

CounterPunch



NAFTA 2: FREE-TRADE, TRUMP-STYLE BY LAURA CARLSEN

THE VENEZUELA FIXATION BY W. T. WHITNEY JR.

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF HOMELESSNESS BY KENNETH SURIN

FIDEL, TWO YEARS LATER BY SUSAN BABBITT

A BIG LABOR FIGHT IN IOWA BY CINDA COOPER



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In Memory of
Alexander Cockburn
1941–2012



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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Kudos from England

Just want to thank you from the UK. Over here—one after another they throw the Palestinians under a bus to the sound of rapturous applause and the satisfying thud and ‘wump’ of a red carpet rolling out in front of them. Our future leaders.

I wonder how many of our new heroes would have actually stood up against anti-Semitism when it wasn’t exactly a cost free exercise.

Even though it’s all part of a continually repeating pattern, without intelligent journalism to back it up, you can just end up getting gaslighted. Your work is greatly appreciated.

*Alistair Hale
Walsall, UK*

Rock Soul

Jeffrey...hope you’re well man. I feel connected to you through your writing, and through Counterpunch, so thank God for that. Like so many other musicians and artists in our country, I’m fairly broke. Had some more major nasty health setbacks. However I will find a way to scare up some dough and get it to CP, which I feel is absolutely crucial to the survival of some kind of sane dissent currently.

Just wanted to say thank you for what you do, and great thanks for how good you’ve been to me. I’ve got a new single coming your way in next couple weeks, and it’s quite influenced by what I read in CP and how I feel in my heart and mind. First song is called “We’re All We’ve Got”—how we have only each other to truly rely on, I mean...a bit

reductive as a statement I know, but it can be tough to get complicated ideas into a brief rock’n’roll song (and yes it still is rock’n’roll, or rock’n’soul) and still hope it provokes an emotional response in the listener. Other song is a cover of Bowie’s great “This Is Not America.” So taken as a whole, it’s a subtle commentary on where we are and where we need to be in the face of how fucked up this man and his administration truly are. So it becomes about asking who we are, answering that personally to ourselves individually and then, in my case anyway, expressing it.

It’s about what kind of country this is—and what we want it to be, and who gets to live here. And then...where do they get to live, and what are they allowed to do? I could go on, but that’s why you’re here. Take care man...music will come soon.

Stewart Franke

What It Means to Be...

I’m still reeling from this morning, by chance hearing NPR speak of a shooting in Squirrel Hill, Pittsburgh, at a Jewish Temple. My wondering which one. Having grown up in Squirrel Hill. Then came the word that it was a Conservative Temple, which ruled out the Reformed temple I knew best, Rodef Sholom where I went to Saturday School as a boy. Then the temple’s locale, Shady and Wilkins Avenues. “Oh!” Just a few blocks from where I grew up, and where my nephew and niece now live with their families. The initial shock, like being hit by a sledgehammer. Here, this morning, our getaway home on the Zigzag

River, Rhododendron, Oregon, no longer so very distant from the anguish of an inside-out world. Then hearing from the KDKA broadcasters what was on the shooter’s quasi-Twitter, before the FBI closed it down, Death to the Jewish Invaders, and praise for Donald Trump. Impossible not to connect this moment to the Florida pipe bomber.

I’m reminded of when I asked a close friend at Portland State what it was to be a Sikh, his saying he that a Sikh grows up with half a dozen reminders of what it is to be a Sikh: wearing a turban out of respect for God, wearing split pants, so you can leap on a horse at a moment’s notice to ride to the rescue of another, having a scimitar by your side, again to protect the other. I forget the others; one is a book, a reminder of a holy text, another a bracelet, copper perhaps, for humility. He then told the story of how in his first year of college in India that there was a group of Hindus attacking a young Christian student, and how he ran to his aid, and so was also beaten up. And then, when Mrs. Gandhi was shot and killed by a Sikh, and how turbaned Sikhs were being shot on the street, so that he hid in his dorm room, not daring to come out. Then came a knock on his door. It was the Christian boys, saying, “This is certain death. You must come with us till things calm down.” Which he did. Later, when I asked him how many Sikhs there are, he replied, “Not many. Hardly more than there are Jews.”

A character in one of my novels had described herself is a similar vein. She wasn’t so

much Jewish, as not Christian. So that when, at an all-boys high school, at mandatory chapel five mornings a week, after a brief sermon, and the our singing a hymn, which always ended with “In the name of Jesus Christ Our Lord,” the Jewish oys would softly murmur, “Not me.”

Exactly what this adds up to still puzzles me. I’m “other” in so many ways: a sourdough baker (this morning loaves about to go in the oven); a needlepointer, who gets inspiration from Moroccan artists half a dozen centuries back; as a cyclist who when he’s asked why he always wears shorts, replies, “To keep my pants from getting wet.” Add to that being left-handedness and cross-dominant. I guess it’s no wonder I’m a Counter-Puncher.

Tony Wolk

Out with Bono

Excellent article by Aiden O’Brien. Not only are Bono’s politics bad, but he is a mediocre singer. The version of U2’s “One” in which the superb MaryJ. Blige does most of the vocals is far superior to the original in which Bono does all the singing. Bono has managed to get duets with singers far superior to him such as Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett and Mick Jagger. But my attitude toward his singing can best be described by the words of Roger Waters, “Fuck all that.”

Richard Warren

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ROAMING CHARGES

In Yemen, No One Hears You Scream

BY JEFFREY ST. CLAIR

Now we know what it takes to briefly flip the narrative on Saudi Arabia. A journalist has to be murdered in an embassy on the orders of the Crown Prince, his body dismembered with a bone saw and then the butchered remains dissolved in a vat of acid. But not just any journalist. The Saudis have killed and imprisoned many journalists before. But Jamal Khashoggi was journalist working for *The Washington Post*, a paper owned by the world's richest man.

Still there was no anguished outcry, from the *Washington Post* or the *New York Times*, three months earlier, after a Saudi Arabian fighter jet launched an airstrike on a school bus in Yemeni village of Dahyan. The bus had stopped in Dahyan for refreshments, after a picnic, and was heading back to the school when it was struck by a laser-guided MK 82 bomb manufactured by Lockheed and sold to the Saudis by the Pentagon. Fifty people were killed in the bombing, all of them civilians, 30 of them children, most of them 10 years old and younger. Another 48 people were wounded.

One of the school's teachers, Yahya Hussein, was driving behind the bus in a car. She arrived in Dahyan a few minutes after airstrike and encountered a scene of unspeakable horror. "There was body parts and blood everywhere," she told Al Jazeera.

The Saudis didn't bother cleaning up the blood or hiding the severed limbs. Instead the Crown Prince declared the school-bus bombing a "legitimate military attack." A few days later, the Saudis bombed a funeral for one of the victims, killing and maiming

another dozen people. The Saudis said the victims were being used as human shields by the Houthi militias. "I'll be talking about a lot of things with the Saudis," Trump quipped to Axios recently. "But certainly I wouldn't be having people that don't know how to use the weapons shooting at buses with children."

One might have hoped for at least a little introspection from the Pentagon in the wake of this gruesome child slaughter.

Instead we were treated to some appalling nonsense from the liberals' favorite general, James Mattis, who said that the US's role in the war was helping to prevent civilian casualties. "There aren't news reports when Saudi coalition pilots exercise restraint," Mattis declared. Which begs the question: who is being killed when the Saudis show restraint with their American weapons and the press isn't around to examine the body parts?

After all, the Dahyan bombing was far from first the massacre of civilians perpetrated by the Saudis using American-made "smart bombs." In March 2016, 97 civilians were killed when the Saudis bombed the Kames Market in Mastaba. According to Human Rights Watch, 25 children died in that attack. Seven months later, the Saudis targeted another laser-guided missile at a funeral hall in Sanaa, killing 195 civilians. In between, those atrocities the Saudis bombed hospitals, schools, power plants and water treatment facilities, all in violation of international law.

In all, more US-backed Saudi airstrikes have killed more than 5,000 people, 60 percent of them civilians.

This lethal lawlessness eventually proved too much even for the drone king himself. After the Sanaa bombing, Obama ordered a halt new weapons sales to the Saudis. Of course by this time, his administration had already sold the Saudis more than \$115 billion in weapons, the most of any administration in the 70-year history of the US/Saudi relationship. The ban was swiftly lifted under Trump, who wasted little time in brokering his own \$110 billion arms deal with the House of Saud.

The war in Yemen, started under Obama and accelerated under Trump, can legitimately be called a war on children. The famine sweeping the country largely as a result of the crushing embargo against the nation may be the worst on the planet in more than a century, according to the United Nations. More than 1.8 million children are the brink of starvation, with at least 130 dying each day.

Despite the rising death toll, Yemen remains a place few Americans have heard of or could place on map. Yet it is where Barack Obama ordered the assassination by drone of an American citizen, Anwar al-Awlaki, and two weeks later called up another hit that killed his 16-year-old son, Abdulrahman, also an American citizen. Neither were afforded any kind of due process by the peace prize president.

Yemen is also where Donald Trump committed his first war crime, authorizing a commando raid eight days after his inauguration on a village that killed 15 civilians, including, al-Awlaki's 8-year-old daughter, Nora. Why is the US killing children in Yemen? Who authorized it? What is the goal? When will it end? No one is saying. Few in congress or the press even bother to ask.

It's not a secret war, the way Afghanistan was under Jimmy Carter. It's something worse: a war no one cares enough about to mention, assess or debate. Yemen is the place where no one hears you scream, even as you shout in horror at the sight of the dismembered bodies of the 10-year-olds who were once your students. **CP**



EMPIRE BURLESQUE

Following the Static

By CHRIS FLOYD

The last bar at the end of the world is not an artfully constructed glamor-sleaze ruin on a billion-dollar movie set. The end of the world—the world of bars, of people who go down to hole-in-the-wall bars, drink booze and hear music—is not going to be like that. There's not going to be fake rain glimmering over hyperglow neon. No corrupt thugs seeking salvation through sprays of hot lead and stylized violence. No minatory tower looming over the teeming streets, no jaded mastermind in the penthouse watching old movies, no agents of the Master State moving grimly through the night.

The last bar at the end of the world will be on a side street off the main drag of some ordinary, lower-tier city, a city on the edge of the ocean. An ocean that had once been far away. It's going to look more or less like it's looked for a hundred years, except for a time in Eighties when the original bar closed and the building became a second-hand furniture shop for awhile, then the first owner's family got it back again and made it more or less the way it was before. The race and class of the main clientele will have changed several times over the decades until now, when the bar is on the edge of the ocean and its customers are a hodgepodge of anyone who still has a handful of whatever passes for money—and more than a few that don't.

On the last night that the last bar at the end of the world is open, the plan is to drink what's left of the stock, all of it, for free. The delivery lines have dried up. There's no way of telling anymore when a truck might come, or if they've finally stopped coming. Telecomms went out a long time ago, not that long after the ocean started moving, quicker

than anyone expected, toward the city. Landlines are like the electric grid: uncertain, intermittent, frazzled, failing. There's still radio of sorts: thousands of jangled voices talking over each other from this basement and that shed and, who knows, maybe some real stations somewhere. Music, ranting, preaching, official statements from whatever passes for officialdom, news of unknown provenance, gossip, panic, all of it crackling with static.

Even with all that, the last bar might have stayed open a bit longer. Someone always wants to drink, and something that passes for booze can always be gotten. Someone always wants to play, someone always wants to sing, and any night you can't get someone, there's always the jukebox. But the sewer system's finally going—it's going—and that's all she wrote, really. You can't run anything in a building that becomes one big, broken, oozing, overflowing toilet. And you see more and more places turning into just that. Time to pack it up, head for the hills, or to one of the other towns where it's whispered things might not be so bad yet. Or maybe just follow one of those crackling radio waves to the place where the static comes from.

Maybe that's what he's doing, the guy stumbling down the steps from the bar. It's not long after midnight, there's still booze to go, the band is taking a break, the jukebox is playing. The generators are loaded, there'll be light until dawn. He's been boisterous and maudlin like everybody else, but now he's gone quiet, abstracted. He gets up to leave; they call after him half-heartedly, then get back to it.

He goes down to the street that's still

wet from where the last storm brought the ocean into the city before the water eased back, just a bit. And on down to the sea edge in the middle of where the park used to be. There's not a beach, but there are waves. He sees the whitecaps flashing then shutting off in the churning darkness. Real dark; he can't see a line between the ocean and the sky.

He sits down in the shaggy, storm-muddied grass. He's had too much to drink, but that's not the thing. The last bar is closing, but that's not thing. The world he'd known for a time, then dreamed of while it faded, is now ending; but that's not the thing. The thing is a feeling welling up inside him, something that's been a long time coming, working its way to a flashpoint like a whitecap emerging from the void. A strange, scrambled, utterly senseless, utterly selfless feeling that shivers his body like a seizure or a fever: gratitude.

It's the last thing he knows before the darkness leaves the ocean and swallows him whole, and whatever the hell he is isn't here anymore. The music from the jukebox in the last bar on its last night drifts over like a perfume across his figure in the grass. It might be Bobby Darin, something really old and swoony, or maybe Johnny Ace. The bar's too far away and the music's too faint to tell. **CP**



BOTTOMLINES

Fooled Again on “Free Trade”

BY PETE DOLACK

The text of the new version of the North American Free Trade Agreement has been released, and it’s about as bad as activists have warned. It is a document by, of and for multi-national corporations.

This was to be expected. The Trump administration’s July 2017 “Summary of Objectives for the NAFTA Renegotiation” featured boilerplate language lifted from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and a report it issued in April 2018 took aim at 137 countries for trade “barriers” it wanted to knock down—barriers such as rules requiring food be proven safe.

Even the two apparent improvements, reducing the use of secret tribunals to settle disputes and a rule intended to raise Mexican autoworker wages, may prove to be little more than window dressing.

The use of secret tribunals—a process known in trade lingo as “investor-state dispute settlement,” or ISDS—enables corporations to sue to overturn any regulation that they claim hurts their actual or potential future profits. The Trump administration claimed it intended to eliminate ISDS.

It didn’t. The new NAFTA, officially known as the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement, contains this holdover language: “No Party shall expropriate or nationalize a covered investment either directly or indirectly through measures equivalent to expropriation or nationalization” (article 14.8). That is often the basis on which corporations sue governments to overturn pesky laws such as those safeguarding environmental safety. Further, annex 14-A states: “The Parties confirm their shared understanding that ‘custom-

ary international law’ ... results from a general and consistent practice of States that they follow from a sense of legal obligation. The customary international law minimum standard of treatment of aliens refers to all customary international law principles that protect the investments of aliens.” Again, the same language as before—“customary international law” is interpreted by the secret tribunals to favor corporate profits.

What is not clear is determining the forum in which corporate attempts to overturn regulations will be heard. Annex 14-A states that disputes between the U.S. and Mexico will be heard in the same tribunal used in NAFTA, but article 31.3 states that the parties to disputes will choose their forum. The text appears to exclude “indirect expropriation” from the issues eligible to be heard by the secret tribunals. That does appear to block cases where a corporation wants to overturn a regulation because it would allegedly hurt future profits. But that seems contradicted by article 31.2, which states corporations are eligible to sue “when a Party considers that a benefit it could reasonably have expected to accrue to it” under any of several chapters is breached. Future profits hurt by a regulation is the sort of “benefit” corporate executives expect to “accrue.”

