only profession in New York was that of a revolutionary socialist.”

The obscure story of Trotsky’s brief stay in New York in early 1917 is of special interest to students at the City University of New York. For members of the CUNY Internationalist Clubs, which were forged in the midst of campaigns against the U.S. imperialist wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the story of Trotsky’s efforts to mobilize the working class against World War I in this very city a century ago, in meetings and public actions that took place often a short train ride away from our schools, is a fascinating reminder of the historical continuity of our movement.

Kenneth D. Ackerman’s cinematically written *Trotsky in New York 1917: A Radical On the Eve of Revolution* (2016) gives a definitive account of the Russian revolutionary’s Bronx exile. Ackerman uncovers

¹ This is known as the October Revolution because, according to the old Russian calendar, the seizure of power occurred on 25 October 1917. The date of the *New York World* headline is 11 November 1917; an exact date has not been found for the *Bronx Home News* headline, which is cited in *Trotsky in New York*.



Early Soviet poster of Leon Trotsky.

the history of Trotsky’s little-known intervention into the politics of the Socialist Party of America (SP), guiding us through New York’s radical landmarks as he recounts the impassioned debates. Central to these was Trotsky’s overlooked showdown with Morris Hillquit, the SP’s NYC-based reformist party boss.

Above all, *Trotsky in New York* makes an important historical point: during his ten weeks in New York City, Trotsky’s struggle for revolutionary internationalism, against the reformists, helped pave the way for the birth of the American Communist movement, which changed the landscape of the U.S. left for generations. More broadly, it is part of the prehistory of the Communist (Third) International, formed at the Bolsheviks’ initiative after the old Socialist (Second) International blew apart when its parties in most of the warring countries supported their “own” rulers against the workers on the other side of the trenches.

Revolutionaries vs. Reformists

Following the outbreak of World War I, Trotsky was expelled from country after country for his revolutionary activity against the imperialist slaughter that would take the lives of millions. Already banished from Russia for his leading role in the 1905 Revolution as chairman of the St. Petersburg soviet (workers council), Trotsky narrowly avoided arrest in Austria and was deported from France, then Spain, before finally arriving in New York Harbor aboard the *Monserat*.

“Leon Trotsky Is Arriving Today!” the *New Yorker Volkszeitung* proclaimed on 14 January 1917, urging its fourteen thousand readers

to greet “our much persecuted comrade” and “courageous fellow combatant.” “In Comrade Trotsky,” wrote the Russian *Novy Mir* that same day, “America gains a resolute fighter for the Revolutionary International.”²

Trotsky was well-received by New York City’s largely Eastern European and German socialist milieu. Tsarist repression and anti-Semitic pogromist violence had also brought hundreds of thousands of immigrants from the Russian Empire, mostly Jews, to New York City, where they mainly settled on Manhattan’s Lower East Side. Many had, like Trotsky, been part of the failed Revolution of 1905. It was here amidst the garment sweatshops and tenements that the “Uprising of 20,000” – mass strikes of young immigrant women garment workers in 1909-10, followed by the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire – occurred and International Women’s Day arose. In fact, women workers’ protests on that international proletarian holiday were what would soon touch off a new revolution in Russia, on 8 March 1917.³

Emblematic of the size of the immigrant socialist movement in New York was the then-leftist Yiddish-language daily *Forverts* (Forward), whose circulation of over 200,000 rivaled that of the *New York Times*. To this day, the Forward building, with its portraits of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (as well as 19th-century German socialist leaders August Bebel and Ferdinand Lassalle), still stands on East Broadway. But in typical present-day New York City fashion, it now houses luxury condos.

Disembarking the *Monserat* on a cold, rainy Sunday morning, Trotsky, his companion Natalia Sedova and their two sons were greeted by friends and political associates who had also managed to escape tsarist persecution, and a flock of journalists from New York City’s numerous so-

² The *New Yorker Volkszeitung* (New York People’s Paper) was a German-language daily edited by Ludwig Lore, an influential member of the SP left who became a founder of the Communist movement. *Novy Mir* (New World) was a Russian-language Marxist magazine published briefly in New York.

cialist publications. Among those who greeted him was Bolshevik leader Nikolai Bukharin, who famously insisted that Trotsky immediately visit the New York Public Library on 42nd Street.⁴ Within days he would settle in the Bronx, at 1522 Vyse Avenue near Crotona Park.

Even the bourgeois press noted Trotsky’s arrival, though their coverage mischaracterized as “pacifism” his call for mass working-class action against the imperialist war.⁵ The *New York Times* (15 January 1917) headlined that Trotsky had been “Expelled From Four Lands” (“With Bayonets,” added the *New York Tribune*). Within two days, his arrival would be covered by six New York papers, with a combined readership of more than half a million.

For his part, on the day after his arrival Trotsky jumped headfirst into New York socialist politics. He began work for the *Novy Mir*, whose offices were located in the basement of 77 St. Mark’s Place near First Ave., just a block away from Tompkins Square Park. Trotsky later described *Novy Mir* as a “headquarters for internationalist revolutionary propaganda.” There his articles would appear alongside those of others including Bukharin; Alexandra Kollontai, best known for her powerful articles and speeches on the Marxist program for women’s liberation through socialist revolution;⁶ Grigory Chudnovsky, who as a Red Guard participated in the seizure of the Winter Palace described in John Reed’s classic first-hand account of the Bolshevik Revolution, *Ten Days That Shook the World*; and V. Volodarsky, who became Petrograd’s press commissar after the Revolution. (This joint work with Bolsheviks in New York presaged Trotsky joining the Bolshevik Party after his return to Russia.) On January 15, the *Forverts* sent a journalist to cover Trotsky’s first day in New York, publishing a front-page headline and a photo of Trotsky standing on St. Mark’s.

