

FRANCES FOX PIVEN, WILLIAM J. BARBER II, AMY LITTLEFIELD,  
BRYCE COVERT, AND OTHERS ON ENDING POVERTY IN AMERICA

REASONS FOR HOPE IN  
THE MIDST OF COVID-19

RUTH CONNIFF: SANDERS OR  
NOT, WE NEED A REVOLUTION

# The Progressive

April / May 2020



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STEPHANIE DALTON COWAN



## AN UNPARALLELED CRISIS

This issue of *The Progressive* went to press on March 25. It will not reach our print subscribers until, in some cases, mid-April.

Just as we could not have predicted how vastly the coronavirus pandemic would reshape our lives in just a few days, we are quite unable to predict where things will be when our readers receive this issue, on which we have worked so hard.

For this reason, we have taken the extraordinary step of publishing the entire issue on our website even before the magazine reaches subscribers, in recognition of the urgency of the moment. Some of you, hopefully, will have received our emails to this effect, and have been able to read this issue online. In the future, know that your print subscription always entitles you to digital access; just go to [progressive.org](http://progressive.org) and click the red subscriber-access box.

The coronavirus pandemic has created, for all of us, an unprecedented crisis. For *The Progressive*, that means our office building is closed; our staff is pressed to the limit; and our finances are stretched even more than usual to deal with the emergencies of the moment. We can't even be sure our printer and other service providers will continue to be available to us through this crisis.

In the worst-case scenario, we might be forced to suspend print publication for some period of time. We hope that doesn't happen, and we are doing all we can to address these challenges and to keep *The Progressive* alive and in print.

In any event, we will continue to produce copy online, and to keep alive our two projects: the Public School Shakedown, which tracks attacks on public schools, and the Progressive Media Project, which distributes op-eds to news outlets nationally.

But the main thing that has sustained us, throughout *The Progressive's* 111-year history, is our print subscribers. So we are turning to you once again.

We have received many calls and emails from our concerned readers asking how they can help us meet this emergency. We have a few suggestions:

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Thank you for all that you have done to support *The Progressive* through the years. We are doing everything we can to remain viable. We owe it to Fighting Bob.

Your friends at *The Progressive*



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*The Progressive tackles the forces distorting our economy, corrupting our democracy, and imperiling our planet, and champions peace, civil liberties, equality, and justice.*

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# MORE RELEVANT THAN EVER

**M**uch of this issue of *The Progressive*, focused on poverty, was written, edited, and even already laid out on pages as the rapid advance of COVID-19 forced dramatic changes in American life. We made what tweaks we could and replaced a few offerings, but the package is mostly the same and, we think, more relevant and vital than ever.

That's because, in the weeks and months ahead, the working poor will be among the pandemic's primary targets as they continue to provide essential services. The people on the frontlines of this public health crisis—the ones who can't simply stay home and wait it out—are low-wage workers in what are now high-risk professions: health care providers and nursing home staff, grocery store clerks, child-care providers, drug store employees, bus drivers and truckers, gig economy workers, and home health care attendants (see Mike Ervin's column).

and fines; Emily Whitnall on efforts to curb homelessness in Missoula, Montana; Amy Littlefield on the need for a broader vision of reproductive justice; Mike Kuhlbeck on a funeral industry that is now tragically seeing an upsurge in business; and an interview with Felicia Wong of the Roosevelt Institute.

Addressing the needs of the poor is no longer a long-term goal honored mostly in the breach. It is, as Barber argues, a moral imperative and now, a practical necessity. We just can't keep underpaying the most important workers in America.

We are also heading rapidly toward an election that will decide the future of the nation. There is no need to despair at the narrowing of the choice on the Democratic side; the struggle over what the party stands for is ongoing—as John Nichols reminds us in the excerpt from his new book on Henry Wallace, *The Fight for the Soul of the Democratic Party*.



Top row: Bill Lueders, Norman Stockwell, Kassidy Tarala (featuring Harvey), Emilio Leanza, Kerstin Diehn, Daniel Libby, Elizabeth Miller. Bottom row: Catherine Cronin, Madison Deyo, Jules Gibbs, Bryanna Allen, Nuha Dolby, Diana Cook, Fighting Bob.

That many of the low-wage workers we are relying on during this crisis are also subject to non-compete agreements, as Sharon Johnson describes in her article in this issue, is a travesty—and so is the fact that many states have laws barring communities from raising the minimum wage, the subject of Bryce Covert's article.