If we were to assume the most optimistic reading—that such cases will be excluded from the secret tribunals—that does not mean democracy will have been restored. It would simply mean that corporations would be able to sue in regular courts instead. Better results are not necessarily likely there.

Consider two recent examples: In

August, a U.S. federal judge ruled that a defunct Canadian gold mining company, Crystallex International, is entitled to seize control of the Venezuelan state oil company’s U.S. subsidiary, Citgo, because Crystallex claims to have lost \$1.4 billion when its Venezuela gold mine was nationalized. Other judges consistently ruled for Chevron in its attempt to evade responsibility for polluting Amazonian lands in Ecuador.

And a different tribunal than the one used under NAFTA would be no better: In September, the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague ruled on the dispute between Ecuador and Chevron. Although a case concerning Chevron dumping 16 billion gallons of toxic wastewater into waterways and open pits, the ruling was that government of Ecuador must pay Chevron!

Trade cases being heard in regular courts will still be judged on the standard of “customary international law,” which means the precedents already set in numerous tribunals establishing the “right” of corporations to overturn whatever laws or regulations they don’t like.

And if a government is dragooned into a tribunal, what is the standard for the judges? Exactly the same as under NAFTA: “Each roster member and panelist shall have expertise or experience in international law, international trade, other matters covered by this Agreement, or the resolution of disputes arising under international trade agreements.”

And as for the supposed new protections, those are empty words. Under article 14.8, governments are allowed to encourage enterprises to voluntarily adopt standards of corporate social responsibility. Note there is no requirement here, whereas rules to enhance corporate power use words like “shall” and “must.” Such definitive words are used, for example, in Chapter 15, which prohibits any restrictions on financial-services companies, and in Chapter 20, which grants pharmaceutical companies their wish lists.

Will we get fooled again? **CP**



BETWEEN THE LINES

An Orange Masturbatory Chimp

BY RUTH FOWLER

It's hard to know what to write about as the midterms loom. We are in a society that sends pipe bombs to senior Democratic figures and outspoken A-list celebrities. We're in a culture that sees the dismemberment of a journalist in the Saudi embassy as a perfectly acceptable, if mildly regrettable, mistake which should be dismissed with no further comment. In the meantime we're trying to get a national database of genitalia up and running. Think about that. The world is going to hell. Temperatures are rising. Climate change is real. No one has health insurance. Schools are shit. If you're black, brown, muslim, LGTBQ, a woman or a supporter of these you're fucked. We're all going to die in misery and poverty. Hey, let's spend some money examining baby peni and creating an entirely new bureaucracy! I know it must be bad as Caitlyn Jenner says so. Kanye West can't speak as he's at a fashion show with the animated stop motion figurine made of Hyaluronic acid and botox that is his wife, the great cultural icon of our time, she who needs no introduction.

The world we are living in is so patently awful, so outlandishly, cartoonishly horrific in every way, so much like a grainy, flickering black-and-white movie about the rise of Hitler, or Stalin, or any other psychotic, brutal despotism, that many of us who have been politically active and outspoken for years, are actually rendered, instead, completely mute. What the hell are you meant to say when confronted by the enormous numbers of people who continue to believe that this is all perfectly acceptable and fine, and not really a frightening Orwellian novel? This is terrible?

It's fucking awful. Why does our awful sound so weak now? There was a sense of fire and conviction on the (divided) left under the Obama regime which feels wholly lacking in this fire and brimstone era of Trump.

During the Kavanaugh hearing, I sat down with a Trump supporter in California and just listened, my intent to figure out what the hell is going on in these people's heads—particularly those who live in liberal hubs such as Los Angeles, and don't even have the excuse of living in some small-town Fox News middle American caucasian hell to justify their stupidity. The Trump supporter I ended up talking to—Christian, educated, Palestinian-American, 43, Deadhead, chain smoker, loving father, relatively affluent, hopelessly sexist as I heard him casually try and sell me off to his sixty-something friend when he thought I wasn't listening (“She’s totally into you dude! She wants you!”—I did not)—blustered on about Dr Ford in between informing me about which Grateful Dead album was the best. “I think Kavanaugh absolutely shouldn’t lose the nomination over this. He’s innocent until proven guilty. There’s something not right about Dr Ford. Like, why now? Her motives aren’t pure. There’s no *evidence*.” The need for indisputable evidence. Testimony and memory are not sufficient to convict, punish or deprive any white male of what they think they might be owed, but are always absolutely enough to send people of color to a lengthy and punitive prison sentence or justify measures which abuse the civil rights of a marginalized group.

What we are witnessing in America

today is our own mass arranged marriage to the most abusive mother-fucker on earth. We have been yoked to Donald Trump and his agenda of destruction, forced along as the long suffering little wifey whose plaintive objections go unheard while the rest of the country unite in hatred. We're basically married to a dude who says, every day, “Yeah, I hit you. So fucking what?”

Over the years America and its Presidents have always quietly farmed out their support of totalitarian regimes and genocides, hidden it for fear of losing the support of the American people. As the United State's blatant manipulation of world politics has become uncovered and resulted in little more than some international hand-claps from unimportant European countries with less important economies and a few liberals holding up banners in Washington, it has become ever more apparent that this supposedly Democratic country had become fertile ground for the creation of its own totalitarian regime of fear. Many of us lived through Bush, the Iraq Wars, Special Registration and the construction of a fictitious bogeyman used to justify Republican attacks on civil liberties. None of us could, it seem, imagine that a worse horror would lie in wait for us, an orange masturbatory chimp who literally does not give a fuck, who motivates the vast swathes of stupid Americans who also do not give a fuck and have little else to do in life aside from wallow in motivational hatred and contempt for those who do give a fuck. As the liberal press flounder, publishing reams of articles which fall on deaf ears, drawing links between increased occurrences of racism, sexism, bigotry and casual violence and what our President does and says (NO SHIT!), it seems, perhaps that we are at a time when we simply have to accept that we're not doing great as opponents. We were much better at it under Obama. Why is that? And what the hell can we do to fix it? **CP**

BORDERZONE NOTES

NAFTA 2

No Relief for Workers

BY LAURA CARLSEN

Donald Trump strode triumphantly into the Rose Garden on Oct. 1 and launched into hyperbole. He called the recently renegotiated North American Free Trade Agreement “the most modern, up-to-date and most balanced trade agreement in the history of our country”. The White House, quoting Fox News and the Wall Street Journal and not a single workers’ organization, called it “a victory for American industries and workers”.

But the new NAFTA, like the old NAFTA, offers no relief for U.S. workers. And it’s not a “brand new deal”. It retains much of the old text and incorporates text from the Transpacific Partnership (TPP) that Trump dumped when he took office. Although there are some gains on paper, the agreement as written doesn’t guarantee they can be enforced.

NAFTA 2’s biggest flaw is that it continues to lock the nations into a free-trade model that has created vast inequality and hurt workers in all three countries. The agreement grants transnational corporation access to resources and labor under privileged conditions throughout North America. By not permitting states a stronger role in governing and constraining public interest in favor of profits, it also leaves intact the “globalist” order that Trump rails against in speeches to his blue-collar base.

What It Says

To be fair, the new agreement—now called the “US-Mexico-Canada

Agreement-USMCA” to distance it from the old one dubbed by Trump the “worst trade deal ever made”—isn’t a rehash of NAFTA 1 or a sneaky return of the TPP, as some pundits have claimed. There are a few changes that progressives have been fighting for for years, and there are also some new clauses that are far worse than either of its predecessors, especially for consumer and patient rights affected by extended monopolies in the intellectual property chapter. The most important advance is the elimination of most of the Ch. 11 investor-state dispute chapter that allowed corporations to sue states for laws restricting their profits or future profits.

Labor scored a largely symbolic, but not unimportant, win by incorporating the labor chapter into the accord. The first NAFTA had pegged labor and environmental side agreements on to the text to get it through a Democratic congress. By having the chapter in the body of the agreement, it theoretically strengthens enforcement and at least recognizes that labor is a factor in international trade and that exploitation is an unfair trade practice, in addition to violating rights. The labor side agreement was so toothless that in 24 years no case was ever sanctioned, despite rampant violations of labor law. This agreement still contains mostly mechanisms of cooperation and consultation, rather than the stricter sanctions that are stipulated for trade disputes.

The USMCA puts compliance with

the basic International Labor Organization standards in the text, along with a few additional articles from the original side agreement on equal labor rights for migrant labor and elimination of sex-based discrimination. Despite a lot of talk about setting a wage floor—a proposal pointedly directed at Mexico whose minimum wage is around four dollars a day—negotiators rejected the proposal.

Ironically, given Trump’s virulent anti-union practices, the trade agreement enshrines the right to organize unions. A special Annex 23-A requires that Mexico eliminate fake company unions and “protection contracts”, form independent regulation and conciliation bodies, assure free and secret union votes, and provide public information on representation and contracts. This is a big deal because it’s so far from the current situation, where companies sign contracts with corporate unions without the participation and often even the knowledge of workers. The hope on the US side—and it’s a reasonable one—is that effective labor law in Mexico will contribute to closing the approximately 4 to 1 gap between U.S. and Mexican wages. If that happens, it’s progress for everyone.

Mexican labor experts and activists celebrated the clauses to eliminate company contracts, which “protect” thousands of workplaces from real worker representation. It gives them a tool to pressure for stronger national legislation and implementation of labor reforms, and push for a real shake-up of the corrupt, company-led system of dispute resolution. Whether it succeeds or not will depend on the willingness and the capacity of the new Lopez Obrador government to carry out reforms, rather than on the trilateral trade agreement.

Adversaries Above

In any case, improved labor conditions for Mexican workers would take a long time to be felt as a gain for U.S. workers, although the change would undoubtedly move “the arc of the moral universe” in the right direction. The main reason it won’t make much difference is that,

contrary to Trump rhetoric, Mexican workers and Mexico were never the real adversaries in the NAFTA debacle. By pitting global factory workers against each other, Trump covers for the real adversary of workers' rights—the transnational companies that employ them on both sides of the border. Free trade agreements like NAFTA 1 and 2 facilitate corporate mobility to move where they can find the cheapest and most captive workforces, while constraining wages with threats of closure in the United States. Nothing about this new agreement will alter that.

Workers lose in free trade agreements because they're made to benefit, not regulate, corporations. If Donald Trump really wanted to address working families' plights, he could have included a fairness clause to cap the ratio between CEO and worker salaries. The latest AFL-CIO study on CEO salaries revealed a 361 to 1 ratio in some cases. CEO salaries have gone up as workers' wages stagnate, to an average of about \$13 million a year.

Mary Barra the CEO of embattled General Motors raked in \$22 million last year. Sofía, a maquiladora worker on the Mexican side of the border showed me her pay stubs last year. She earned \$123USD, for a 72-hour work week. After deductions, she took home \$83.00. So who's the real problem in global wealth distribution?

Much has been made of a "labor content clause" that establishes that 40-45% of a vehicle must be produced by workers earning a minimum of \$16 dollars an hour. Although sometimes presented as a way to bring wages up in Mexican transnational auto-producing factories, it's really a minimum US-Canada content requirement. Eduardo Solis, the president of the Mexican Association of the Automotive Industry, stated it won't have an impact on Mexican salaries or on redistributing production.

U.S. union leaders are waiting to see what kind of enforcement mechanisms are written in before passing judgment

on the new agreement. The text was hastily drawn up to make a deadline imposed by the changing of the guard in Mexico. Since all trade agreements have to be published by the USTR 60 days before the president can sign on and Mexican president Enrique Peña Nieto leaves office Dec.1, the clock was running out. The text still has to be completed and the online version changes constantly as officials continue to modify and add text. Implementing legislation in all three countries will be an important opportunity for input since these rules will define the specific impact of the changes.

What Was Left Out

The proposals that ended up on the cutting room floor reveal how far negotiators were *not* willing to go to improve workers conditions. Originally, the Canadian government demanded a clause condemning U.S. "right to work" laws. They argued with labor leaders that allowing workers to obtain the benefits of unions without the obligations weakens the very core concept of collective bargaining. Right-to-work laws have been a major factor in wage stagnancy in the U.S., according to AFL-CIO statistics leading to higher poverty and lower wages in states that have allowed them. Needless to say, this prohibition did not make it into NAFTA.

Labor mobility didn't either. In the anti-migrant atmosphere of the Trump administration, no one expected the NAFTA renegotiation to get real and take on immigration, although there were a few rhetorical statements from the Canadian and Mexican governments. Regional integration cannot exist without regulating labor mobility along with trade and no region has failed as spectacularly in this area as North America.

This failure to legalize immigrant workers perpetuates an underground labor economy that encourages exploitation and strips a significant part of the working population of its rights.

It allows continued criminalization of workers and their families who have been living in and contributing to U.S. communities for years, severing community ties and breaking needed bonds between residents and service providers like police, healthcare works and justice officials. As NAFTA imports displaced Mexican workers and increased migration, a lucrative parasitic private detention industry grew up that in some border communities is all there is to fill the hole left by the loss of productive jobs.

U.S. negotiators also rejected a Canadian proposal to include a chapter on gender rights. Numerous studies have shown the differentiated and severe impact of NAFTA on women and their rights, but now gender only comes up in a paragraph on job discrimination. Indigenous rights, which Canada also asked to include, were reduced to single line stating "nothing in this agreement shall preclude a party from adopting or maintaining a measure it deems necessary to fulfil its legal obligations to Indigenous peoples." Whether it's labor, women's, indigenous peoples or consumer rights, FTAs make rights compliance voluntary and anything that affects corporate profits actionable.

The new NAFTA serves political ends without improving workers' lives. Trump needed a win, or at least something he could spin as a win to take control of a news cycle dominated by the boorish image of his Supreme Court nomination, Brett Kavanaugh, attempting to defend himself against sexual assault charges. Polls showed the Democrats poised to take the House in the midterms, just weeks away. NAFTA was a campaign promise he could check off the list.

But what U.S. workers—and workers everywhere—really need aren't idle campaign promises but a fair economy and strong communities. A free trade agreement, by any other name, is never going to get us there.

Donald Trump's bid to be the billionaire blue-collar hero may have to wait. **CP**

EUROZONE NOTES

Our Own Filth

BY DANIEL RAVENTÓS AND JULIE WARK

It's not a nice feeling to walk out into your beautiful medieval neighborhood with a curse on your tongue soon to be released by the first pack of humans who try to kill you or knock you over. In the tourist season, you risk life and limb when you go out to shop because flocks of adults on wheels, blind to everything but the little flag waved by their bellwether, careen down your street on segways, bikes, motorized scooters, rollerblades and skateboards. We locals don't exist. They'd as soon skittle us as drop two meters behind the pack. Your summer vocabulary gets boorish: bugged off!

International tourist arrivals grew by 7% in 2017 to 1.322 billion. Anti-tourist protests also grew, from Amsterdam to Venice, through Barcelona, Dubrovnik, Hvar and Reykjavik. Venice, with only 55,000 permanent residents, gets 20 million tourists per year. Rome's City Hall now regulates things that should be basic good manners: no paddling in public fountains, no throwing food on the ground, no getting drunk and loud in the streets at night. Selfie stick wielders threatened the Coliseum so seriously they were banned. Barcelona has seen a lot of protests. Anti-Airbnb signs say, "Welcome tourists. The rent of holiday apartments in this neighborhood destroys the local socio-cultural fabric and promotes speculation. Many local residents are forced to move out. Enjoy your stay." Or, more succinctly, "Tourists go home. Refugees welcome." Some neighborhoods have more tourist accommodation than housing for residents. These zones become soulless with instant food shops, places selling

rubbishy mementos, and Irish pubs. Gone are the legume shops, bakeries, the shoe-repair man, and all the places that once made a neighborhood.