On his second night in New York, Trotsky attended a meeting at the home of *New Yorker Volkszeitung* editor Ludwig Lore, on 55th Street in Brooklyn. The objective: to work out a ‘program of action for Socialists of the Left, for the purpose of organizing the radical forces in the American Socialist movement’.⁷ Participants came from the internationalist wing of the socialist movement that opposed the ongoing world war. Among the guests were Bukharin and Kollontai as well as Sen Katayama, the founder of Japanese socialism who had famously embraced Russian Marxist pioneer

⁴ See “The Bolshevik Revolution, Leon Trotsky and the New York Public Library,” *Revolution* No. 14, January 2018.

⁵ Among Trotsky’s important polemics in the period leading up to the revolution was “Pacifism As the Servant of Imperialism” (June 1917). See Lenin’s *Socialism and War* (1915, published as an Internationalist pamphlet in 2001) for an in-depth explanation of the Marxist position on war and the Bolsheviks’ call for “revolutionary defeatism” to “turn the imperialist war into civil war” on the road to world socialist revolution.

⁶ See the Internationalist pamphlet *Marxism and Women’s Revolution* (2017).

⁷ Quoted in Tony Michels, “The Russian Revolution in New York, 1917-19,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, October 2017.

WHEN TROTSKY WAS ON EAST SIDE

Recollections of the Days Less Than a Year Ago When He Made Fiery Speeches in New York City.

From an Article in *The Outlook*
By Henry Moskowitz

To understand Trotsky’s brief stay on the east side it is important to get an impression of east side life to constitute a background against which his powerful figure can be silhouetted.

The east side is more of a state of mind than even Boston, to which this

Jewish State in Palestine, the Jewish workmen of America organized a National Committee of Jewish Workmen on Jewish Rights. The freedom of the Jews of the world concerned them even more than Palestine. In their reaction as to Jewish questions the Jewish workers are internationally minded.

One of the first things undertaken by the National Committee was the publication of its *Black Book of Jewish Suf-*

New York Times (10 February 1918), three months after the Bolshevik Revolution.

September 2021

Georgi Plekhanov at the 1904 congress of the Socialist International to symbolize international workers solidarity amidst the Russo-Japanese War.

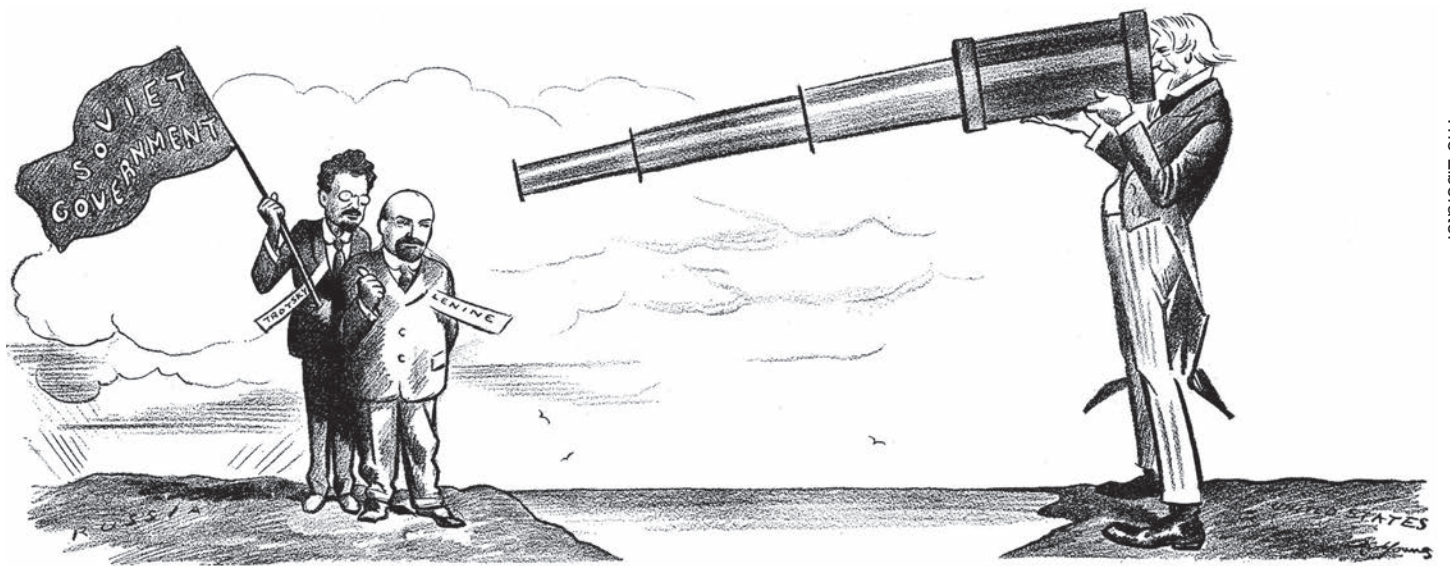
In the thick of things at the meeting was Louis Fraina, the Italian immigrant radical who soon became editor of a paper called *The Internationalist*. Published by the Socialist Propaganda League, founded in a Latvian workers' hall a few months previously, Lenin read it from Switzerland and held it in high regard. Also present was Louis Boudin, a labor lawyer and author of one of the most influential books in the early U.S. Marxist movement, *The Theoretical System of Karl Marx* (1907).⁸

The main topic of discussion at the meeting on that evening in mid-June of 1917 (which Ackerman describes as a dinner party) was the brewing fight against the opportunist Socialist Party leadership under Morris Hillquit.

Faction Struggle in the Socialist Party

Among his many electoral campaigns as a Socialist Party candidate, Hillquit's 1917 New York mayoral campaign struck an antiwar note. Together with opposition to escalating attacks on civil liberties – like Woodrow Wilson's vicious Espionage Act – this drew considerable support among radical workers; Hillquit got a fifth of the vote. Nonetheless, Hillquit was a staunch reformist. In her diary, Kollontai called him “a vile revisionist.” Trotsky later described him in *My Life* as “the ideal Socialist leader for successful dentists.”