As the poverty scholar Frances Fox Piven explores in this issue, we still treat poverty like a personal failing, and the poor as being somehow responsible for their own predicament. That has to change, now that many Americans are facing an economic crisis through no fault of their own.

We are proud to present two of the nation's leading voices for the poor, Piven and the Reverend William J. Barber II, who writes our lead "Comment" on the moral crisis of poverty in America. Also in this issue: Wilson Sherwin on the need for militancy among anti-poverty activists; Rebecca Nathanson on how San Francisco is helping the poor escape crushing fees

Progressives must continue to insist on bold and systemic change, no matter who is picked to go head-to-head against Trump. It won't happen otherwise.

In this tremendously busy and trying period, *The Progressive* is getting by with the help of three new members of our small but dedicated staff: Kassidy Tarala, our new web editor and audience engagement coordinator; Emilio Leanza, our new associate editor; and Elizabeth Miller, our new office manager. I hope to tell you more about them later on.

I am proud of my colleagues and the phenomenal effort they have put into this issue. We are all working together, though not hand-in-hand, to be a voice of sanity in a crazy time.

Bill Lueders  
Editor



# THE REAL EPIDEMIC IS POVERTY



*The Reverend Dr. William J. Barber II is president of Repairers of the Breach and co-chair of the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival.*

**T**he United States is the wealthiest nation in the history of the world, yet millions of American families have had to set up crowdfunding sites to try to raise money for their loved ones' medical bills. Millions more can buy unleaded gasoline for their car, but they can't get unleaded water in their homes. Almost half of America's workers—whether in Appalachia or Alabama, California or Carolina—work for less than a living wage. And as school buildings in poor communities crumble for lack of investment, America's billionaires are paying a lower tax rate than the poorest half of households.

This moral crisis is coming to a head as the coronavirus pandemic lays bare America's deep injustices. While the virus itself does not discriminate, it is the poor and disenfranchised who will experience the most suffering and death. They're the ones who are least likely to have health care or paid sick leave, and the most likely to lose work hours. And though children appear less vulnerable to the virus than adults, America's nearly forty million poor and low-income children are at serious risk of losing access to food, shelter, education, and housing in the economic fallout from the pandemic.

The underlying disease, in other words, is poverty, which was killing nearly 700 of us every day in the world's wealthiest country, long before anyone had heard of COVID-19.

The moral crisis of poverty amid vast wealth is inseparable from the injustice of systemic racism, ecological devastation, and our militarized war economy. It is only a minority rule sustained by voter suppression and gerrymandering that subverts the will of the people. To redeem the soul of America—and survive a pandemic—we must have a moral fusion movement that cuts across race, gender, class, and cultural divides.

The United States has always been a nation at odds with its professed aspirations of equality and justice for all—from the genocide of original inhabitants to slavery to military aggression abroad. But there have been periods in our history when courageous social movements have made significant advances. We must learn from those who've gone before us as we strive to build a movement that can tackle today's injustices—and help all of us survive.

**I**n the aftermath of the Civil War, African Americans who had just escaped slavery joined with white allies to form coalitions that won control of nearly every southern legislature. These Reconstruction-era political alliances enacted new constitutions that advanced moral agendas, including, for the first time, the right to public education.

During the Great Depression, farmers, workers, veterans, and others rose up to demand bold government action to ease the pain of the economic crisis on ordinary Americans. This led to New Deal policies, programs, and public works projects that we still benefit from today, such as Social Security and basic labor protections.

Pushed by these movements, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt even called in 1944 for an economic bill of rights, declaring: "We cannot be content, no matter how high that general standard of living may be, if some fraction of our people—whether it be one-third or one-fifth or one-tenth—is ill-fed, ill-clothed, ill-housed, and insecure."

During what I like to call the "Second Reconstruction" over the following decades, a coalition of blacks and progressive whites began dismantling the racist Jim Crow laws and won key legislative victories, including the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, and the Fair Housing Act.

With each period of advancement has come a formidable backlash. This is how we find ourselves today, in the year 2020, with levels of economic inequality as severe as during the original Gilded Age a century ago. Since the Supreme Court's 2013 *Shelby* decision, Americans have had fewer voting rights protections than we did fifty-five years ago, while thanks to the earlier *Citizens United* ruling, corporations can invest unlimited sums of money to influence elections.