If you live in a tourist destination you have to put up with drunken gaggles bellowing happy-birthdays at 3 a.m., tour guides inventing local history and demanding applause right under your balcony, and other noise pollution. Public spaces, especially in London, become "Pops", privately owned public spaces, prettied up for tourists, used strictly for transit or consumption but not as quiet spots where homeless people can rest a while, or for demonstrations, all of which means yet another attack on democracy. "Cultural" tourism degenerates into, say, hordes of gawkers messing up Dubrovnik or ancient ruins in Northern Ireland with Game of Thrones trails. Culture is such a money spinner in Edinburgh that Richard Branson wants to build an eleven-story hotel that will block out 82% of the Central Library's light. Few locals attend traditional festivals like Hogmanay because there are too many tourists. Once, the ancient art of cairn-making in Scotland marked the way through difficult, foggy terrain. Now stone-stacking is a selfie habit which can mislead people lost on misty moors, causes soil erosion, decimates small invertebrates on the underside of overturned stones, and damages nests of birds like oystercatchers. Iceland, with a volatile economy increasingly dependent on the tourist boom (10% of GDP and more than 2,000,000 visitors in 2017), is struggling with the social and environmental downside. There are reports of tourists defecating wherever

they want in the countryside, camping in inappropriate places, stealing road signs, killing sheep, and digging up large areas of moss. Prices for locals are rocketing.

The Association of British Travel Agents estimates that in 2015, more than 1.3 million British tourists went overseas for stag and hen parties. This incongruous package-tour nuptial rite costs about £1,000 per person, bringing few economic benefits to the destination and social costs like drunken or aggressive behavior and environmental damage. And, at this point, let's kill one myth: tourism doesn't create good jobs. In Spain, for example, tourism increased 20% between 2008 and 2016, and employment rose a wretched 0.7%. And just ask hotel cleaners about this. Non-unionized, they work long hours for meager pay (CEOs can earn more in an hour than a cleaner gets in a year), face safety and health risks, sexual harassment, intimidation, and are in constant fear of arbitrary dismissal.

The early claims of Airbnb to be creating a "sharing economy", a jolly global community where we could all get to know each other better by spending a few days in each other's homes and democratizing the travel industry (which has helped to make the fortunes of the likes of Sheldon Adelson, Donald Trump, Richard Branson, *inter alia*) by letting small-fry make a buck too from their "authentic" properties (or rented flats) but the democracy was still-born because holiday accommodation is a goldmine for buy-to-let landlords who amass properties and hire agencies to run them. Landlords make much more from short lets to Airbnb travelers than to full-time tenants struggling to survive on low salaries thanks to the economic catastrophe of the selfsame system in which Airbnb flourishes. Many people can't remain in rented housing when they have to pay between 50-100% more at contract renewal time. Young people are especially vulnerable. Barcelona City Hall is trying to stop the trend by fining and restricting licenses for enterprises like Airbnb and HomeAway and

expanding public housing. Amsterdam, Lisbon and Paris are introducing similar measures, and Berlin has banned homeowners from renting out apartments on Airbnb.

The tourist industry is one of the motors of the shift away from regulated markets in favor of private capital, pushing global homogenization in the image of the hegemonic powers, and benefitting from pared-down state intervention (except in surveillance and security and discriminatory powers of who enters and who doesn't). The boom in the global hotel industry after the mid-1980s occurred when globalization and the expansion of finance capitalism provided the perfect milieu for the expansion of cartels which have changed old ideas of hostelry (and its connotations of hospitality) to condo hotels, casinos, golf courses, and marinas. Trump, of course, personifies this ugly business. Transnational corporations selling the travel dream were soon able to exploit the new forms of investment liquidity. Most have shell companies hiding in nasty corners of the global economy, easing flows of capital and finance which appear in no accountability ledgers. With zero public control, this dark money acts as slush funds for the businesses now dominating global and local economies, in the latter case with convenient pork barrels wherever they operate. Since they are unregulated, they can work with repressive "stable" regimes (Indonesia, Dominican Republic, Morocco, for example), thus shoring them up even more. As more airports, hotels, highways, fast trains, and marinas appear, less public money is spent on housing, education, health and welfare in tourist destinations. The situation is even worse in poor countries where traditional common resources like land, water, hunting and fishing zones are privatized and hundreds of communities destroyed.

Tourism fits neatly into the structure of the so-called Fourth Industrial (or digital) Revolution, fusing technologies which jumble up the physical, biological and virtual-reality spheres. You don't

contemplate a lake but take a selfie of yourself pretending to contemplate a lake. Ecotourism, "sustainable development tourism", "slum tourism" and "volunteer tourism" might sound politically correct but basically, they mean more havoc. Just look at Bill Clinton's beloved ("building back better") project of the luxury Marriott Hotel in earthquake-stricken Port-au-Prince. Or the high-altitude rubbish dump that is Mount Everest (8.5 tonnes cleaned up from the northern slopes in May 2018, according to China's *Global Times*). In Europe, too, mountains like Montblanc and Aneto are suffering serious environmental damage as masses of rash, inexperienced climbers leave their litter and risk their lives (and those of rescuers), all for an ecological selfie. The upshot is that the rights of the poor are trampled on in the most out-of-the-way parts of the globe. Everything is snatched from them by people who shoot elephants, patent plants plucked from jungles, steal indigenous weaving designs, and destroy delicate ecosystems.

In Ghana, for example, tourism, which was mainly controlled by the public sector until the 1990s, has brought no public good. Global markets quickly required institutional commodification of artefact production in the Ashanti kingdom where, with a rising tourist demand for heritage cloth, the state and international aid agencies imposed mass production. This has had dire effects on Ashanti culture and society and the art of weaving itself, from which young people are now excluded as power in the tourist sector is increasingly concentrated in hands decreed by external forces.

People have travelled ever since Abel left brother Cain behind and went off to pasture his flocks in other places. Once, the impulse to travel seemed to be related with a very human question: who am I? One way of trying to see ourselves is to gaze into the mirror of the Other, perhaps as a way of trying to work out who we think we are not. Now that who-we-are-not are erased from the story by the selfie. Which is surely a perfect representation of an

alienated, narcissistic "culture". When not conquering, travelers used to try to situate themselves in the world by exploring difficult places like mountain passes, Arctic ice-floes, or the Amazon. Or they made pilgrimages. Now, with the demise of once-expanding empires and the rise of the mono-empire, people with money to travel can go online, find the cheapest/sexiest offers and, blithely ignorant, pop up in far-flung places. Former sacred sites or killing fields are garishly or ghoulishly theme-parked, or become dangerous after tourist and NGO-workers are kidnapped or murdered. The new-place-each-year tourism is devoid of any earlier sense of inquiry and achievement. But who cares? When privatized business models applied in education spread out to quantify everything, you don't need to learn or experience anything new or challenging. You just tick places off your bucket list and get that shot with your face blocking out a good part of the Sphinx of Giza. What you must not do is emulate Claude Levi-Strauss who understood that, "The first thing we see as we travel round the world is our own filth, thrown into the face of mankind." It's sobering to re-read *Tristes Tropiques* (1955) now when travel is just another item of mass consumption. "When the spectrum or rainbow of human cultures has finally sunk into the void created by our frenzy; as long as we continue to exist and there is a world, that tenuous arch linking us to the inaccessible will still remain, to show us the opposite course to that leading to enslavement; man may be unable to follow it, but its contemplation affords him the only privilege of which he can make himself worthy..." These words are especially painful when all our filth, all the chemtrails of mass tourism, oceans choked with plastic bottles, and galloping species extinction are threatening the whole planet. Tourism is inseparable from housing, education, health, social, environmental, racism, employment, and exploitation issues. Which is to say neoliberal capitalism. And this is where the real "tourist problem" resides. **CP**

Stoking Fires, Plotting Coups Venezuelans Test Peaceful Road to Socialism, US Weighs In

BY W. T. WHITNEY JR.

Maybe the obituary of President Nicolas Maduro's Venezuelan government is already written, at least in North America. Yet China bet on his government's survival recently with a new \$5 billion loan. Even so, powerful enemies are mobilized, the economy is in crisis, and distressed Venezuelans have been leaving.

Hugo Chavez, Venezuela's president from 1999 to his death in 2013, founded the Bolivarian Revolution which Maduro, his successor, now leads. It is anti-imperialist and socialist, yet co-exists with capitalism.

The socialist government of Chilean President Salvador Allende, voted into power by the people, came to a bloody end in 1973, the result of a U.S. supported military coup. The Bolivarian Revolution also set out on a peaceful route toward a socialist society. Will that government defy heavy odds and avoid the fate etched out by the Chilean experience?

Stoking the fire

Speaking at the UN General Assembly in September about Venezuela, President Trump mentioned "further action." At a press conference, he opined that Venezuela's government "could be toppled very quickly by the military if the military decides to do that." U.S. leaders, of course, had already threatened Venezuela with military intervention.

The UN Council of Human Rights that week issued a resolution calling upon Venezuela to accept humanitarian aid. With many distressed Venezuelans now exiting, ideas of foreign military intervention now center on humanitarian needs, which do exist.

Luis Almagro, secretary general of the Organization of American States, recently discovered that unadorned military intervention has lost some of its appeal. He had declared that, "With regards to a military intervention I think we should not exclude any option." Bolivian President Evo Morales reacted, saying "Attacking Venezuela is attacking Latin America." And in a turn to "pragmatism," all but three member states of the Lima Group of Western Hemisphere nations—anti-Bolivarian—rejected Almagro's suggestion. There are worries about having to unleash bloody repression against Bolivarian sympathizers. Surveys of Venezuelan opinion show little confidence in what might replace the Maduro government. For one observer, the opposition has "shown itself to be incapable, ineffective, and without proposals."

Colombian air force units went on alert supposedly in response to Venezuelan troops having recently concentrated along the border with Venezuela. Reacting to that, U.S. Vice President Pence warned the Maduro government "not to test the resolve of the President of the United States." With U.S. encouragement, Colombia, Peru, Guyana, and Brazil have been building troop strength along Venezuela's borders

Enthusiasm for humanitarian intervention may be building but one of its principal rationales, that of out-of-control migration, is hardly straightforward. It becomes less persuasive on exposure to United Nations and Colombian data and to the full story, each provided by Gabriele Kuehnle of the Latin American Center for Strategic Analysis, Now 2.3 million Venezuelans are indeed living abroad, up from 606,340 in 2015. Some 600,000 of them are in Colombia. Earlier the situation was reversed. In 2016 over 2.6 million Colombians, not counting children, were living abroad, mainly in Venezuela. Over the course of 30 years almost five million Colombians fleeing Colombia's civil war had migrated to Venezuela.

By 2016 Venezuela had taken in 1.7 million immigrants, tops in Latin America. Colombian refugees there receive government-supplied social services. Presently many Venezuelans leaving for Colombia are actually natives of Colombia, 250,000 of them so far in 2018.

Humanitarian intervention itself may be hazardous. That's clear from the report submitted recently to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights by lawyer and scholar Alfred-Maurice de Zayas. Exploring economic and humanitarian aspects of the crisis in Venezuela, the expert warns that "humanitarian crisis can be misused as a pretext for military intervention." Such an action in such circumstances would be adding insult to injury. That's because, as stressed by de Zayas, suffering and disruption already prevail in Venezuela, the results of "19 years of economic war" and now a "financial blockade."

The latter results from economic sanctions, "which have immensely aggravated the scarcity of foods and medicines." For de Zayas, "economic sanctions kill. They "amount to crimes against humanity." De Zayas mentioned also "the century-old dependence on the sale of petroleum" and "devastating" effects of falling oil prices as contributing to suffering.

Presence of mine enemies

President Obama signed legislation enabling economic sanctions against Venezuela in December 2014. Afterwards he and President Trump each issued executive orders framed as "emergencies" and in response to a supposed national security threat. The sanctions at first applied only to government officials; assets were frozen and entry into the United States was banned. Both Canada and the European Union imposed similar sanctions later on. New sanctions imposed by the Trump administration prohibit U.S. transactions involving both payments on debt owed to Venezuelans and debt taken on by Venezuelans to buy goods from abroad, including the

United States.

Now CITGO, the U.S. affiliate of PDVSA, Venezuela's state oil company may not return revenue to Venezuela. Venezuelan assets are frozen in the United States. Due to restrictions put on instruments of Venezuelan debt, Venezuelans have troubles buying U.S. goods—including food and medicine. Rescheduling of foreign debt payments and borrowing are problematic.

Sanctions introduced in August, 2017 caused a \$6 billion decline in oil revenues. Oil production plummeted 37 percent in one year. Venezuela's GDP contracted sharply; a 15 percent drop is expected for 2018. Tax revenues have fallen drastically.

The U.S. government has sought to nourish a political opposition inside Venezuela. Beginning in 2002 the National



Nicolas Maduro. Photo: Euronews.

Endowment for Democracy and USAID annually has arranged for millions of dollars to be distributed among youth groups, politicians, and right wing organizations. Funding morphed into influence, political subversion, and street-fighting capabilities.

The U.S. government has recruited European and Latin American allies. The Organization of American States, formed as U.S. cold war tool, partners with the U.S. on Venezuela. Secretary General Luis Almagro, based in Washington, campaigned to expel Venezuela from the group. Almagro and the United States created the Lima Group of Nations in 2017 as a means for isolating Venezuela diplomatically and supporting U.S. economic sanctions.

Colombia is the foremost U.S. ally in the region. Right wing governments there have ties to Venezuela's political opposition. Colombian paramilitaries regularly cross into Venezuela to commit murder and mayhem—even to try to kill Chávez. Authorities are ineffective in restraining smugglers from marketing subsidized Venezuelan goods. The United States main-

tains a strong military presence in Colombia, complete with airbases.

In the Dominican Republic in February 2018, negotiators for Venezuela's government and political opposition had reached overall agreement. Then Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos and U.S. Secretary of State Tillerson each called. "Don't sign," they said. Agreement disappeared.

Asked in an interview why the United States intervenes in Venezuela, Venezuelan Communist Party leader Pedro Eusse cited a U.S. need "to regain full control of the strategic resources of this country and consolidate its dominance in Latin America." He rejected the notion that Venezuelan socialism bothered the United States. After all, he implied, it's an aspiration, not the real thing. Yet the mere seeds of such aspirations

served as provocations for U.S. troops to invade the Dominican Republic in 1965, for the CIA to harass Chilean presidential candidate Salvador Allende in 1970, for the CIA to dispose of Guatemalan President Arbenz earlier.

A not so dead hand of the past

According to Simon Bolivar himself, founder of independent Venezuela and inspiration for Hugo Chavez, "The United States appears to be destined by Providence to plague America with misery in

the name of liberty." That was in 1829.

Bolivar, inspired by enlightenment ideals, had inherited wealth in the form of land, plantations, mines, and slaves. The Venezuelan political leaders who followed knew about military command and land-based wealth. They may have jostled with one another, but they were solidly united in their fears of social upheaval.

Dictators emerged during the 20th century: Juan Vicente Gómez (1908–1935) and Marcos Pérez Jiménez (1948–50, 1952–58). The corrupt Carlos Andrés Pérez, president in 1974–79 and 1989–93, adopted neo-liberal measures. He responded to an uprising in 1989 with repression that took an estimated 3000 lives. Memories of the so-called Caracazo fueled the political movement founded by Chávez.