⁸ Several of these figures, together with John Reed, radical journalist Louise Bryant and many others, are portrayed in Warren Beatty's 1981 film *Reds*. They also feature in key works on U.S. left history including *The Roots of American Communism*, by Theodore Draper (1957); *The First Ten Years of American Communism: Report of a Participant* (1973) by James P. Cannon, the former Industrial Workers of the World activist, socialist and communist leader who became the founder of American Trotskyism in 1928; and Bryan D. Palmer's thrilling and essential *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890-1928* (2007).



“Boys, I Can't Hardly Recognize You!”

Cartoon in left-wing New York magazine *Liberator* (July 1918) on the U.S. refusal to “recognize” the Bolshevik government of Lenin and Trotsky.

In 1912, Hillquit had orchestrated the expulsion from the SP's leading body of the class-struggle hero and Industrial Workers of the World leader “Big Bill” Haywood, for advocating the use of militant tactics in labor struggles.⁹ This set the pattern for the stance Hillquit took on the war in deeds (as opposed to just words). He was part of a January 1916 delegation to the White House asking President Wilson to please keep the U.S. out of World War I – but he promised that should the U.S. enter the conflict, socialists would comply with the war effort. In November 1916, the Jim Crow Democrat Wilson was reelected to the presidency on the slogan “He Kept Us Out of War.” Hillquit, no dummy, knew Wilson's words were

⁹ The IWW (“Wobblies”) of Haywood included such other courageous forerunners of our movement as U.S. labor's preeminent songwriter, the Swedish immigrant Joe Hill (executed at the behest of the copper bosses in Utah as a result of a frame-up trial in 1915); Elizabeth Gurley Flynn (the “rebel girl” mass agitator who became a founding Communist); black dock workers leader Ben Fletcher; Native American labor organizer Frank Little (lynched in Montana in 1917) and others. On its history, strengths, limitations and post-WWI decline, see Cannon's “The I.W.W.: The Great Anticipation” (1955).

hokum to hook voters; war was coming for the workers of the U.S. too. So the SP leader announced to the *New York Times* (11 February 1917): “I do not believe that the Socialists will advocate any general industrial strike to handicap the country in its war preparations. And I do not believe there will be any such strike.”

And of course, the “peace-loving” imperialist Wilson would indeed soon take the U.S. into what he called the “war to end all wars” and “make the world safe for democracy.” The real purpose: to uphold, consolidate and expand the power of U.S. imperialism, which had seized Puerto Rico and the Philippines two decades previously, lorded it over Cuba and Central America; had made billions of dollars in war loans to France and Britain; and was well on its way to replacing the latter as the dominant power worldwide.

In contrast to reformists like Hillquit & Co., the leftists wanted workers action against the imperialist war. In the words of Rosa Luxemburg's comrade Karl Liebknecht in Germany, “the main enemy is at home”; the burning need was to “turn the imperialist war into a civil war” of the exploited against their exploiters, putting an end to the slaughter through socialist revolution. The fight in the American SP was a reflection of the great issues facing the socialist movement worldwide. So at the 15 January 1917 meeting at Ludwig Lore's home in Brooklyn, by the end of the evening, a formal vote was taken. Katayama wrote later: “We intended to organize the Left Wing under the direction of Comrade Trotsky, and Madam Kollontai, who was going to Europe, was to establish a link between the European and American Left Wing movements.”¹⁰

While joining the struggle against the reformist SP leaders and contributing articles to socialist publications, Trotsky was addressing large crowds at public meetings in venues across the city such as the Brooklyn Lyceum, Beethoven Hall in Manhattan, the Labor Temple near Union Square and the Great Hall of Cooper Union, calling for international working-class solidarity and continued class struggle. “Trotsky built up a large and enthusiastic personal following,” Ludwig Lore later wrote. In his spare time, he studied at the Public Library on 42nd Street and took meals at the Monopoly Café on 2nd Avenue.

His first political clash in New York

¹⁰ Quoted by Ackerman from Sen Katayama, “Morris Hillquit and the Left Wing,” *Revolutionary Age*, 26 July 1919.

took place when on March 1, the *Forverts* published a patriotic headline article promising that “every inhabitant of the country would fight to the last drop of blood” should war break out with Germany. According to one account, Trotsky marched over from the *Novy Mir* offices to the Forward building, stormed into the office of its editor Abraham Cahan, and denounced him for being a “social-patriot,” a socialist in words, but a patriotic defender of imperialism in deeds.

As a result of his growing influence, Trotsky was brought onto the Resolutions Committee of the New York Socialist Party alongside his new friend Louis Fraina and adversary Morris Hillquit. Trotsky and Fraina demanded that the Socialist Party unequivocally oppose the war and inevitable U.S. entry. They penned and put forward a resolution rejecting “national defense,” condemning party members who made patriotic promises in the bourgeois press (a clear shot at Hillquit), and calling for mass labor action to oppose U.S. entry into the war. The resolution ended with the call: “No ‘civil peace’! No truce with the ruling class! War does not change the issue, but emphasizes it. War against capitalism! On with the class struggle!”

Hillquit and his associates claimed they were willing to concede on the first two points, but refused to align the Socialist Party against the capitalist state by calling for mass labor action to stop war preparations. Since the committee reached an impasse, and Trotsky and Fraina refused to compromise their principles to reach a deal with the reformists, a general meeting was called for the following Sunday, March 4.

One hundred eight members of the party gathered at the Lenox Casino in Harlem, a site which decades later became home to Mosque No. 7, where Malcolm X preached for the Nation of Islam. Fraina delivered the Resolutions Committee minority report that he had written with Trotsky calling for class struggle against imperialist war. Hillquit, ever the parliamentary maneuverist, tried to table the report and prevent Fraina from putting forward the perspective of the left-wing opposition. When the crowd became outraged, Hillquit withdrew his motion. Heated debate unfolded.