In response to fair tax reforms, the wealthy have used their economic clout to slash their IRS bills, cutting the top marginal income tax rate from more than 90 percent in the 1950s to 37 percent today. In response to the hard-fought wins of the labor movement, corporate lobbyists have rammed through one anti-worker law after another, slashing the share of U.S. workers protected by unions nearly in half, from 20.1 percent in 1983 to just 10.5 percent in 2018.



Decades after Depression-era reforms, Wall Street fought successfully to deregulate the financial system, paving the way for the 2008 financial crash that caused millions to lose their homes and livelihoods. And the ultra-rich and big corporations have also managed to dominate our campaign finance system, making it easier for them to buy off politicians who commit to rigging the rules against the poor and the environment, and to suppress voting rights, making it harder for the poor to fight back.

Our military budgets continue to rise, now grabbing more than fifty-three cents of every discretionary federal dollar to pay for wars abroad and pushing our ability to pay for health care for all, for a Green New Deal, for jobs and education, and infrastructure, further and further away.

## **To redeem the soul of America—and survive a pandemic—we must have a moral fusion movement that cuts across race, gender, class, and cultural divides.**

The wars that those military budgets fund continue to escalate. They don't make us safer, and they've led to the deaths of thousands of poor people in Afghanistan, Syria, Somalia, and beyond, as well as the displacement of millions of refugees, the destruction of water sources, and the contamination of the environments of whole countries.

The only ones who benefit are the millionaire CEOs of military companies, who are getting richer every year on the more than \$350 billion—half the military budget—that goes directly to their corporations. In the meantime 23,000 low-ranking troops earn so little that they and their families qualify for food stamps.

Key to these rollbacks: controlling the narrative about who is poor in America and the world. It is in the interest of the greedy and the powerful to perpetuate myths of deservedness—that they deserve their wealth and power because they are smarter and work harder, while the poor deserve to be poor because they are lazy and intellectually inferior.

It's also in their interest to perpetuate the myth that the poverty problem has largely been solved and so we needn't worry about the rich getting richer—even while our real social safety net is full of gaping holes. This myth has been reinforced by our deeply flawed official measurements of poverty and economic hardship.

The way the U.S. government counts who is poor and who is not, frankly, is a sixty-year-old mess that

doesn't tell us what we need to know. It's an inflation-adjusted measure of the cost of a basket of food in 1955 relative to household income, adjusted for family size—and it's still the way we measure poverty today.

But this measure doesn't account for the costs of housing, child care, or health care, much less twenty-first-century needs like internet access or cell phone service. It doesn't even track the impacts of anti-poverty programs like Medicaid or the earned income tax credit, obscuring the role they play in reducing poverty.

In short, the official measure of poverty doesn't begin to touch the depth and breadth of economic hardship in the world's wealthiest nation, where 40 percent of us can't afford a \$400 emergency.

In a report with the Institute for Policy Studies, the Poor People's Campaign found that nearly 140 million Americans were poor or low-income—including more than a third of white people, 40 percent of Asian people, approximately 60 percent each of indigenous people and black people, and 64 percent of Latinx people. LGBTQ people are also disproportionately affected.

Further, the very condition of being poor in the United States has been criminalized through a system of racial profiling, cash bail, the myth of the Reagan-era "Welfare Queen," arrests for things such as laying one's head on a park bench, passing out food to unsheltered people, and extraordinary fines and fees for misdemeanors such as failing to use a turn signal, and simply walking while black or trans.

We are a nation crying out for security, equity, and justice. We need racial equity. We need good jobs. We need quality public education. We need a strong social safety net. We need health care to be understood as a human right for all of us. We need security for people living with disabilities. We need to be a nation that opens our hearts and neighborhoods to immigrants. We need safe and healthy environments where our children can thrive instead of struggling to survive.

With the coronavirus pandemic bringing our country's equally urgent poverty crisis into stark relief, we cannot simply wait for change. It must come now.

America is an imperfect nation, but we have made important advancements against interconnected injustices in the past.

We can do it again, and we know how. Now is the time to fight for the heart and soul of this democracy. ♦



# A TIME FOR HEROES

**A**s this issue of *The Progressive* goes to press, the ultimate scale of the COVID-19 pandemic remains unknown; its capacity for disruption is not.