Venezuela's oil reserves, the world's largest, from the 1920s on attracted foreign oil companies. New wealth nourished a well-heeled upper class and non-stop corruption. The state oil company PDVSA took shape in 1976 following nationalization of oil production.

Barriers of strife and division long have separated Venezuela's elite from unreconciled masses of the population. Argentinean observer Atilio Boron could have been thinking of the Chávez—Maduro era of Venezuelan politics with his comment that, as regards Latin America, “in the context of reformist or progressive change it's fatal to succumb to the illusion of thinking that a loyal opposition exists.” Indeed, reaction greeted Chávez early, illegally, and often violently.

In April 2002 a coup engineered by businessmen, military officers, and the media removed Chávez. Millions of citizens mobilized and two days later he was back. Later that year PDVSA officials and unionists halted oil production and exports for several months, thus heaping distress and shortages upon the population. A right wing separatist plot materialized in oil-rich Zulia state in 2008.

Chávez's election victories triggered violent, often deadly, anti-government street demonstrations. These so-called “Guarimbas” returned with a vengeance in 2014 after a divided opposition's defeat in municipal elections and in 2017 coincident with the arrests of opposition leaders, failed negotiations, and government plans for forming a constituent assembly.

Corruption flourished and infected PDVSA, thereby undermining oil production and the flow of moneys into social programming. All the while as the economic climate worsened, an elite minority thrived.

But the Bolivarian movement was weathering the storm even after the charismatic Chávez was gone. The government stood despite violent streets demonstrations in 2017. Maduro won re-election in May, 2018. Increasingly the opposition resorted to an iron fist.

Dissident military and police officers took things into their own hands. In 2017 government ministries in Caracas were assaulted (with a helicopter), military bases were attacked in Valencia and in Miranda state, and in January 2018 the Cuban embassy was hit. On August 4, 2018, plotters, soldiers among them, used armed drones to attack Maduro and other officials attending a Caracas event honoring the National Guard. They survived. Authorities have jailed almost 30 suspects. The intellectual author of the attack, a former National Assembly head, did his planning in Colombia. Training for the attack took place there.

According to a *New York Times* front page article on September 9, Venezuelan military plotters seeking advice and assistance had met with U.S. officials several times during the previous months. They apparently received nothing, but there was no indication such meetings had ended.

In the bank?

Venezuela's government under Chávez changed many lives for the better. Did social gains solidify enduring loyalties? They may have. By 2010 poverty rates had fallen to 23 percent, down from 70 percent in 1996; extreme poverty dropped from forty to six percent. Over 11 years, Government spending on health

care, education, and subsidized food exceeded \$330.6 billion (total revenues—\$500 billion).

Literacy rose from 86 percent in 2001 to 96 percent. Education at all levels was accessible while 95 percent of Venezuelans had medical care. Neither required payment for access. The infant mortality rate fell from 21.4 percent in 1998 to 13.7 percent in 2007. Life expectancy was 73.9, up from 72.8 in 1998. However, agrarian reform stalled, and Venezuelans remain dependent on imported foods.

The government's advocacy for Latin American integration and collaborative resistance to U.S. pretensions won friends. Fostering region-wide cooperation, Venezuela led in sharing education and health-care services and in exchanging agricultural and industrial products. The ALBA alliance (Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America), initiated by Venezuela and Cuba in 2004 and loathed by U.S. leaders, had been instrumental. Chávez's followers were enthused over his role in burying the Bush administration's so-called Free Trade Area of the Americas.

But alterations in state institutions and political organizing under both Chávez and Maduro didn't necessarily translate into support. For example, an emphasis on participatory democracy and the development of communes, community councils, cooperatives, and worker councils seemingly hasn't benefited national production capabilities or influenced the workings of national politics.

The United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), organized in 2007, is a mass party that, allied with smaller parties, became the vehicle for Bolivarian candidates to win elections. Yet ideological spread and corruption within its ranks have blunted its impact. Far left socialist formations recently abandoned the PSUV. A Venezuelan labor movement marked by sectarianism and variable levels of militancy is of only marginal help to the government. Administrative capabilities of the two governments remain weak. Ministries under Chávez were staffed by unsympathetic holdovers. In Maduro's government many pliable bureaucrats subservient to upper echelons are serving.

The integrity of state institutions took a hit in July 2017 when the Maduro government in effect replaced the National Assembly with a Constituent Assembly. In the elections of December 2015 the government lost super-majority control of the Assembly. The Supreme Tribunal of Justice and the Assembly became locked in struggle over the seating of four deputies. Claiming the present constitution authorized formation of a Constituent Assembly, the Maduro government presided over the election of delegates. In theory the Constituent will legislate and alter the Constitution. Its tenure ends in 2019.

The government's judicial treatment of leaders of violent demonstrations provoked accusations of human rights abuses in the international press and opposition circles. Those in prison took on martyr status, especially among conservatives in the U.S. Congress. Their profiles include wealthy back-

grounds, education in the United States, and participation in the aborted 2002 coup.

Venezuelan elections have been efficient and fair, say international observers. Except for defeat in the 2015 National Assembly elections, Bolivarian candidates have prevailed in all elections at the national level and in most regional and municipal elections. Voters in 2007 did reject President Chávez's proposals for constitutional change. Opposition forces appealing for votes are divided and often boycott the polls.

Inflation and shortages, increasing during the Chavez presidency and exploding afterwards, have hobbled the national economy and challenged Bolivarians in power. Predisposing influences included lack of domestic capacity for producing consumer goods and food, necessary reliance on foreign suppliers, and the need for the government to supply importers with cheap dollars.

Dollars accumulated through oil exports have drained into the black market. Speculation pushed up exchange rates. Dollars left the country, especially by way of Colombia. Hoarding by importers, merchants, and distributors aggravated shortages and inflation alike. Venezuelans rush to buy goods rather than save worthless currency. Now the cost of consumer goods increases 100 percent every month.

In August the Maduro government announced a plan. There is now a new and much devalued currency called the Sovereign Bolivar. Its value correlates with "Petro" cryptocurrency (a target of U.S. sanctions) whose assigned value follows the price of oil. Currency regulation theoretically is no more, and market forces will determine currency value. The hope is that speculation will end.

Additional reforms include tax increases, a minimum wage hike, reduced gasoline subsidies, gold bars for sale to encourage saving, a new ministry for domestic trade, and sell-off of a few public assets.

Loose ends

It's evident that the government of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, custodian of that nation's Bolivarian Revolution, is at extreme risk. Biased media, European and U.S. alike, have added their mite; their bias highlights dictatorial abuse and extreme human suffering. A recent survey of slanted reporting presented on venezuelanalysis.com is essential reading. It emphasizes the considerable spread between what's reported and actual context.

To rely over the long haul almost totally on sales of oil or other products of extraction to finance a social revolution seems now to be a recipe for failure. Besides, keeping oil underground is good for alleviating climate change.

It seems too that sustainability of a social revolution requires major development of capacities for producing food and making consumer goods and tools. That hasn't happened in Venezuela. Oil production took precedence over organizing and preparing a workforce ready for production. Workers in

that situation might have expanded their awareness of membership in a class. Maybe so doing they would have been primed to defend the social revolution.

Importantly, the earlier expressed uncertainty remains. Can socialism take root via consent, freely arrived at? Or must reactionaries feel the brunt of force? The tension surfaces in odd places, in a claim, for example, that Chávez chose to "prioritize social programs over economic objectives," and thereby "failed to prepare Venezuelans for the toil and struggle that lay ahead." Maybe forceful persuasion is required to install a program of economics first.

There's the matter too of international solidarity. U.S. advocates for the Bolivarian project occupy a special niche. Their actions may exert more impact than is the case with solidarity activists elsewhere. That's because their government owns those sanctions against Venezuela that are most cruel. In carrying out the duty of holding their government to account, they are directly assisting the Bolivarians—two birds with one stone!

Chuck Kaufman, National Co-Coordinator of the Alliance for Global Justice recently reflected on solidarity. Familiar with Nicaragua, he recalls in an email that, "I remember Nicaraguan poet and FSLN militant Roberto Vargas telling me, 'Solidarity with Venezuela is solidarity for Nicaragua, because if Venezuela falls we all go down.'"

Kaufman adds: "Solidarity with the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela was that important then and it is that important today. A fascist tide is sweeping the Americas and Venezuela is one of the bulwarks that we must continue to defend."

Ancient Greek drama often featured the tragic hero whose innate flaw leads to inevitable ruin. The flaw of the Bolivarian Revolution—an updated tragic hero—really has two sides. One is to have chosen peace as the way. The other would be to choose the alternative route, which is war, with pain and grief. **CP**

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The Political Economy of Homelessness in the US and the UK

BY KENNETH SURIN

For those of us who are socialists, it is a core principle that everyone cares for everyone. This entails that all should be fed, clothed, housed, given health care, and be assured of the means necessary for a life above the poverty level for their society.

Attaining this should, of course, be pretty simple for the U.S. and other wealthy western countries!

All it would take in the U.S., for instance, is taxing Jeff Bezos, Bill Gates, and Warren Buffett at a level that will enable them still to continue their lives at off-the-charts standards of luxury, but without those extraneous 000s added to the billions they now have.

It isn't sarcasm to suggest that perhaps a billion or thereabouts could somehow suffice for these plutocrats?

Proponents of capitalism maintain this system is the best way to secure (in some kind of occultation) the above-mentioned fundamental goods. Alas, if the examples of the U.S. and U.K. today are anything to go by, this claim, or sham more accurately, is a sick joke.

Homelessness in an advanced industrial country is invari-

ably a function of poverty. to estimates from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development—though the actual number is likely to be higher, since this estimate is derived from a point-in-time count of people in homeless shelters, living under bridges and on the street, etc., with those staying with friends and family, or living in hotels and motels, not being counted.

Unsurprisingly, the homeless are concentrated in the big metropolitan areas. In 2016 these were Philadelphia, Las Vegas, Boston, San Jose and Santa Clara, San Francisco, District of Columbia, San Diego, Seattle, Los Angeles, and New York.

City authorities invariably put the interests of property owners and businesses ahead of the homeless. *The Guardian* reports that in Los Angeles, for example, with over 25,000 people living in cars, tents, and other improvised shelters, business owners have started fencing-in sections of the sidewalk in front of their shops, in order to keep homeless people from occupying these public spaces.

L.A. city council has pledged to prevent this illegal erection of fences by business owners, but not much action seems to have been taken so far—a few “notices of violation” have been issued to the offending businesses and the city is “investigating” other cases.

Excrement in the streets of San Francisco is now a common occurrence—complaints about human waste have increased 400% in the past 10 years. The cause of this poop upsurge is simple, according to *The Guardian*: “People aren't pooping on the streets because they have suddenly forgotten what a bathroom is, or unlearned basic hygiene. The incidents are part of a broader failure of the city to provide for the basic needs of its citizens, and show the catastrophic, socially destructive effects of unchecked inequality”.

U.S. income inequality has of course ballooned in recent decades. Thomas Piketty of the Paris School of Economics and Emanuel Saez of UC Berkeley are the world's leading researchers on income inequality. Writing in December 2016, they (along with their colleague Gabriel Zucman) say of the US:

Average pre-tax national income per adult has increased 60% since 1980, but we find that it has stagnated for the bottom 50% of the distribution at about \$16,000 a year. The pre-tax income of the middle class—adults between the median and the 90th percentile—has grown 40% since 1980, faster than what tax and survey data suggest, due in particular to the rise of tax-exempt fringe benefits. Income has boomed at the top: in 1980, top 1% adults earned on average 27 times more than bottom 50% adults, while they earn 81 times more today. The upsurge of top incomes was



Photo: Ed Yourdon

ably a function of poverty.

The UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty around the world, Professor Philip Alston, said in a damning 2018 report that the “United States has the highest rates of youth poverty, infant mortality, incarceration, income inequality and obesity among all countries in the developed world, as well as 40 million people living in poverty”.

Alston also said that African-American maternal mortality rates were now almost double those in Thailand. He referred to World Health Organization data showing that babies born in China today will live longer healthier lives than babies born in the U.S.

The 2015 Nobel Laureate in economics, Angus Deaton, points out that in the Mississippi Delta and much of Appalachia life expectancy is lower than in Bangladesh and Vietnam.

Nearly 550,000 people in the U.S. are homeless, according

first a labor income phenomenon but has mostly been a capital income phenomenon since 2000. The government has offset only a small fraction of the increase in inequality.

Even *Forbes Magazine*, that hardcore mouthpiece of American capitalism, notes that “having a job doesn’t exempt anyone from poverty anymore. About 12% of Americans (43 million) are considered poor, and yet they are employed. They earn an individual income below \$12,140 per year, and slightly more than that for a family of two. If you include housing and medical expenses in the calculation, it raises the percentage of Americans living in poverty to 14%. That’s 45 million people”.

This long-term rising inequality is likely to be exacerbated by Trump’s recent budget measures with their extensive giveaways for the plutocracy. Even before Trump the US government did little to mitigate this increase in inequality, so we can assume that nothing will be done to address the US’s homelessness crisis.

The situation in the UK is not much better—the UK’s poor, like their US counterparts, are in the grip of “shit-life syndrome”.

Perhaps a slightly different twist to the predicament of the homeless in the two countries lies in the fact that, unlike the U.S., it is the U.K.’s middle-sized cities that have fared worse than their larger neighbors since the Conservative imposition of austerity from 2010 onwards.

Blackpool, the northern seaside resort is typical in this regard. It has the lowest life expectancy in the U.K., according to the Office for National Statistics (ONS).

In some parts of Blackpool men are predicted to have failing health by as young as 47.

Antidepressant prescription rates in Blackpool are twice the national average, and the town is ranked fifth in the country for its suicide rate. The city has the highest mortality rate from heroin overdoses in the U.K.

Since the 2008 financial crash, Blackpool’s employment rate has climbed by 2.6% but average weekly wages have fallen by 7%.

Blackpool’s housing situation is a disaster. As *The Huffington Post* reports (most of the Blackpool details provided here are from this report), while property prices there have risen by a mere 3.7% since 2008 (10 times below the national average), the purchasing capacity of local people looking to buy has declined by 7%.

Youth homelessness in Blackpool has doubled in 10 years.

The welfare state is crumbling in Blackpool, which has become a two-tier place: fairly prosperous resort-goers who congregate on the glitzy seafront, and left-behind locals who have to make-do in its boarded-up back streets.

The above-mentioned Professor Alston is coming to the UK in November to report on extreme poverty there, and hopefully, he’ll visit Blackpool.

Alston will examine the impact of austerity, universal credit, the advent of computer algorithms making decisions

on welfare matters, and Brexit.

Alston has invited members of the public to make submissions (2500 words max) to him by 14th September on what he should investigate during his U.K. visit.

Alston had heated exchanges with the Trump administration when his US report was published (Nikki Haley accused him of being “politically motivated”), and the same can be expected with the Tory government, which has already said in response to Alston’s forthcoming visit that household incomes “have never been higher and there are 1 million fewer people living in absolute poverty than in 2010, including 300,000 children”.

The Tories since Thatcher have of course been adept at mas-saging such statistics.

The independent and reputable economics think-tank the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) has projections which show that U.K. relative child poverty is set to increase from 30% to 37% by 2021. That is, there will be an additional 1.2 million children in poverty, increasing from 4 million in 2015/16 to 5.2 million in 2021/22.