Only one later account of this face-off specifically mentions Trotsky; Ackerman notes that he was scheduled to speak in Newark at the same time. But Louis Waldman, a prominent figure in Hillquit's crew, recalled that after speaking at the Lenox Casino SP meeting, “as I sat down, Trotsky,

Revolution



People's Commissar for Military and Naval Affairs: Leon Trotsky in Moscow's Red Square circa 1920.



The East-Side Jew That Conquered Europe

Trotsky's Red Army routed capitalist powers' intervention against the Revolution. *Liberator* (March 1920) cartoon, proud of Trotsky's time in NYC, derides anti-Bolshevik propagandists' use of anti-Semitism.

who was sitting in front of me, turned and sneered: 'Chauvinist!' In the end, after a vote was called, the Trotsky-Fraina report was defeated, by a vote of 101 to 79.

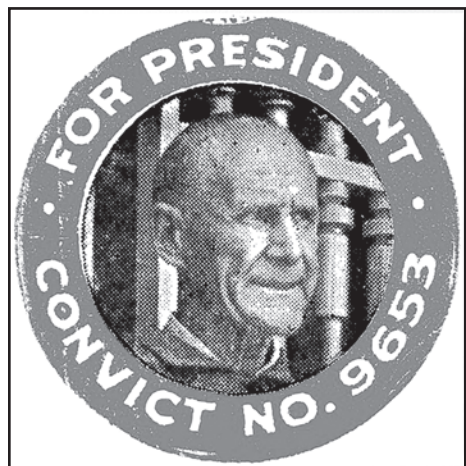
Yet the internationalist left wing of the Socialist Party did not abandon its struggle. Plans were made to continue rallying workers in solidarity with their brothers and sisters in the belligerent imperialist powers, and to launch an organ titled *The Class Struggle* to be edited by Boudin and Trotsky, with significant contribution from Fraina and Lore. Though *The Class Struggle's* first issue would come out in May 1917, with articles by Fraina on "The War and America," by Boudin on the SP's emergency convention (held in St. Louis in April, its keynote address was given by Hillquit), and by Bukharin on the revolutionary struggle in Russia, by that time the events had taken a huge new turn.

Internment and Internationalism

On 8 March 1917, International Women's Day, Leon Trotsky was addressing a crowd from the podium of the Great Hall of Cooper Union, sharing the podium with Socialist Party icon Eugene Debs, who was later jailed for his opposition to World War. (Declaring solidarity with Lenin, Trotsky, and the Russian Revolution, though he was unable to make the transition to Bolshevism himself, Debs famously ran for president from his prison cell in 1920.)¹¹

On that same day, the protests broke

¹¹ See James P. Cannon, "Eugene V. Debs: The Socialist Movement of His Time – Its Meaning for Today" (1956); and "Eugene V. Debs vs. Democratic (Party) Socialists of America," in the Internationalist pamphlet *DSA: Fronting for the Democrats* (2018).



Convicted for speech against WWI, Eugene V. Debs ran for president from his prison cell in 1920.

September 2021

out in Russia that within days would topple the 300-year-old Romanov dynasty and end monarchist rule. The revolution had begun. With the March upheaval (called the "February Revolution" due to the dates of the old Russian calendar), the workers soviets that arose in 1905 emerged once more, leading to a situation of "dual power." Yet the reformist leaders who for the time being dominated the soviets were political brethren of class-collaborationists like Hillquit and the French and German pro-war "socialists"; they joined the unelected bourgeois Provisional Government of Alexander Kerensky. Denouncing any kind of confidence in or political support to the new, bourgeois "democratic" regime, Lenin called for "All Power to the Soviets!" This set the stage for Russia's October Revolution, which Trotsky would lead together with him.

Burning to get back to Russia, Trotsky and his family left New York on March 27 on the Norwegian vessel *S.S. Kristianaffjord*. But when the ship stopped in Halifax, Canada, Trotsky was seized by British military authorities, acting on orders from London to arrest him and other "Russian Socialists leaving for purpose of starting revolution against present Russian government."¹² Ackerman unearths interesting information from the British Archives demonstrating that agents of the British intelligence agency MI1c (predecessor of MI6) had been tracking Trotsky in New York, given his prominence in the socialist milieu.

Trotsky, Sedova and their sons Leon and Sergei were interned at a prison camp in Amherst, Nova Scotia, alongside 800 mainly German P.O.W.s, as well as Canadian nationals of German origin or descent. For a revolutionary internationalist, this was an opportunity not only for solidarity but for helping win workers – branded "enemies" by the British allies of Russia's Provisional Government – to the common cause of red revolution. Recalling his time as a prisoner of "democratic" Britain for the crime of speaking out against the imperialist war, Trotsky wrote in his autobiography:

"The whole month I was there was like one continuous mass-meeting. I told the prisoners about the Russian revolution, about Liebknecht, about Lenin,

¹² The orders are reproduced in *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* (January 1979) at https://brill.com/view/journals/css/13/3/article-p314_8.xml?ebody=Abstract%2FExcerpt

and about the causes of the collapse of the old International, and the intervention of the United States in the war. Besides these speeches, we had constant group discussions. Our friendship grew warmer every day.... Even now it makes me happy to remember that in the very midst of the war, we were fraternizing with German sailors in Amherst."

In New York, Fraina and others organized a big rally on April 15, largely attended by radical immigrants, demanding Trotsky's release. In Russia, Lenin's *Pravda* denounced the British government's slander that "Trotsky, chairman of the Soviet of Workers delegates in St. Petersburg in 1905 – a revolutionary who has sacrificed years to a disinterested service of revolution" would have anything to do with any "scheme subsidized by the German government" (a slander the Kerensky regime later wielded against Lenin as well). The Bolshevik paper noted that the British agents had "dragged Comrade Trotsky away by his legs and arms, all in the name of friendship with the Provisional Government!"