The biggest reasons for these increases in child poverty are changes to benefits and tax credits, especially the freeze on most working-age benefits, all part of the Tory austerity agenda.

These changes are expected to save the Exchequer over £3 billion a year, but will leave poorer families with the challenge posed by the rising cost of essentials. Prices will rise while the benefits of poorer people remain capped.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that in 2017 1.5 million people were destitute at some point—just over one in 50 of the population—with the highest levels in rustbelt northern English cities.

British life expectancy, on a steady upward trend for a century, declined precipitously between 2010 and 2016. The rate of increase dropped by 90% for women and 76% for men, to 82.8 years and 79.1 years respectively.

The Trussell Trust’s Foodbank Network said that the number of people using food banks in the U.K. rose by 7% in 2016/17.

According to *The Independent*, the number of people recorded as sleeping rough on any given night in the autumn of 2017 has more than doubled since 2010. The same article cited a National Audit Office (NAO) report which showed that the number of people sleeping rough had soared by 134% since the Conservative Party took power in 2010.

Everything shows that increased homelessness, poverty, and inequality are the direct outcome of political decision-making in the U.S. and U.K.

The Australian Philip Alston did not mince words in his U.S. report, and we must hope for more of the same when he visits the U.K.’s “shit-life” zones.

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Life Without a Boss

How a Group of Workers in Istanbul Took Control of Their Factory and Lost It Again

BY STAN DE SPIEGELAERE

When Serkan sleeps he sees a dragon. Terrifying and omnipotent, it towers over him, watching every move Serkan makes and breathing fire at him. Sound familiar?

There are good bosses and bad bosses, but the idea of a workplace with no boss at all might seem a pipe dream to many. And yet this was the daily reality for Serkan and his colleagues for five years at the Özgür Kazova (Free Kazova) cooperative, where a group of textile workers took control of their factory after being unfairly dismissed by their employers. Serkan thought he'd never have to face the dragon again.

However, when we meet him in May 2018 in Istanbul, Serkan seems to be facing an inevitable return to wage labor. All his sisters-and-brothers-in-crime have left the cooperative for 'normal' jobs. Serkan, the last man standing, is now selling the machines to pay the debts. But although he's suffered a huge knockback, he remains combative in both words and deeds: "What we are carrying out here is a workers' struggle. Our story is like a movie script, but unlike the movies there's no happy ending. Yet."

Seeing him like this comes as a surprise. I had contacted Serkan to visit the Kazova factory thinking I would be visiting a struggling but functional cooperative. I'd read about their adventure on several sites and worn their high-quality pullovers with pride. However, my notebook filled with questions about decision-making procedures, sales strategies and future plans was quickly put aside when I arrived at the building and saw that the doors were locked. The 15-meter weaving machines had been sold and the lease terminated.

In an office loaned from a friend—ironically, the director of a family-run textile company—Serkan sat down with me to recount the story of the cooperative's downfall.

From a trick holiday to a company takeover

Of course, before the fall came the rise.

The adventure began in 2013. Just like any textile worker in Turkey, the 94 workers of Kazova Textile were working long hours, six days a week. As with the experience of many in the industry, any mistakes were met with strong rebuke and intimidation. What's more, they hadn't received their wages for a couple of weeks.

In February, the workers were sent home for a week. While this is normal practice in the Turkish textile sector when there

are down periods with no work, in this instance it was actually a trap. After only two days, all the employees were fired due to so-called 'unauthorised absence' from work. Meanwhile, the factory owners used the absence of the workers to stow away tons of produce and sell off some of the machinery, sabotaging what they couldn't move out. After emptying the company's coffers, the owners then disappeared.

This was the moment that things began to change. While most of the dismissed workers quickly set about looking for other jobs, a determined few put up tents outside the company doors to protest and demand severance pay. On 1 May 2013 the police forcibly broke up the demonstration, but what they hadn't counted on was the greater wave of solidarity and support for the workers that manifested itself in the wake of the Gezi Park uprising. The activists heard about the workers' troubles and staged demonstrations in their support.

On 28 June, the dismissed workers occupied the factory. And in September of the same year, bolstered by the Gezi resistance, they decided to take their protest one step further. They fixed some of the sabotaged sewing machines and started producing pullovers under the brand name 'Diren Kazova' (Kazova resistance). After 25 days of production, the police intervened and confiscated the machines.

A legal battle followed which ended in November 2013 with a judgment allowing the workers to legally own the machines, although only after paying some fairly heavy 'costs'. It was not until February 2014 that the workers finally became the official owners of the enterprise and were able to move the machinery to a rented shop and restart production. This time for real.

In the background to all this, however, tensions had broken out between two groups of ex-Kazova workers. One group wanted to align the initiative with the political struggle that was taking place in the aftermath of the Gezi uprising. The other group preferred to focus on producing sweaters; the politicization of the cooperative didn't interest them, they just wanted to be in control of the process and not under the overbearing authority of a boss. This state of affairs was a painful and energy-draining experience for the colleagues, eventually leading to a split and the creation of the separate Özgür Kazova Cooperative by the latter group, of which Serkan was a member.

In this sense, the Gezi protests were a mixed blessing. In the early days of the occupation, the wave of solidarity bolstered the workers to continue their fight and even push it further, from blockade to occupation and production. However, the heavy politicization of the project made some workers uneasy. Although many would regard such a struggle between employee and employer as intrinsically left-wing, Serkan doesn't see things this way: "Look, we are not left or right. We are fighting a workers' struggle which is only about up and down. The workers against the capitalist. Any party, right or left, which wants to support us is welcome. But apparently, it's only the leftist parties who are willing to do so."

The good years: designing, producing and selling

Becoming the legal owners of the weaving machines wasn't the end of the workers' problems. Going back to producing for luxury brands was not an option. The cut-throat competition in the sector would mean the cooperative members having to work just as hard as before, which was too hard. They would substitute exploitation by their boss for exploitation by their powerful clients, and even self-exploitation. It would also mean not being able to decide themselves on what to produce, nor on the quality of the gear. All of this would be destructive to their professional pride, which was of fundamental importance to the members.

This left them with only one option: taking control not only of the production but also of the sales. This involved putting up stands at university campuses, opening an online webshop and cooperating with designers, all of which took up a lot of their time. And as quality was essential, they also invested heavily in

a single member remaining in an office loaned from a friend.

"We're going through hard times," Serkan admits. "About four months ago, Aydemir [his last remaining colleague] left the cooperative and I was left alone. Hoping for better times I kept on renting the place, but in the end I was forced to sell the machines to pay our rent arrears."

What happened to bring about this drastic turnaround? The first shock came when, after the good winter sales, almost 90% of the company's savings were stolen. Serkan has some unconfirmed suspicions about the culprit, but the material point is that an act like this can destroy a small cooperative already on shaky financial ground: "That killed our spirit completely and we never recovered."

In addition to this, their dependence on volunteers to manage the internet sales proved hazardous. Mistakes in communication between them and the staff led to the closure of the main online sales site, cutting sales dramatically. The

promotion involved in sales was not what Serkan had signed up for, as he explained to me: "I just want to make pullovers without being scolded by a boss. I don't want to do eternal sales campaigns."

The build-up of issues and incidents like these took their toll. "With the savings gone and the sales down our spirit was broken.

We also had hard times in

“Look, we are not left or right. We are fighting a workers’ struggle which is only about up and down. The workers against the capitalist. Any party, right or left, which wants to support us is welcome.”

seeking out and buying high-quality material for their goods. Once a very small part of a global value chain of textile production, the cooperative now had to control the whole process, from buying yarn to designing and producing the product, to selling it to the customer.

While this extra pressure and overstretch of resources would prove to be the cooperative's Achilles heel, it did finally give them the fulfillment that they had been seeking in their work: seeing a happy customer wearing a sweater they had collectively designed and produced. "When everything settled down, we had some great years. We've been all over Turkey and Europe selling our sweaters and talking about our project. It was just great."

The fall: bad luck and overstretched resources

And if I had visited the Özgür Kazova premises one year ago, I could have reported on the good winter sales. Serkan recalls, "For the first time in years we had some savings. In the bank and in the factory. We were looking at several months of working at ease and planning for the future."

But I'm visiting the factory in May 2018, and what was previously a struggling yet promising cooperative now has only

our families as our income took a steep dive. One after the other, the members left and now I'm the last one here." After spending several months hoping for an impossible revival, the debt kept mounting from the rent arrears and Serkan was forced to sell the weaving machines and with them his dream of producing 'boss-free pullovers'. The last defender of this enterprise shows clear signs of fatigue but not of resentment towards his co-workers. "We've put the workers' struggle into practice, and we've struggled ourselves. I'm alone now and I'm selling what's left and thinking about my next move. But going back to normal wage labor with a dragon-like boss? That would feel like the ultimate defeat." **CP**

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A Big Labor Fight On the Edge of the (Iowa) Abyss

BY CINDA COOPER

In Iowa City, it is Fall, and the air feels closer and tighter. The town—the city—is a mix of tumbledown bungalows belonging to an always-rotating staff of students, their professors' stately homes, the usual brick apartment complexes, and milky subdivisions spreading out into the cornfields. At noon each day, an emergency whistle sounds out a test, announcing that, despite living in the so-called middle-of-nowhere, we're also living on the edge of vague and constant threat. My students stop talking during the marmot-like call. We all wait in silence for the marmot to retreat. Discussion resumes on Jane Smiley's *Moo*, a satirical novel from 1995 set at a fictional Midwestern university very much like our own—a university facing budget cuts, riddled with administrators pinching here and there for fat they might trim, and one turning to corporate models and corporations themselves. (Here, at the University of Iowa, Victoria's Secret parks a polka-dotted bus near the quad, from which its unpaid interns, University of Iowa marketing students, get "on the ground experience" by selling Iowa-themed underwear and sweatpants. The VS campus representatives also recently hosted a "panty frenzy" on a memorial walkway named for a victim of a horrific campus shooting in 1991).

"Associations of mutual interest between the university and the corporations were natural, inevitable, and widely accepted," writes Smiley, in 1995, from her fictional Provost's point of view. "Further experiments in driving the university into the arms of the private sector would be warranted...paying for the university out of state funds was irresponsible, or even immoral, or even criminal (robbing widows and children, etc., to fatten professors who couldn't find real employment, etc.)."

We are talking about what makes *Moo* feel true-to-life. "I don't know," says a first-generation college student in the back. "When I read this, I just felt...upset. I felt angry. We come here and we're told we're the priority. We aren't."

Football is safe. The business school is safe. The frankly disturbing parents' weekends—undesigned, but characterized by hordes of aging alumni doing kegstands—are safe.

What is not safe in this state, now, is organized labor. In the spring of 2016, the Iowa legislature voted to scrap Chapter 20, a provision that mandated bargaining topics between public employees and their unions—topics like wages, benefits, overtime, and safety rules. Union folks—firefighters, graduate students, sanitation workers, teachers—flooded the Capitol building in Des Moines. Since then, of course, Mark Janus just across the Mississippi was recruited by his governor, Bruce Rauner, to

serve as figurehead on a successful campaign to crush public sector unions. The Supreme Court ruled in favor of Janus, establishing that, like is already the case in Iowa—a right-to-work state since the 1940s—public employees do not have to pay dues to the unions which represent them.

In July, when the corn was between knee and shoulder, Bruce Harreld, the fairly new President of the University of Iowa, announced he was shuttering 7 centers that were taking up too much of the working budget (Harreld's yearly salary is nearly 800,000 dollars). These centers had, Harreld said, "little to do with student learning, research or economic development." Tucked slyly near the middle of the bundle of closures was the Labor Center, which has operated for seventy years, and is the central node of workers' rights in Iowa, as well as an important national touchstone. Under the Labor Center's broad awning sit public programs designed to educate workers about what they can do in the face of sexual harassment, language barriers, and discrimination, how to keep apprised of safety procedures, and what, more broadly, their basic rights are on the job. Staff have, over the past few decades, collected over a thousand oral histories from working Iowans, preserving as historical record their everyday memories and struggles at the workplace—these oral histories serve as teaching materials across several disciplines. And, contrary to Harreld's assertion, the students at the University actively place value on the center. As one undergraduate, Joseph Feldmann, stood up and said bluntly at a public hearing about the proposed closure earlier this year,

As the son of an ISEA [Iowa State Education Association] teacher, I receive direct benefit from the courses that the Labor Center provides. I am able to be a student because of the stability of my family's income. This stability is compromised if there are no resources for my father to be informed of safety procedures and workers' rights which the Labor Center provides. Students and workers are not enemies. They are families working together to benefit their community. To say that students are at odds with workers unjustly pits father and son against each other. To say that my father is receiving benefit on my back defames my family's integrity.

Iowa is a collection of smallish industrial cities like Des Moines and Cedar Rapids and Davenport and Dubuque and Sioux City and Waterloo, and a dense freckling, too, of small-to-tiny towns from which my students often hail, towns with names like Brooklyn and Williamsburg, Atalissa and Popejoy. These students are often quiet and reserved in class. But they come, frequently, from union families—Iowa's small towns and cities grew around the state's agricultural output, of course, but also the wide splotch of coal under the southern half of the state. When, in the 1920s, the mines began to close, writes Sheldon Stromquist in his Terkelian collection of Iowa oral histories, *Solidarity and Survival*, spirited workers well-practiced in organizing flooded the burgeoning meatpacking and farm equipment industries. So began a rich history of fierce labor activism in Iowa—a history dotted with backbreaking failures

as well as serious victory, like in 1970, when female teachers in Keokuk successfully struck against a proposed merit-based wage system, one that would breed, they argued, rampant favoritism for men, and discrimination against, say, pregnant employees. Four female teachers were jailed. One later joked about seeing previous students' names written on the cell walls. It was this strike that ushered in Chapter 20, which worked as an adequate balance, for a while: it outlawed strikes, but it mandated serious bargaining between unions and employers.

This is all to say that there is a fight here, and a big one, with a serious history of labor activism behind it. Iowans from across the state and across professions are involved: between August 14 and September 10 of this year, seven public hearings about the closure of the Labor Center brought hordes of people wanting to speak. Iowa State Representative Monica Kurth was there, and argued succinctly:

“Our Regents Universities have three colleges of business, three large colleges of business yet they have one very, very small Labor Center and we need to protect that, and we need to keep it. Is one penny of the \$500,000 that's cut and causes the closing of the Labor Center going to reduce the tuition of University of Iowa students? Not one penny, the money that's been cut would be reabsorbed by the University, the College of Law where the Labor Center is now housed, so it's not lowering tuition, but it is affecting the lives of thousands of Iowa workers.”

These workers are angry. Kerry Bowen, who retired in 2014 after forty-four years of working as a cable splicer for Northwestern Bell, then US West, then Quest, then CenturyLink, told me that as a young woman she dealt with rampant harassment on the job from her predominantly male coworkers and boss. Bowen originally became a cable splicer after hearing at a union meeting—where she was employed as a secretary—“how much money the guys made.” Often the only woman on a team of fourteen, Bowen wasn't going to take the harassment. At the Labor Center class she signed up for, Bowen remembered, laughing, the instructor had “started the class by saying every swear word she could think of. I had heard all those words in the workplace. She taught me how to stand up for myself. I went back to the phone company and I had to call a couple men out on discrimination...I had to talk to the men and I'd always start out by complimenting them: you're not that stupid. You know you can think it, but don't say it. You know if I wanna push it, it'll cost you your job.” Bowen paused. Her voice was knit with emotion. “Without [the Labor Center], I can't imagine how it wouldn't affect other young women to help them do this too.”