Finally, the Russian government asked the British to release Trotsky and his family, who were then accompanied to the gates of the camp by German sailors, who cheered them as their military band played "The Internationale." After three more weeks at sea and a train trip across Finland, on May 4 they arrived in Petrograd (war-time chauvinism had led to St. Petersburg being given this "more Russian-sounding" name). There, he joined the editorial board of *Pravda*, was again elected chairman of the soviet and worked to bring co-thinkers from the Mezhrayonsi (Inter-District) group into the Bolshevik Party.

Trotsky and American Communism

Back in New York, the left-wing Socialist comrades that Trotsky had established connections with continued the struggle against reformism and opportunism. Following the Bolshevik Revolution, cadres Trotsky had cultivated during his ten-week stay here – Fraina, Boudin, Lore and others – would become founders of the U.S. Communist movement.¹³ Ackerman rightfully puts much emphasis on this, though his book, while valuable and engaging, includes some errors.

¹³ In his *First Ten Years of American Communism*, Cannon states that Fraina should be recognized as the main "founder of the movement," while calling him "a tragic figure" who, like Lore and Boudin, eventually "renounced his youthful communism."



From left: Max Eastman, James P. Cannon and "Big Bill" Haywood in Moscow, 1922.

Ackerman at one point mistakenly puts James P. Cannon, the founder of American Trotskyism, in New York in 1917, citing him as one of Trotsky's direct collaborators at the time. (He mistakes James P. Cannon for a New York Socialist politician named Joseph D. Cannon.) However, the events happening in New York did have an enormous impact on Cannon and other leftists and members of the labor movement of his generation.

Cannon was still in Kansas City then, serving as a roving organizer for the "Wobblies" (the IWW). As Bryan D. Palmer points out in the first volume of his biography of the founder of U.S. Trotskyism, in 1917 Cannon was still an adherent of the IWW's syndicalist rejection of all "politics." But Cannon later recalled that NYC workers' response to the purported antiwar message of Hillquit's mayoral campaign (though this would prove hollow) left him "shaken up on my anti-political wobblyism." Moreover, writings by Boudin, Fraina and Lore were introducing many workers to the ideas of Marxism and, after the October Revolution, the views of Lenin and Trotsky and the significance of the Russian Revolution. Palmer points out that Lenin's "Letter to American Workers" was conveyed through yet another paper edited by Louis Fraina, *The Revolutionary Age*.

The left-wing radicals Trotsky worked with during his brief stay in New York would later win the majority in the Socialist Party of America. In 1919, the Left Wing Section contended for leadership of the party, advocating affiliation with the Communist International, the world organization of Communist parties founded that year. To prevent the reformists' ouster from the SP leadership, the faction of Morris Hillquit, Trotsky's New York nemesis, expelled the majority of the party's membership – in total, 70,000 of the SP's 110,000 members. When members of the Left Wing, led by John Reed, sought admission to the SP's conference in Chicago, Hillquit's crew called the cops and had them forcibly removed.

Ackerman's political biases come through in many points throughout the book, making clear his disapproval of Marxism. While rightly pointing to the enormous impact Trotsky's ten weeks in the New York had on the U.S. left, Ackerman argues ultimately that "Trotsky's fingerprints are all over the collapse" of American socialism. He believes that time

has proven that the ideas of Hillquit have won out, as demonstrated by Bernie Sanders' popularity. But a politician in a capitalist party who repeatedly votes to fund imperialist wars is no socialist at all.

Among some of his errors and misinterpretations, Ackerman refers to Norman Thomas, the former minister who joined what remained of the SP in 1918 and later became its virulently anti-communist leader, as an opponent of the Vietnam War. In fact, Thomas was a rabid Cold Warrior, self-proclaimed friend of CIA chief Allen Dulles, helped the U.S. government create the puppet state of "South Vietnam" and supported its dictator Diem.¹⁴ Ackerman also absurdly swallows the claims by an outfit calling itself the Socialist Equality Party to be inheritors of Trotsky's legacy. The SEP's "World Socialist Web Site" has earned the moniker *World Scab Web Site* for opposing unions, even advocating a "No" vote on unionization at Amazon in Bessemer, Alabama. He also echoes various falsehoods repeated about the early Soviet Republic.

Despite this, in this reviewer's view, *Trotsky in New York* still has much of real value for us in our fight for socialist revolution. It gives an important and vivid account of Trotsky's stay in New York City and the overlooked impact it had on the trajectory of the left. For a popular account by a decidedly bourgeois writer, it is often surprisingly honest in presenting the views and activities of revolutionary Marxists. Its portraits of figures in the socialist movement during the First World War, both the better-known and the obscure, are deeply engaging.

Young revolutionaries can learn a lot from this story about the origins of our movement, which will help inspire many as we continue the struggle against imperialist war and capitalist oppression waged by its protagonists, from New York's Lower East Side to red Petrograd and beyond, just over a century ago. ■

¹⁴ See "The Real Heritage of Harrington's DSA" and "'Democratic Socialism' in the Service of U.S. Imperialism" in *DSA: Fronting for the Democrats*.

Cuba...

continued from page 24

the basic fact that a Miami-based *gusano* mob has long served as shock troops for U.S.-sponsored capitalist counterrevolution in Cuba. (Uncoincidentally, key players instigating July's counterrevolutionary protests operate out of Miami.)

Wasp Network tells the story of the five Cuban spies who in the 1990s risked their lives to thwart terrorist attacks against Cuba orchestrated by figures such as Luis Posada Carriles, a "former" CIA operative and longtime would-be assassin of Fidel Castro. In 1997, he was the architect of hotel bombings that sought to cripple Cuba's tourist industry. Together with another notorious counterrevolutionary terrorist, Orlando Bosch, Posada Carriles was behind the 6 October 1976 bombing of Cubana airlines Flight 455, in which all 73 passengers were killed, including 24 teenage members of the national fencing team.