Gunther Anderson works at Pinnacle Foods in Fort Madison, Iowa, a small town made of dusky brick and on the banks of the Mississippi River. There, he and his coworkers manufacture canned meats, chilis, and stews. He described a fellow employee who, because of her union job, can afford to finance her son's education at the University, including those “softer”

fees that fall outside of tuition, and which my students know all too well: the cost of books, of printing, of dorm living. “The U of I has put out the information that the reason they've chosen to close the Labor Center is that they can't justify funding programs that ‘don't benefit their students,’” said Anderson. “I don't know if this is disingenuous or a display of ignorance on their part. Because who do they think their students are? Their young adult students were raised by parents who grew up in working class jobs at the U of Iowa's Labor Center has helped improve over the last seventy years.”

At the time of his hiring, less than two percent of University of Iowa professors found Bruce Harreld to be qualified. Harreld's resumé is publically accessible, and it provides some less-than-intentional fodder for critics, the least of which is the bullet point reading “Reared in Midwest USA.” Harreld, who has no background in academia other than adjunct teaching business classes at an extension of Harvard Business School, was instated as President, it seems, because of his record jerking corporations (Boston Market, IBM, Tombstone Pizza) out of their noses and back into smoother, more lucrative air. Many of the publications Harreld lists on his resumé are not publically available, not even through the University of Iowa library system—and so I found myself having, as is increasingly the case in public education, to pay: this time to Harvard Business Review for a three-part case study Harreld penned on the cost-saving measures that saved Jamba Juice after the Great Recession. Harreld lauded the company's turn towards automation, towards licensing its name on “smoothie kits,” and for its decision to save seven cents per smoothie by training cashiers to stop offering “free boosts,” the meaning of which I've never been sure. These strategies map perfectly, of course, onto those currently steering higher education—the massive expansion of the student-customer base via semi-automated online courses, the Hawkeye logo splashing the Victoria's Secret garb that students sell as “interns,” the steady hiking of vague technology and printing fees, the steady hiking, for that matter, of tuition, and the influx of wealthy international students who are not met with adequate support systems upon their arrival.

Also on Harreld's resumé is another HBR article titled “Felipe Calderón: Leading with Light and Power.” In this article, Harreld admiringly details former Mexican President Calderón's liquidation of Luz y Fuerza del Centro (LyF), the state-owned power company serving Mexico City, which happened at midnight on October 10, 2009, during widespread celebrations of a World Cup-qualifying soccer victory over El Salvador. Under cover of darkness, thousands of federal police swooped in to seize and occupy the power plants, while Calderón announced that 44,000 people had just lost their jobs, as well as, of course, their union. “No Mexican leader had acted to bring LyF's powerful union to heel,” writes Harreld early in this case study, in a moment many creative writing majors would recognize as fairly obvious foreshadowing. The

“Light and Power” Harreld refers to in his title is a translation of the power company’s name, but it’s also a pun translating to “money and force,” those two ingredients which facilitated the liquidation. A third ingredient, included on an internal list of pre-liquidation preparations, was “a narrative that serves as the basis for legitimacy and the motivation for the adoption of the measure.”

Harreld’s analysis of this shattering moment in Mexican labor history is nothing short of gleeful: he positions it as a

GOP to destroy immigrant communities. This is a long-term campaign.” Increasingly, small and dwindling towns in Iowa, places like Storm Lake and Columbus Junction, Marshalltown and Mount Pleasant, have been revitalized by immigrant workers. In Columbus Junction, for example, an old railroad town with a locally famous swinging bridge, Chin-Burmese refugees compose one-quarter of the population, and Latinos nearly one-half. A local Tyson pork-packing plant is a major employer. “The immigrant community trusts in [The Labor

Center’s] knowledge,” Morataya said, speaking to me while typing emails frantically, texting, and supervising a volunteer. It was nine o’clock in the morning.

The late John Berger, in an essay on Hieronymus Bosch, used Bosch’s painting Millennium Triptych to discuss the state of the world from which he was writing, close to the year 2000, which is the birth year, or close to it, of many current college students. “The first step towards building an alternative world has to be a refusal,” wrote Berger, “of the world-picture implanted in our minds and all the false promises used everywhere to justify and idealize the delinquent and insatiable need to sell.” Iowa City is covered, currently, in construction: Bruce Harreld imposed a construction moratorium to cut costs, but then very quickly lifted it so that the golf course over the river, named for an old Iowa timber baron, could get a new club house. I drove there the other day. There were a few polo-shirted old men and one of those thick, possibly pesticidal Iowa

mists rising off the green. The parking lot was cocooned by waxen rose bushes. I was coming down from a fever; my hair was greasy; the framed photos of the golf team leered; thrice, I was stared at with unconcealed suspicion; once, I was told no, you cannot go walk around on the course. The Bosch painting, of course, is of Hell—a fragmentary place, Berger writes, with no horizon, no continuity, “no pauses, no paths, no pattern, no past, and no future.” A kind of endless, infinite golf course, on which moneyed players stride, free of history and free of other people. There is no collaboration, because there can’t be. The Labor Center, and places like it, are invaluable collections of experience—past and present—and of knowledge, and of dissent. They are libraries—public resources just like public universities are supposed to be—that belong to us. They are the way out. **CP**

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Photo: WBBJ

slow, strategic, and unequivocally positive eventuality. And he positioned it as such, I am sure, when he invited the Mexican Secretary of Labor, Javier Lozano Alarcón, to come to his “Leadership module” at one of his Harvard Business School classes, during which, a Spanish-language news site reported, “the extinction of Luz y Fuerza del Centro was presented as a success story.” Labor Secretary Lozano Alarcón, by the way, worked as a consultant to a company that immediately jumped on capitalizing upon the fiber optic cable system previously owned by LyF. The company’s founders were two former secretaries of energy.

There is a connection to be made, and not a particularly subtle one, between the Harreld-approved treatment of workers in Mexico, NAFTA’s flood of Iowan and Kansan corn into the Mexican market, and the huge immigrant worker population in Iowa, whose rights and livelihoods are being attacked from every direction. Rafael Morataya, the executive director of the Center for Worker Justice in Iowa City, to which the Labor Center is a crucial ally, told me that “It is the strategy of the

The National Fraud League NFL Paper Lions and Sunshine Patriots

BY MATTHEW STEVENSON

Although scales have been forming on my eyes regarding the illusions of the National Football League since I began following the sport in the 1960s, I can only say for sure that they fell in summer 2017, after a conversation that I had on Amtrak's *Southwest Chief* that was on its way from Kansas City to Chicago.

I had traveled across the Mid-West, from Raleigh, North Carolina to Topeka, Kansas, in search of Trump's America (I should have looked in Palm Beach, Florida, if not in some dead drops located near the Kremlin), and I was heading home in leisurely fashion—in part because I was traveling with my bicycle and a box of unread books.

After breakfast in the dining car (I passed on Amtrak's Cheese Quesadillas, Eggs & Tomatillo Sauce), I fell into conversation with Kim Locklin, who had been amusing some other travelers about his time spent playing for the San Francisco 49ers when they won the 1989 Super Bowl.

Kim grew up outside of Austin, Texas, in a professional football family. His father had played for the Los Angeles Raiders in 1960, the first year of the American Football League, and Kim had brothers and uncles who had also played the game at the college and pro levels.

A man with an easy laugh and ironic insights, Kim had played running back and on special teams in the NFL, and had coached at both the pro and college level, where at the same time he had earned a Ph.D. in physical education. He was an NFL blue-blood. Kim referred to Montana as "Joe," Walsh as "Bill," and Brady as "Tom," and he answered all of my fan questions about cover two and the read option with anecdotes that had allusions to the Ryan twins (Rex and Rob) if not the University of Houston receiver Torrin Polk (who said of his coach: "He treats us like men. He lets us wear earrings."). The five hour trip across Missouri and Illinois was a football chalk talk.

Kim told stories about agents, salaries, injuries, gambling, drugs, CTE, and coaches, in descriptions that made professional football sound like a pre-Civil War cotton plantation.

As Kim explained the game, the stars are those who endear themselves to the (white) owners and management, who then design plays for them to succeed. Yes, Tom Brady is a good quarterback, but many others are just as good, if not better. His genius was to ingratiate himself with the corporate structure of the New England Patriots. The G.O.A.T (greatest of all-time) is just another grey-flanneled organization man.

I found Kim to be a man of eloquence and humor, much of which turned on football's plantation attitudes toward African

Americans. He laughed in explaining the "3-4-5 rule" of college football: that is, he said, to play "three blacks at home, four on the road, and five if you are behind."

As Missouri farmland flickered to the horizon, Kim talked about the Friday Night Lights of his high school career, outside Austin, Texas, and even his mother's death. I asked him about his Super Bowl ring ("I keep it in a safe") and how he was dealing with permanent injuries from a lifetime in the game (he said the NFL did very little to help former players, i.e., field hands).

As the train approached Chicago—it loomed out of the prairie horizon, much as it does in the first chapter of Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*—Kim and I said good-bye. I promised to send him one of my books, and he said he would keep in touch, although it was all a bit vague, as he said he didn't have email and didn't have a mailing address. He sounded like a character in a Harold Pinter play, heading to Sidcup "to pick up his papers."

I didn't press it, although when I got home and looked up his career NFL statistics, I realized that most of what Kim had told me was a dream, wrapped in an illusion.

He had never played a down in the NFL, nor had he won the Super Bowl with the 49ers. He had played at New Mexico State, but that was it. He was drafted for professional football but cut before playing a down in the league. Calvin and Hobbes have as many Super Bowl rings as does Kim.

For a while, I thought that I had been conned. But Kim's stories about the NFL had carried me across the plains from Kansas City to Chicago. I was grateful for that. And he was as engaging as any performer in a one-act play.

He spoke well, laughed often, told jokes, and rolled his eyes when I asked innocent questions about whether gamblers have their talons in the sport. Best of all, he evoked the culture of professional football as a variation on cockfighting or professional wrestling. All it had cost me was a cup of Amtrak coffee.

In the end, I decided that Pinter would have understood Kim's soliloquy. In *Old Times* he writes: "There are some things one remembers even though they may never have happened." Now it would kill me to find out that professional football is real.

* * *

I was six when I went to my first professional game, which took place in New York's Polo Grounds on November 24, 1960, featuring the New York Titans (now the Jets) against the Dallas Texans (who morphed into the Kansas City Chiefs).

I remember much about that day in upper Manhattan: the spookiness of the cavernous Polo Grounds (they were torn down for a housing project in the 1960s), the lights on the grass in the fourth quarter, the spiraling arc of the passes and the punts, and getting to the stadium on a subway train that still had straw-stuffed seats.

My father had chosen to introduce me to the professional game via the American Football League (AFL) because, I suspect, in those days he associated the NFL and its New York franchise, the Giants, with the Fortune 500 and everything that was wrong with corporate America.

Instead of paying obeisance in Yankee Stadium to Y.A. Tittle, we were huddled under a blanket in the Polo Grounds, drinking hot chocolate from a thermos, in a crowd that was not more than 15,000. (The stadium had room for 55,000.) Titans and later Jets linebacker Larry Grantham said of those early games: “They actually didn’t introduce us before the games. They just let us wander through the stands until we had met everyone.”

I have stayed loyal to the Titans and the Jets in the following fifty-seven years, but I cannot say it has been an entirely rewarding relationship. Beside the one Super Bowl win, being a Jets fan is the equivalent, every autumn, of undergoing electroconvulsive therapy, served up by pincers and wires connected to the Heidi Game, Lou Holtz, Rich Kotite, Gastineau’s roughing the passer penalty against the Browns in the 1986 playoffs, perpetual draft mediocrity including the whiffs on Dan Marino and Vernon Gholston, the Mud Bowl, and hapless QB Mark Sanchez, who, when not butt-fumbling, was eating a hot dog on the bench.

The only good to come from the Jets in the last fifty-seven years is that various team members (or their ghostwriters) have written some amusing books, the best of which is Namath’s *I Can’t Wait Until Tomorrow ... ’Cause I Get Better-Looking Every Day*, which includes the definitive history of Bachelors III, the New York bar he owned with a few Lebanese (“Some of my best friends are Arabs...”), a primer on how athletes blow their fortunes investing in such companies as Mantle Men and Namath Girls, a temp pool (“I should have studied commerce...”), a deconstruction of sports reporting (“You never get blitzed in the press box...”), and a soliloquy on aphrodisiacs and the concept of “tension-easers” (“I like my women blond and my Johnny Walker Red...”).

* * *

As the Jets were winning the Super Bowl in 1969 and the National and American leagues were merging, I got my first inkling that professional football was more of a tilted wheel

or a stacked deck than anything associated with the phrase “open competition.” (It goes with the PR nonsense about a “level playing field” and the famous expression of former NFL commissioner Pete Rozelle, who said: “In this league any team is capable of beating any other team on any given afternoon.”)

Before the two leagues merged, I had the feeling that pro football might keep expanding, and that before long there might be many new teams starting across the country. (Atlanta and Miami got their teams only in 1966.) I looked at baseball with its extended minor league system and figured that before long pro football would have teams even in Shreveport, Texas, or Gainesville, Florida. (Measured by population, there are 278 American cities larger than Green Bay.)

Little did I know at the time that the whole idea of the AFL-NFL merger was to eliminate competition and to operate the pro game much the way that the Texas Railroad Commission hands out sweetheart oil contracts around Houston.

“Another reason why Goodell is worth \$200 million in salary to the collective football guild is because he’s the shill and frontman in various lawsuits and negotiations to deny any connection between the violence of the game and head injuries known as CTE.”

The only reason why today an NFL franchise is worth more than \$2-3 billion is that the U.S. Congress granted the owners anti-trust exemption, which allows them to gorge on monopolistic pricing.

In the interest of the great American game of oligopoly, NFL owners can share TV revenue, fix wages (who needs five-year rookie contracts?), blackball troublemakers (see Kaepernick, Colin), stifle a free market for talent with the draft, and blackmail cities (see Oakland and San Diego) that refuse to vote the owners hundreds of millions in tax subsidies or use public money to build state-of-the-art stadiums (the revenues from which accrue to the privately owned teams, after some nominal rent is paid).

If football were a sport—and not a variation of the Whiskey Ring during the Grant presidency—cities and not owners would be awarded team franchises, and those teams would be required, in good times and bad, to remain in Oakland or wherever. A local club, owned and operated for the fans in that city, would control the team.

Instead, in the closed shop of the National Football League, a franchise is the equivalent of one of Charlie Wonka's golden tickets. On paper, owners might be "awarded" the franchise for Cleveland or Denver, but in reality what they have is a seat on the football exchange, which entitles them to sell their team brand wherever they can cajole a mayor or a city council to stump up enough tax benefits to feather the owner's nest, or, more accurately, his skybox.

In my lifetime as a football fan, a majority of the professional teams have moved somewhere, even if just across city or state lines, where the subsidies are always greener.

The Texans, as noted, moved from Dallas to Kansas City. The Raiders have bounced around between Oakland and Los Angeles, and soon will head to a shotgun wedding with the city of Las Vegas, with renewed coach Jon Gruden serving as the best man.

My Jets moved from Shea Stadium and Long Island (their traditional fan base) to the Meadowlands of New Jersey (where, as best as I could tell, the only cultural advantage was having Jimmy Hoffa buried in the end zone, not that the Jets would visit him very often).

* * *

I thought more about the economics of the NFL when I read recently in the newspaper that the current NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell—a man of stunning mediocrity—was to be rewarded by the owners with a contract extension worth more than \$200 million, one that includes the guarantee that the Artful Roger will never have to suffer the indignity of ever flying commercial for the rest of his life.

In theory, if professional sports leagues were democratic institutions (it is, after all, America), the commissioner's job would be to protect the interests of the players, teams, and fans, who would collectively represent the franchise of each city.

In the megalopolis of the National Football Oligopoly, however, the commissioner—for the moment Good Soldier Goodell—is the handmaiden of the owners, whose job is to rig prices and fix contracts in the spirit of the departed Leland Stanford and Daniel Drew (old-time railroad barons).

Goodell is the owners' concierge, and if there was accuracy in advertising, instead of being lauded on pre-game shows as "the Commissioner," he would be dressed in the raiments of a London footman—with white gloves, a top hat, and tails—and spend his days opening the limousine car doors of the plutocrats who own NFL teams. He would bow gracefully when they informed him of the Raiders move to Las Vegas, adding, "Very good, sire," and when he left the room, he would do so by walking backward, as happens in the Netflix serial, *The Crown*.

As for power, Goodell has none, as can be seen in how he handled the "Ray Rice Affair." In case you missed it, Rice

was a Baltimore Ravens running back who after some soiree knocked out his wife in an elevator and then dragged her by the hair out of the elevator when it reached their floor.

For this "late hit," Commissioner Goodell suspended Ray for two games, until the elevator video of the horse-collar tackle on his wife was leaked to the press, and the horrified league—pretending it had never seen or heard about the Rice elevator "game film"—suspended the running back "indefinitely."

* * *

Another reason why Goodell is worth \$200 million in salary to the collective football guild is because he's the skill and frontman in various lawsuits and negotiations to deny any connection between the violence of the game and head injuries known as CTE, which stands for chronic traumatic encephalopathy.

CTE is what happens to the human brain when, over a twenty-year career in the trenches, you get tackled or blocked on thousands of occasions. The brain turns to mush, and the victim is prone to depression, memory loss, related illnesses, paralysis, and violence.

Afflicted with CTE, New England tight end Aaron Hernandez went on several shooting sprees around Boston, before killing himself in prison. Neither in the obituaries nor at his murder trials, was there any mention about "the Patriot Way."

Despite the obvious connection between the brain injuries seen in retired football players and the method of the pro game (helmets are best understood as plastic spears, not protective gear), Goodell is the face man for denial of any links between the NFL and CTE. (He sounds like the Tobacco Institute in the 1950s, or that ad which read: "More Doctors Smoke Camels than any other cigarette.") Goodell likes to say that "the average NFL player lives five years longer than you, so their lifespan is actually longer and healthier..." and brags about how much the league is spending in support of medical research.

On the train when I asked Kim if his father or uncles later in life had any help from the league in dealing with football-related injuries, he gave me a look that implied I had spent too many Sundays watching J.B. and Boomer talk up the league on some pre-game show.

Nor does it take much effort online to come across statements such as this one from Fox Business, which reported in summer 2017: "A study of brain tissue from 111 deceased former NFL players found that 110, or 99%, showed signs of the degenerative brain condition known as CTE, researchers said Tuesday."

Still have doubts? Then listen, as I did several times with the podcast, to the PBS *Frontline* report, *League of Denial*, on the decline and death of Pittsburgh Steelers All-Pro center Mike Webster and how a local Pittsburgh doctor discovered

CTE in the course of doing his autopsy, after the Super Bowl winning player died homeless and suffering from acute depression, amnesia, and dementia. It's the same story (without all the romance) that was made into the Hollywood thriller, *Concussion*, with Will Smith.

* * *

The golden geese for the National Football League owners are the various television and cable contracts (from Fox, CBS, NBC, and ESPN) that keep the league awash in cash. The combined contracts, at the moment, are worth \$20.4 billion to the league, which works out to about \$637 million to each of the 32 teams, including my pathetic New York Jets.

On an annualized basis, league revenues amount to something close to \$7 billion, when you throw in jersey sales, season tickets, and Pappa John's ads, which creates an annual revenue floor for each team of around \$200 million. But that's before the clever owners rake in profits from selling skybox space, stadium parking, or PSLs (personal seat licenses), which is the con of cons, inflicted on season ticket holders, requiring fans to "buy the right" to purchase season tickets.

It's not enough to watch the Jets lose to the Patriots every year; to get into Met Life Stadium (Hoffa didn't make the move over to the new stadium) you have to pay a membership fee, excuse me, a "personal seat license," just to have the right to buy season tickets for a team that hasn't been in the playoffs in seven years and has a coach, Todd Bowles, who, down by 21 points in the fourth quarter, often chooses to punt on fourth down.

At least if the fans ran the teams, the product in some of the stadiums might be watchable. (Fans demand excellence, while only cash flow excites most owners.) Instead, with many teams run by wastrel heirs such as Woody Johnson (the owner of the New York Jets and heir to the Johnson & Johnson fortune) or Jimmy Haslan (owner of the Browns), incompetence on the field starts in the corner office, where there is little association between having the means to own a team and the ability to run one.

* * *

What development represents an existential threat to the National Football League?

Is it the settlements from the CTE lawsuits, brought by retired players and now in the courts, that could do in the league, especially if the award judgments match the damages owed by cigarette companies to dead smokers?

Is the league more at risk if suddenly cable TV revenues were to go the way of newspaper subscriptions and classified advertisement revenue—assuming that fans will figure

out cheaper ways to watch or pirate the games on free social media?

Will professional football disappear—much the way boxing is no longer a sport—once its fan base of older, Bud Lite-drinking men drifts away from their LED screens? Or will a generation of women, announcing loudly that "I don't want my son to play football," put an end to the sport?

My problem with imagining that the NFL will dissolve because of some runaway class-action lawsuit is that the one thing the league does to near perfection is screw its players. When it comes to those on life's taxi squad, even the feckless Goodell can chop block the legal claims of some interior linemen with memory issues.

Yes, the players union will try its hardest to pry money out of the league and the teams to care for afflicted players. But in stiffing those who are suffering, the league owners have natural allies in the current players, who want to maximize their own payouts while in the league, knowing that the average shelf life of an NFL career is 3.3 years.

When you read headlines that talk about "a \$1 billion CTE settlement," keep in mind that payout will be over, say, twenty years and that—through things such as payroll deductions and insurance policies—much of the lawsuit settlement funding will come from the victims themselves.

The present value of a \$1 billion CTE settlement is probably less than the five-year contract of some turnstile left tackle for the New York Giants.

* * *

Do I think the drop in TV ratings is an indication that the sport is passing from the public imagination? The reason for the drop in ratings is because the league has been so successful in selling TV ad space such that the games have become tedious packages of Walmart pitches and Home-Depot makeover ads.

Even I, a loyal Jets fan, find it painful to watch a live broadcast of an NFL game, which takes more than three hours and includes a twenty-minute half-time break. Is there anything duller in sports than the last two minutes of a football game, which take about twenty minutes to unfold?

Another reason given for the drop in prime-time ratings is that fans were tuning out because so many players were taking a knee—in protest over social injustice and police violence against African-Americans—during the national anthem.

President Donald Trump, among others, has complained on Twitter that NFL players on one knee during the anthem are treasonous ("Total disrespect for our great country!"). But based on a lifetime of watching sporting events, I can say that few fans do anything more during the singing of the national anthem than head to the kitchen for a beer. (They would only take a knee if the beer is on a lower shelf.)

The idea is farcical that football fans care whether or not some NFL players are on bended knee while a local opera singer heads to the fifty-yard line with a mic. Personally, I don't care if the Jets take a knee during the national anthem. The problem I have is when they take one in the third quarter.

What I blame the National Football League for—not to mention the Evil Patriots Empire of Brady, Belichick, and owner Robert Kraft all of whom talked up the candidate—is the presidency of Donald Trump, who instead of being in the White House belongs at the league owners' meetings, as one of their own.

If you wonder what the average team owner is like, think of Trump, who for years tried his hardest to buy his way into that

with his boyhood dream that the best model of government for the United States is that of the National Football League, with him as commissioner, presiding over an economy rigged for oligarchs (including the cable TV operators who are a lifeline to the NFL and its \$7 billion annual revenue stream).

To believe in Trump as president is akin, I fear, to believing in the righteousness of the National Football League. Both the Trump presidency and the NFL are illusions wrapped up in the small print of tax rebates, sweetheart subsidies, worker exploitation, price fixing, anti-trust exemption, and oligopoly, which are then smothered in images of the flag, half-time veterans, cheerleaders, studio analysts dressed up to look like a bank board of directors, and Air Force flyovers.



Arrowhead Stadium. Photo: Kansas City Chiefs.

exclusive billionaires' club. He tried to get the United States Football League (he owned the New Jersey Generals) to merge with the NFL, and he tried on several occasions to buy an NFL team, including the Buffalo Bills when they were sold in 2014 (to the dysfunctional Pegula family).

Just think: had Trump been allowed to buy the Bills, he would have been too busy with then coach Rex Ryan and quarterback Tyrod Taylor to run for president. And his ego would have gotten sufficient massaging from on-air chats with *PTT*'s Michael Wilbon and Tony Kornheiser for him to think: "Wait, if I can't buy the Bills, what about the White House. Maybe that franchise is for sale?"

Trump might never have realized his Rosebud dreams to become an NFL owner (and sit smirking in a skybox with the likes of Jerry Jones and Chris Christie). But in railing against Colin Kaepernick on his knees or gifting the NFL ownership class with tax breaks worth billions, Trump has kept the faith

* * *

One reason Trump would have fit right into the culture of the NFL is that—thanks to the revelations in the wake of the president's own groping scandals—on any given Sunday, or so it seems, some player, coach, or announcer is being outed for sexual assault or perversion.

Take the league's captive network, with such flagship shows as *Good Morning Football*, *Total Access*, and *Gameday Morning* (Rich Eisen with Mooch, Michael, Kurt Warner, and that lone wolf headdress).

At times when I could have been doing something more productive, I have been known to tarry on the NFL's website, going through the power rankings with Elliot Harrison or checking in with Rap Sheet (the latest league news thanks to Ian Rappaport).

Most of these shows feature retired NFL stars, in neatly pressed suits and colorful ties, who sound as serious as the Supreme Court and speak with more authority than does the Senate Foreign Relations committee (except for Deion Sanders, who shucks and jives while standing on the meta-physical street corner of 21st and Prime).

No sooner had the litany against Harvey Weinstein et al. gone down in the tabloids than were some of the NFL Network heroes—how shall I put it—primed for a fall. (As they say on the NFL Network's Shek Report with Dave Dameshek, "Don't blame me for calling out your name. I didn't do this to you... you did this to you.")

A phalanx of NFL "on-air talent"—including one of the chief justices of the pre-game show, ex-St. Louis Rams star Marshall Faulk, and former Patriot Heath Evans—was shown the door over various sexual transgressions.

Some of the offenses were a variation on the *Seinfeld* episode in which Elaine comes back from a date and says to Jerry at the apartment, when asked about the evening out: "He took... it OUT."

Apparently the object of the NFLers' "affections" was a make-up artist who got tired of being given sex toys in the Christmas grab bag, getting grinded into corridor walls, or receiving on her cell phone what in the lust underground are known as "dickpics."

She sued the network and released to the press her list of particulars, including numerous glimpses of life behind the scenes at the NFL Network, which sounds like out-takes from *North Dallas Forty*. She received numerous messages, to the effect of, "Why don't you cum over after work?"

* * *

Lewd and suggestive text messages sound almost quaint when compared to the NFL's police blotter—a large file on the website of *USA Today*. The newspaper devotes serious energy to updating its NFL Player Arrest Database, an Excel spreadsheet detailing the cases, their status, and a brief description of the charges, either pending or resolved.

Here are few summaries from the NFL police blotter:

—"Suspected of domestic battery in Duval County, Fla."

—"Accused of stomping on head of sister's boyfriend."

—"Accused of carrying a concealed weapon at water park in Ohio, leading to intense encounter with police."

The list of charges, and their resolution goes on for pages on the website, suggesting that the NFL is just a venue variation from *The Longest Yard*, a prison movie (remade often) that features the rise of an inmate football team.

Now most of the charges against pro players seem to involve drugs, drunk driving and assault, although in an earlier era (clearly one the league has worked hard to get past) the charge of choice was carrying an illegal firearm, usually to a nightclub

or through an airport checkpoint.

In the case of Plaxico Burress, a wide receiver for the New York Giants, he began partying at a bar with his burner wedged into his front pocket, perhaps to protect the family jewels.

For reasons never established, while at the bar, the gun discharged down Burress's leg, which led to a prison sentence for illegal possession of a handgun.

Alas, illegal gun possession did not end Plax's football career. Since another way to look at the NFL is as the world's most profitable work-release program, Burress was brought back to the league, first with my Jets (he caught a few passes in a forgettable 8-8 season) and later with the Steelers.

Burress is by no means the only ex-con to have played in the league, which takes the air pressure in game balls a lot more seriously than domestic violence, firearm possession, or, in the case of Baltimore Ravens superstar Ray Lewis, copping a plea on charges of being an accessory to murder.

* * *

Although the facts about the Ray Lewis case are hazy, what is clear is that he and his entourage left an Atlanta nightclub during the night after the 2000 Super Bowl (Lewis had not been playing). While on their way to Lewis's stretch limousine, a fight broke out in a parking lot that involved about a dozen men.

When it was over, two of those who had challenged the Lewis ensemble had been stabbed to death. Rather than wait around and tell their side of the story to the police, Lewis's crowd hightailed it out of the parking lot, although not before bullets tore holes into some of the limousine's tires and metal work. ("On any given Sunday...")

As a man of principle and conscience, Lewis decided in the interests of truth, justice, and the American way to gather up his blood-soaked clothing from that evening (including his mink coat) and throw them in a dumpster. (They would never be found.)

When Atlanta police finally caught up with Lewis, who was in a prevent defense, Ray was vague on the details of the confrontation, saying only that there had been a fight, and that he had not been involved.

Such evasions earned Lewis an indictment for two counts of being an accessory to murder, although during his criminal trial, he copped a plea with the prosecution, and became a witness for the state against several of his limo buddies, telling the court that the day before two of them had bought hunting knives at a sporting goods store. (They were acquitted, as the jury could not figure out who did what in the brawl.)

Lewis also made some regretful noises about how, well, perhaps he might have been more cooperative with Atlanta police, confessions that got him a conviction on some obstruction of justice charges and a year of parole—none of which cost

Lewis any playing time with the Ravens.

Back on the field, Lewis resumed his Hall of Fame career, which included numerous Pro-Bowl appearances and two Super Bowl wins (those jerseys weren't thrown in a dumpster). When he retired, he was serenaded as one of the immortals of the game. Commissioner Roger Goodell said:

His legacy on the field is extraordinary; 17 years and playing extraordinary football, not many people can match that—if anybody. That speaks for itself. What I'm so proud of is what he's contributed off the field. He's meant so much to the NFL, to the Baltimore community and to the Ravens for what he's done off the field, and that speaks volumes about Ray Lewis and his leadership.