First among the film's five protagonists is René González, who leaves Cuba in December of 1990 under the guise of defecting to the U.S. His skills as a pilot allow him to infiltrate the counterrevolutionary *Hermanos al Rescate* ("Brothers to the Rescue") outfit headed by José Basulto. In the '80s Basulto, trained and employed by the CIA, flew supplies to the "Contras" it organized and armed to wage a counterrevolutionary proxy war against the revolution that overthrew the U.S.-installed dynasty of Anastasio Somoza – Nicaragua's counterpart to Batista.

The ostensible purpose of *Hermanos al Rescate* was to aid *balseros* ("raft people") taking to the Florida Straits, as conditions brought about by the U.S. blockade were worsened after capitalist counterrevolution in the former USSR deprived Cuba of Soviet aid. But what Basulto and his bandit band aimed at was bringing bloody counterrevolution to Cuba. In the film Basulto, over lunch with René González, remarks: "The collapse of the Soviet Union has raised people's hopes," and "without Russian money, [Castro] won't last long." His end game? "When the regime collapses, they'll have to return the refineries, banks, factories. And casinos!"

José Basulto's father was in fact an ex-



Liborio Novak

21 December 1961: Literacy teachers holding huge pencils in victory march of Cuba's historic campaign to eliminate illiteracy. Where U.S.-backed Batista regime had mired Cuba in poverty and illiteracy, the Revolution enrolled volunteers, largely young women and teenagers, to spend a year in the countryside teaching population to read and write. Free universal education, medical care are among key gains of anti-capitalist revolution.

ecutive with the Punta Alegre Sugar Company, which was expropriated after the Revolution. Such capitalist property, and the wealth it squeezed out of Cuba's poor, was what he and his ilk longed to "rescue." He was no "starving refugee," and the same goes for his associates in the ultra-rightist Miami exile milieu, such as the late Jorge Mas Canosa of the Cuban American National Foundation. Such offspring of the Cuban bourgeoisie were welcomed with open arms by the CIA for the express purpose of returning Cuba to imperialist domination. In the film, Basulto eventually tells René bluntly: "We're not just a humanitarian [sic] organization, we're a militant organization." Then and now, "humanitarian intervention" is code for imperialist subjugation.

No amount of brutality, criminality and dirty tricks were off-limits for the agents of counterrevolution. *Wasp Network* depicts the drug trafficking which served as a major source of funding for U.S.-backed anti-communist terror groups and death squads in Central America during the 1980s and '90s. And going back decades, all manner of plots were made to kill Fidel Castro in the wake of the Cuban Revolution, with many of them detailed in the 2006 documentary *638 Ways to Kill Castro*. A notable Pentagon-proposed ter-

ror scheme was "Operation Bounty" in 1962, which would have created "a system of financial rewards for Cubans for 'killing or delivering alive known Communists'," with the reward paid upon presentation of "conclusive" proof of death and the deceased's party membership card.⁴

Wasp Network vividly shows that the *Avispa* group and colleagues back in Cuba worked in earnest to stop deadly dangerous threats. The film also avoids presenting the *Wasp Network* as Bond-style *suaves* fueled by martinis and love affairs. They lived their lives within the U.S. working class and suffered conditions faced by millions of immigrant workers. In the U.S., Olga Salanueva, a trained industrial engineer married to René González, had to work first in a care home and then at a telemarketing firm. Like millions in this country, she lacked health insurance. Her second child, Ivette, was born with her umbilical cord coiled twice around her neck due to the hospital's unwillingness to perform a C-section and had to be rushed into intensive care due to oxygen deprivation. So much for the "land of opportunity."

One of the film's dramatic scenes is the 24 February 1996 shutdown of two

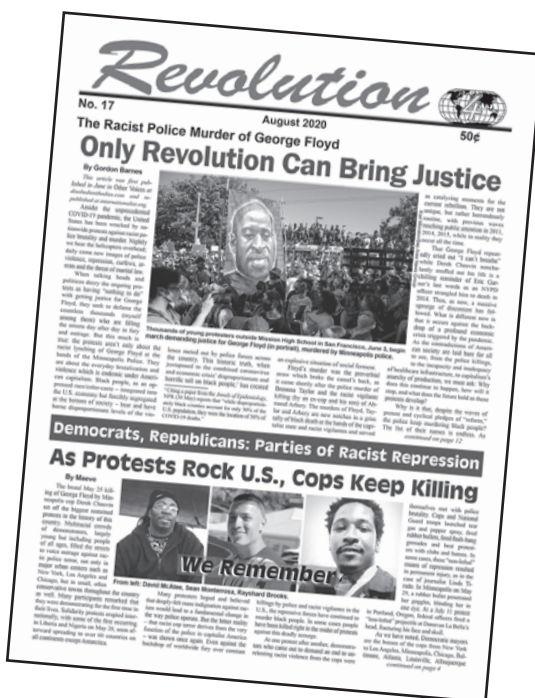
⁴ Martin Garbus, *North of Havana: The Untold Story of Dirty Politics, Secret Diplomacy, and the Trial of the Cuban Five* (2019).

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The racist police murder of George Floyd brought millions into the streets in 2020. Revolutionary Internationalist Youth intervened with a class-struggle program, laid out in the pages of our publication. Our previous issue (*Revolution* No. 17) features articles on black liberation through socialist revolution, slavery and the U.S. Constitution, why Bernie Sanders' "political revolution" was a scam, and much more.

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Assata Shakur in Cuba.

Hermanos al Rescate planes by Cuban Air Force pilots. After a series of provocative violations of Cuban airspace, Basulto's gang had once again moved past the 12-mile line (the limits of Cuba's territorial sea). Warned by the Cuban military to turn back, they ignored this and were shot down. *Wasp Network* depicts Basulto as being baffled and shocked by the course of the events. In reality, he knew damn well what he was doing, staging dangerous provocations (which created a *cause célèbre* for counterrevolutionary agitation) – and reportedly laughed about it. Revolutionaries defended the shootdown of the Hermanos planes as part of Cuba's basic right to self-defense.⁵

The film's final scenes portray the FBI's September 1998 dismantling of the courageous *Avispa* operation, as it arrested Cuban immigrants in September 1998 on an array of 26 different charges, ranging from being "unregistered agents of a foreign government" to "conspiracy to commit espionage" and, to escalate the stakes, even "conspiracy to commit murder." Apparently their "crime" was not announcing to the imperialist authorities their work in defense of their country against deadly threats and attacks long promoted by those same imperialists. (However, after intelligence collected by the *Wasp Network* reached Havana, much of it was actually shared with the U.S. government.)

The Cuban Five and Defense of Cuba Today

Known as the "Cuban Five" internationally and the "Five Heroes" in Cuba, René González, Gerardo Hernández, Ramón Labaniño, Fernando González and Antonio Guerrero experienced firsthand the brutality of the U.S. criminal "justice" system, languishing in the dungeons of the capitalist state for over a decade. This included long stints in solitary confinement. The 2001 "trial" of the Five was held in Miami, the heart of *gusano* terrorism, in the wake of a hysterical rightist press campaign against Fidel Castro and the Cuban Revolution.

The jury foreman openly proclaimed his hatred for the Cuban leader, and the defendants were declared guilty on all counts by a jury that did not ask a single question. This, combined with arbitrary detention, limitations on lawyer visitation and separation from one another, made even the semblance of a fair trial impossible. When

⁵ See "Free the Cuban Five!" *The Internationalist* No. 27, May-June 2008.

a three-judge panel of the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals unanimously threw out the convictions and ordered a new trial on the grounds of the location and prejudicial publicity, the U.S. government appealed the ruling and the convictions were upheld.

René González was the first of the Five to be freed, followed by Fernando González in February 2014.⁶ Those remaining were released in December of that year as part of a prisoner exchange which saw Cuba give up Rolando Sarraff Trujillo (an imperialist double agent who helped engineer the Five's arrest). On the U.S. side, this was part of the short-lived "Cuban thaw" undertaken by the Obama administration, which sought to further the long-standing U.S. objective of capitalist restoration through a more "soft power" approach including pressing to "open Cuba's economy." (As we have noted, inequalities fostered by some "market reforms" that have been promulgated by the Cuban government were part of the background to the July 11 counterrevolutionary protests.)

For decades, the U.S. has sought to extradite Assata Shakur, the former Black Panther (and aunt of rapper Tupac Shakur), who was framed up on murder charges and incarcerated by the racist capitalist state. In 1979, Shakur managed to escape from prison and by 1984 had made it to Cuba, where she was granted political asylum. There, she has authored the widely read *Assata: An Autobiography* (1987), helped publicize the truth about the FBI's murderous COINTELPRO program, given interviews about life in Cuba and inspired many with her courage and resilience.⁷ In the U.S., politicians and administrations both Democratic and Republican have pursued Assata's extradition. (Among them: Bernie Sanders, who in 1998 was one of the 205 Republicans and 165 Democrats who in a vote of both

⁶ René González was released on parole in 2011, but did not return to Cuba until 2013 and was allowed to stay provided he renounced his U.S. citizenship.

⁷ See "The FBI's Covert Program to Destroy the Black Panther Party" and "Prisoner in Paradise: An Interview with Assata Shakur" at assatashakur.org and listen to or read "Assata, Guilty of Survival" at prisonradio.org by Mumia Abu-Jamal, the former Black Panther and journalist who is America's foremost class-war prisoner. (*Revolution* and *The Internationalist* have run many articles over the years on Mumia's case, among them "Free Mumia Abu-Jamal Now!" in *Revolution* No. 9, November 2011 and "No Execution By COVID – Free Mumia Abu-Jamal Now!" in *The Internationalist* No. 62, January-April 2021.)



Internationalist photo

CUNY Internationalist Clubs and Internationalist Group at July 15 Union Square demonstration in defense of the Cuban Revolution.

chambers of Congress voted to demand her extradition to the U.S. as a "convicted felon.") Today, Assata Shakur remains on the FBI's "Most Wanted" list, with a million-dollar bounty on her head, showing the truth of her observation that, in the eyes of racist U.S. imperialism, she is a modern-day "escaped slave."

Wasp Network achieves something important: breaking through the imperialist propaganda machine, it tells the truth about counterrevolutionary provocations against Cuba and the *Red Avispa*'s heroic efforts to thwart them. Unfortunately, the intimate relationship between the U.S. State Department and the Miami clot of gangsters and terrorists is not depicted in the film. Those who don't know the long history of U.S. provocations against the Cuban deformed workers state could walk away from *Wasp Network* with the impression that Carriles, Bosch, Basulto and their ilk were just independent "hot-heads" who developed an appetite for intrigue and violence, somehow passively tolerated by Washington. The truth is the professionals of counterrevolution were creatures cultivated and trained by the CIA, used in U.S. imperialism's clandestine operations across Latin America and beyond.

Despite its shortcomings, *Wasp Network* shows a slice of what U.S. imperialism really means when its mouthpieces spout propaganda about "freedom"; and the brutality that exiled capitalists and henchmen are prepared to employ in their quest to restore capitalism on the island.

In the wake of last summer's counterrevolutionary protests, René González of the Cuban Five was interviewed in a podcast published on the *Cubadebate* website (28 July). He noted that unleashing hatred against Cuba "continues to be a business" in Mi-

ami and Washington, seeking to exploit real difficulties and problems facing the Revolution. González is asked why this antagonism toward Cuba is "unending" from one U.S. administration to the next; "it always seems like 'déjà vu all over again,'" notes the interviewer. González responds: "Cuba continues to be a thorn in the flesh of Yankee imperialism's arrogance, whether Democrats or Republicans are in office, whether or not one [politician] is more intelligent than another."