Finally, to confirm his status as one of the patron saints of the game, after Lewis retired in 2013, he was hired, first, by ESPN and later by Fox Sports as an on-air football analyst—positions that clearly came with the blessings of the league office that remains smitten with all that Lewis has done “off the field.”

If I feel this way about professional football, why, you might ask, do I continue to watch the games? To be fair, I start watching more games than I finish, given that by the third quarter, the Jets are often settling into their second-half collapse. Nor can I stand watching all the ads that come with non-Red Zone games. But I confess that fandom is often a life sentence (not some plea bargain of the Ray Lewis variety).

Even if I find the League an owner Ponzi scheme played out on Astroturf, I still like the game of football itself—at least the one I played after school while growing up, or the touch football games that we still play as a family at Thanksgiving and Christmas. (We wear eye black, and yes, I have a retro Namath jersey, and during the games can be heard exhorting the kids by quoting Joe: “I never drink at halftime... or saying, “They probably would have told our Lord to cut his hair.” A child of the 1960s, sometimes I lapse into a Vince-ism: “Fatigue makes cowards of us all.”)

I still love watching a football spiral through the air, as I did on that first afternoon in the Polo Grounds, and I like the camaraderie associated with pick-up games of touch football played in Central Park.

Into his sixties, and not seeing very well, my father used to bull rush the quarterback in such backyard games, in the spirit of the Colts' lineman Big Daddy Lipscomb, who liked to say: “I just roam through the backfield until I find the guy with the ball.”

Not even Roger Goodell's \$200 million contract extension to operate “the football ring” or having to sit through some Super Bowl halftime show (remember Up with People and those Elvis). **CP**

Matthew Stevenson is the author of many books including *An April Across America*, *Reading the Rails*, and, most recently, *Appalachia Spring*.

Fidel, Two Years Later

BY SUSAN BABBITT

Fidel Castro died two years ago. If US liberals read Fidel Castro's writing, they'd know Trump is uninteresting. They'd know “nicely sweetened but rotten” ideas cause great suffering in the US. It doesn't take much to see in Fidel a distinct (in these times) vision: in fact, an ancient one.

But you have to think it's worth looking for. And there's the rub. You won't think it's worth looking for if you don't think anything else is possible than what you've always expected, philosophically.

Philosophy is not a luxury. Your daily thinking depends upon it. Philosophical conceptions—what it means to be human, for instance—guide everyday choices. This is well-known in analytic philosophy of science. They might have learned it from Marx.

Even those who like Cuba don't read Fidel. They take students and show them Cuba's “culture”. But they ignore the ideas. There's an irony: Accusing Cuba of dogmatism, academics disregard Cuba's philosophical foundations. If they don't ask, it's because they don't think there's anything to know.

They assume there *are* no such foundations. They are “open” while declaring by behaviour that no dissent to their (liberal philosophical) worldview is possible. It is a damaging form of dogmatism, unacknowledged.

When I first went to Cuba, I saw, written on a wall, a statement attributed to Fidel: *Al valor no le faltara la inteligencia, a la inteligencia no le faltara el valor*. I realized then that this society, this Revolution, expressed a departure from philosophical liberalism: the ideology dominating the North, including Marxists, Aristotelians, anarchists, queer theorists and feminists.

Put simply, Fidel's statement means you can't be intelligent and bad, and if you manage to be good, that is, if you manage to actually act out of good will for others, and not just *appear* to do so, you must also be smart because you've properly understood causal interdependence.

Morality and science are not separated.

European philosophers separated the intellectual from the moral. They invented the “fact/value” distinction. They denied facts (or knowledge) about value. There is no truth in the field of value, just “myths and fictions”.

You can flourish intellectually living however you want. You can talk about global justice and ethics, living your passions. No one will note the contradiction.

How you live is one thing, how you think another. This view dominates still. Cuban philosopher Ernesto Limia says the ineffectiveness of the international left is explained by it. He may be right.

Fidel's view is more sensible and in fact more common, if



Fidel Castro. Photo: La Prensa.

one looks outside Europe and North America for ideas. It says that how you live and how you think are interconnected. If I want to flourish intellectually, I should serve others. I should increase my *felt* awareness of causal interdependence.

It's radical but only due to damage done by European liberalism.

Knowing reality (science), we know how to live well as human beings (morality): When we know science, we know about cause and effect. We know causal interdependence: laws of nature. If I know the laws of nature, I know my self-interest requires the well-being of others. It's simple: When I act out of good will for others, I benefit. When I do harm, I am the first to suffer. Cause and effect. Science.

It's an ancient view. Cuba has demonstrated its commitment. If its history of internationalism (well-documented) were known. Bolsonaro's current lies about Cuban doctors would have no effect. 'But there, again, is the rub. We don't believe what we don't expect. Cuba's internationalism *is* known. But it is not believed because it is not consistent with the liberal worldview that denies its justification.

Cuba's internationalism is long-standing, and its explanation is clear: Cause and effect, interdependence, laws of nature. Fidel expresses it in almost everything he said and wrote.

Cuba's role in Angola is an example. UK historian Richard Gott describes the costly mission as "entirely without selfish motivation". Cuba sent 300,000 volunteers, more than 2,000 of whom died, to defeat apartheid South Africa. In Pretoria, a "wall of names" commemorates those who died in the struggle against apartheid. Many Cuban names are inscribed there. No other foreign country is represented.²

The US claimed Cuba was acting as a Soviet proxy but ac-

ording to US intelligence, Castro had "no intention of subordinating himself to Soviet discipline and direction." Former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger wrote in his memoir 25 years later that Castro was "probably the most genuinely revolutionary leader then in power".

He was revolutionary in his thinking, which continues to influence. Bolsonaro says Cuba's remarkable doctor program is a way for Cuba to enrich itself. It is not surprising that he says it. It is surprising some believe it.

But it is not any more surprising than those who look South for everything except ideas. Fidel Castro said in 1999, in Caracas, after the election of Hugo Chávez: "They discovered smart bombs but we discovered something more powerful: the idea that people think and feel".

It shouldn't be a radical view, and it is not in many traditions, going back millennia. But to see how that is so, there needs to be at least a little bit of doubt about liberal dogmatism. It would be a step forward just to admit that it exists, and that it's been effectively challenged. Fidel Castro is one place to start. **CP**

SUSAN BABITT is author of *Humanism and Embodiment* (Bloomsbury 2014).

1. http://www.cubadebate.cu/especiales/2018/11/20/perdon-a-mis-ninos-por-no-haberles-dicho-adios/#.W_at4uhKiM8; http://www.cubadebate.cu/especiales/2018/11/20/minsap-cuba-no-hace-politica-con-la-salud-de-ningun-pueblo-video/#.W_auH-hKiM8
2. References are here: <https://www.counterpunch.org/2015/07/27/thawing-relations-cubas-deeper-more-challenging-significance/>

CULTURE & REVIEWS

Hunger and Homelessness in America Our Daily Bread

BY LEE BALLINGER

Two hundred and forty-four children around the world will starve to death while you are reading this article. That's just a fraction of the 35,165 children around the world who will die of hunger today and each and every day. There is little of this starvation in America now, but the global experience shows that starvation is always preceded by widespread hunger and widespread hunger defines America today. In 2016, an estimated 1 in 8 Americans were food insecure. This equates to 42 million Americans, including 13 million children. In 2015 the American Academy of Pediatrics issued a policy statement urging pediatricians to screen all children for food insecurity.

It's not just kids, of course. According to the Feeding America Hunger Study 2014, 66% of food bank users had to choose between medical care and food, and 69% had to choose between utilities and food. This happens not just in the inner city or in small-town Appalachia. For instance, the Los Angeles suburb of Temecula has often been ranked as one of the California cities with the highest number of foreclosures. A couple of years ago, the football coach at the local high school said his biggest problem was that many of his players didn't get enough to eat. If you drive around Temecula, it looks very nice. But you don't see those who have been pushed into homelessness by foreclosure and you can't tell which houses may still be occupied but have empty refrigerators.

The U.S. Conference of Mayors' Report on Hunger and Homelessness

reports a dramatic increase in requests for emergency food assistance. 63 percent were from people in families and 51 percent were employed.

This past spring I attended a symposium on homelessness at Cal State Fullerton. University president Framroze Virjee expressed his frustration with the fact that the food the university gives to students to try to keep them academically functional often winds up being taken home to the parents of students. The parents are no better off than their children.

At University of California campuses, the crown jewels of the state's educational system, 42 percent of students are food insecure. This in California, an agricultural wonderland which has the ability to feed the entire country, if not the world.

"What was once a response to an emergency caused by a crisis of capitalism is now a national institution, existing far beyond its original temporary intentions."

— Andrew Fisher, *Big Hunger: The Unholy Alliance Between Corporate America and Anti-Hunger Groups*

In his excellent book, Fisher paints a picture of the vast infrastructure which has emerged to deal with the hunger emergency: Two hundred plus food banks and approximately 60,000 food pantries and soup kitchens that distribute five billion dollars-worth of food every year to 46 million people.

The scale of this effort can be seen by the Greater Boston Food Bank, which operates out of a \$35 million building and distributes 54 million pounds of food annually through 547 agencies.

Yet despite all this activity, hunger continues to grow. That doesn't mean that all the work that goes on at food banks and public feedings is a waste of time. To put food in an empty belly is

a good thing, no doubt about it. When I was homeless for a time, I sometimes got a free meal from some agency or another. I appreciated it. It was great to get some calories to ingest, but within a few hours I was hungry again and had to resume a desperate search for food.

We are held hostage by a flawed structure in order to get just some partial relief, but in ways that preclude the possibility of solving the problem once and for all.

Andrew Fisher points out: "A bag of groceries handed to a person suffering from hunger does not make them food secure, because the underlying conditions that led to their hunger remain."

The underlying condition is poverty, which is a systemic problem. Poverty and the problems it inevitably generates, such as hunger, cannot be solved within our current system, a system which is rapidly collapsing. Yet the big time distributors of free food in America have hitched their wagon to this system and are dependent on it in the form of corporate goodwill and corporate dollars. Over 150 corporations donate either products or cash to the biggest national anti-hunger organizations. Manufacturers and retailers receive an enhanced tax deduction for the food they donate to charitable outlets.

"The hunger frame does not take on industry for its poverty-scale wages, abusive labor practices, heavy marketing of inexpensive and unhealthy food, supermarket redlining of impoverished neighborhoods, and poor record on food safety."

Walmart is a good example of how corporate giving protects the status quo. Walmart is an official "visionary partner" of Feeding America, a huge network of food banks that is the nation's largest hunger-relief organization. At national anti-hunger conferences, Walmart staff has joined the execu-

tive directors of Feeding America and the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) on keynote panels.

At a national food bank conference, a staff member of WhyHunger asked the speakers if they would ask their “partner,” Walmart, to help its employees reduce family food insecurity by paying employees more. A FRAC staffer said no way, that instead they would request that Walmart make sure that it provides food

in the United States. Millions of restaurant employees have to go to food banks to feed their families.

In 2014, FRAC held its annual benefit dinner in Washington DC. The program for the event featured paid advertising by, among many others, Coca-Cola, infamous for its insatiable appetite for water and the way that exacerbates water shortages around the world. Alongside Coke in the FRAC program was Nestle,

provides them with political cover for their misdeeds, generates tax breaks, and increases their social control over an increasingly restive section of the population.

On the other hand, food banks often replicate the practices of their corporate partners. Many food banks do not pay their low-ranking employees a living wage. The Food Bank of Iowa uses prison labor.



Rep. Vicky Hartzler. Photo: John Shinkle.

stamp applications to its workers.

If Walmart paid a living wage to its employees, those folks would be able to feed their families. But Walmart doesn't, and its low wages cost taxpayers \$6.2 billion annually in public benefits.

The six heirs of founder Sam Walton, according to *Forbes*, are worth \$170 billion. They have more wealth than 49 million families combined. Do the math with an open mind and you can see that the resources to end hunger are right at hand.

But it's not just Walmart.

The restaurant industry donates millions of dollars to anti-hunger programs while paying the lowest wages

which drains hundreds of millions of gallons of water out of the state of Michigan for free while tens of thousands of Detroiters have their water shut off for non-payment.

Starbucks is an official “visionary partner” of Feeding America.

In May of this year, the Seattle City Council voted to impose a tax of \$275 per employee per year on companies grossing at least \$20 million annually, the money to be spent on support for the poor and the homeless. Starbucks bitterly opposed the measure.

The “vision” of these corporations is protecting profits and nothing else. Controlling the anti-hunger movement

On the other hand, at Feeding America, whose CEO is former Big Pharma executive Keith Monda, the average manager's salary is \$107,000 a year (\$51 an hour).

Professional food bank managers depend on the continued existence of hunger in order to keep their jobs. Corporations welcome the existence of hunger so that desperate workers must accept the meager wages offered them (real wages have been in decline for forty years).

Meanwhile, robots, which do not eat, continue their takeover of the economy. Human beings, who do need to eat, cannot compete with them. In the long

run, corporations and the government they control will see no need to feed people who make no contribution to the bottom line.

This is the reality that lies behind Congresswoman Vicky Hartzler's seemingly absurd claim that forcing food stamp recipients to get non-existent jobs as a condition of being able to eat will move folks toward "self-sufficiency."

'dolphin' had a slit in the back where a passerby could drop contributions. The statues were built to funnel donations away from the homeless and to community agencies that provide social services to that population. As of 2015, \$235,000 has been donated to various charities through the dolphin program."

It's true that for many centuries, all attempts to operate collectively to

ways this abundance could be distributed, putting an end to hunger virtually overnight. But most of the public still believes in charity as the limit of what's possible. This leaves the likes of Walmart and Coca-Cola in the driver's seat, since charity as a strategy is only compatible with a profit-driven market economy.

Yet the growth of hunger in formerly secure sections of the population is

"A bag of groceries handed to a person suffering from hunger does not make them food secure, because the underlying conditions that led to their hunger remain."

Hartzler, who has personally been the recipient of nearly a million dollars in government farm subsidies, knows full well that there are no jobs. Self-sufficiency in this historical moment is a euphemism for starvation. You failed to get a job so you have no right to live.

Andrew Fisher points out that the anti-hunger movement is decisively under corporate control. Kroger has directors at 32 food banks, Walmart 31, Wells Fargo 22. One East Coast food bank requires its board members to raise or donate \$25,000 annually. 715 board members at 154 Feeding America food bank work for a Fortune 1000 company.

There are no food banks where the recipients of the food sit on the boards and make decisions. The recipients are poor and hungry. They would like to see the end of hunger and poverty. The existing boards of directors have every reason to want to see hunger and poverty continue.

The result is, as Natalie Jayroe, head of a New Orleans food bank, says: "There are very few boards that would give food bankers leeway to fight for a living wage."

"In 1993, the city of Santa Monica CA a business association strategically placed four dolphin shaped statues in highly trafficked areas of the city; each

ensure adequate supplies of food have foundered on the rocks of scarcity. There simply wasn't enough to go around.

Farming is now a complicated science of hybrids, computers, and massive irrigation. The world's farms are so productive today that they can easily feed everyone on earth. Yet we still base our distribution of food on the brutal, scarcity-driven methods of the past, even though the scarcity is gone.

A child could easily come up with

opening a space for discussion of a different model. There is much that lies dormant in the American psyche. These concepts could be dusted off and used by the army of potential visionaries currently kept at arm's length by those who control our food supply. America the beautiful with its amber waves of grain. A chicken in every pot. Give us this day our daily bread.

Let's eat. **CP**

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