Imperialism is "the hand that rocks the cradle" of counterrevolution, the interviewer agrees. That includes those who organize from south Florida, seeking nothing less than the "freedom" to drown Cuba in poverty and enrich themselves in the process. *Wasp Network* gives us an important glimpse of what it's all about. ■

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How Cuba's Heroic "Wasp Network" Stung U.S.-Backed Counterrevolutionaries

By Alice

In July of this year, one after another, big-business media empires launched new torrents of denunciation against Cuba. For over six decades, the Yankee imperialists have tried to starve the rebel island into submission, seeking revenge against the 1959 Cuban Revolution that threw out the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista and his U.S. overlords.¹ Under their current administration of Joe Biden & Co., the deadly U.S. blockade ("embargo") against Cuba maintains heightened measures ramped up when Donald Trump was in the White House. Many here were blurry on the background when the U.S. government's Voice of America blared "Biden Condemns Cuba for Crackdown on Freedom Protesters," referring to coordinated protests that occurred in various parts of the island on July 11.

Mainstream media followed – and "Bernie Sanders Backs Cuban Protests," headlined the London *Independent* (11 July). Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez issued a statement on Congress of the United States letterhead echoing the State Department spin on the protests. "We stand in solidarity" as "Cubans rise up and protest for their rights as never before," wrote AOC, calling to "condemn the anti-democratic actions" of the Cuban government.² Much of the self-proclaimed left took a similar tack.

In sharp contrast, we Trotskyist defenders of the Cuban Revolution told the truth about the events. What was really going on?

"While fueled by desperation over food shortages, lack of medicine and blackouts that have beset the island in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, the marches were instigated, manipulated and exploited by forces seeking to overthrow the Cuban Revolution. With its exemplary public health system, Cuba has been able to contain the virus far better than almost anywhere else on the planet outside of China. Yet U.S. rulers are seeking to capitalize on the economic toll of the pandemic, and weariness from 60 years of imperialist blockade. In this difficult situation, the first duty of revolutionary communists, in Cuba and worldwide, is to actively combat the

forces of capitalist counterrevolution."³

Attempting to paint a picture of a revolution on its last legs, U.S. media obscured or smeared the pro-Revolution demonstrations that drew tens of thousands in Havana and many in other parts of the island. After Fidel Castro's 26 of July Movement defeated Batista's notoriously corrupt U.S.-equipped army and police torture squads, the victorious Revolution raised the standard of living for millions. This included rural and urban poor and working-class people, notably the Afro-Cuban population whose labor had created incalculable wealth, first for the owners of slave plantations and then for U.S.-owned sugar companies, yet had been condemned to destitution and Jim Crow-style discrimination under the old, U.S.-installed regime.

³ "The Truth About Cuba Protests" (July 2021) at www.internationalist.org. Also see the accompanying articles "U.S. Blockade of Cuba: 'Bring About Hunger, Desperation, Overthrow'" and "'Cuba Is Being Accused of Many Things – Let's Fact Check Them'."



On 40th anniversary of counterrevolutionaries' 1976 bombing of Cubana Flight 455, marchers in Havana carry victims' pictures. Among those killed by *gusano* terrorists were the teenage athletes of Cuba's national fencing team.

Already in its first two years, the Revolution had eliminated illiteracy, distributed land to hundreds of thousands of poor peasants, radically slashed rents – and defeated the CIA-organized mercenary army of *gusanos* (counterrevolutionary "worms") at the Bay of Pigs. Cuba went on to build a world-renowned system of medical care and biomedical innovation,

Stalin's anti-Marxist dogma that you can build "socialism in one country." (Among them: the pro-Biden, ultra-reformist Communist Party USA; also Workers World, Party for Socialism and Liberation, and others.)

We Trotskyists explain that difficulties facing the Cuban workers state are further complicated by the fact that it is bureaucratically deformed by the privileged nationalist bureaucracy that sits atop the collectivized economy. Increasingly, it has been promoting pro-capitalist "reforms" that will foster the growth of capitalist inroads and pro-capitalist forces. Intransigently defending the Cuban Revolution against imperialism and internal counterrevolution, Trotskyists call to replace the stultifying bureaucracy with the proletarian democracy of workers councils, that is, a proletarian political revolution to defend and extend the historic gains won in Cuba, through international socialist revolution.

Revolution highly recommends that readers dig deeper into these issues and check out "The Truth About Cuba Protests" (July 2021) and accompanying items on internationalist.org.

In the Belly of the Beast

Recent events make this a good time to bring to our readers' attention an exciting film called *Wasp Network* (2019). It's a dramatization of the history of the Cuban counterintelligence operation of the same name (*La Red Avispa*), by French director Olivier Assayas. Starring Gael García Bernal, Penelope Cruz and others, the movie – available on Netflix – is based on the book *The Last Soldiers of the Cold War: The Story of the Cuban Five* (2015) by Brazilian author Fernando Morais. It is clear from the outset that Assayas is no communist. But *Wasp Network* vividly portrays

continued on page 22



Wasp Network (2019), available on Netflix, tells the story of the "Cuban Five."

¹ In addition to companies such as United Fruit, Domino Sugar, Texaco, plus U.S. imperialism's Murder Inc. of the CIA, State Department, etc., this included the Mafia figures who ran much of Havana in partnership with Batista. This is famously depicted in *The Godfather Part Two* and described in fascinating detail in *Havana Nocturne: How the Mob Owned Cuba ... And Then Lost It to the Revolution* (2009) by T.J. English.

² Sanders' and Ocasio-Cortez's declarations of support for the counterrevolutionary protests did not satisfy right-wing mouthpieces. After fulsomely hailing the U.S.-backed protests, AOC's statement pleaded "it is never acceptable for us to use cruelty as a point of leverage against every day people" (i.e., measures of "leverage" should "just" include those on the Cuban state itself?) while opposing "the Biden administration's defense of the embargo."