Our fears have been stoked, our routines suspended, our sense of security shattered. Schools, restaurants, and workplaces are closed indefinitely, and millions of Americans in nursing homes and elder-care facilities have been shut off from contact with their loved ones.

This is a time for heroes, for people who will put serving and saving others above their own self-interest. It is a time for innovation and determination, as we learn how to cooperate and stay engaged with democracy, while practicing the new mandate of social distancing and staying at home.

We need to keep looking out for one another. Weathering this global storm will take all of our commitment and all of our grit.

As everyone should have expected, President Trump's handling of this disaster has been a disgrace. After having disbanded the White House team in charge of preparing for a pandemic, he blamed the nation's inadequate testing capability on Barack Obama ("I don't take responsibility at all," Trump said when asked); disputed the World Health Organization's death rate findings in favor of "my hunch" that it was much lower; falsely claimed that "anyone who wants a test can get one"; and even hallucinated that "we're very close to a vaccine."

We have to accept that Trump is not and will not ever be a leader. He will never be able to soothe the nation or guide it competently. He will never be able to convincingly fake empathy for anybody but himself. He is not just an embarrassment but also a threat. He needs to be shunted aside until the next election can remove him from power. Or maybe he needs to be overthrown.

Our hope lies not in the President, who claims to have gotten his keen grasp of medicine from his "great super genius" uncle. It rests, rather, in the collective action being taken, especially at the state and local levels, to contain the novel coronavirus and care for its victims.

We have seen remarkable decisions to cancel public events and close businesses, at a gargantuan cost. There has been impressive cooperation from the public with new rules about hygiene and behavior. People have been responding in encouraging ways.

Even those living under lockdown in elder-care facilities where no family can visit are doing their part in gracefully accepting this change in circumstance.

We cannot and never will go back to the way things were before this pandemic erupted. It will change the nation's future direction forever, possibly for the better. If the most sensible strategy during a health care crisis is to make sure no one goes untreated for lack of funds, why can't we always take this approach? If cooperating as a global community to survive an existential threat makes sense now, why can't we do it to fight climate change? And why not take this opportunity to improve things for the low-wage workers who are now providing actual lifelines to countless others?

**If the most sensible strategy during a health care crisis is to make sure no one goes untreated for lack of funds, why can't we always take this approach?**

Of course, this pandemic will certainly bring out our worst as well as our best. President Trump, who embodies all of humankind's worst instincts, has irresponsibly, inaccurately, and xenophobically referred to COVID-19 as the "Chinese virus" and a "foreign virus." There have been attacks on Asian people and Asian Americans for being presumed carriers.

As Judith W. Leavitt and Lewis A. Leavitt, two retired professors at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, put it in a recent op-ed for our Progressive Media Project (see page 37):

"We are all potential victims, as well as potential spreaders of COVID-19. All of us. We are like the mosquitoes in the spread of malaria or dengue. This virus is not particular to any race, class, or nationality. Stigmatizing any one group impairs our ability to successfully combat this disease for all."

Let us work to make sure this unfolding public health crisis has more heroes than villains. This is not just about stopping a pandemic but addressing the pathologies that underlie it, including bigotry and disregard for science.

The struggle for a better world is as vital as ever. This is our chance to show greatness—not just as progressives, but as a nation and as a species. It will be good practice for addressing the challenges to come. ♦

*Bill Lueders is editor of The Progressive.*



## The Perils of Nonviolence

“So the violence is real,” Bill Lueders writes in his Comment (“Let’s Prepare for the Upcoming Civil War,” February/March issue) regarding Trump and his supporters. And this, he says, “requires progressives to prepare to do something truly difficult: respond to violence with empathy and even love.”

I wonder if Lueders has studied American politics of the 1850s? How would slave owners have responded to “empathy and love”? Would Jews in 1933 Germany have changed history by “opening themselves up to others [Nazis] and embracing their humanity”? I think not!

Yes, the right probably does have more guns to carry out violence, but the South had more trained militias in 1861 when it attacked Fort Sumter. Hitler certainly had the best military in the world in 1939 when he attacked Poland, but he had no moral cause.

History tells us at times violence must be met with violence. Trump and his supporters are not only violent but without morals or rational values, and reason, love, or empathy will not work.

—William F. Johnston  
Tacoma, Washington

While the piece is beautifully written and I agree with much of it, I think the media needs to be reminded that they control the narrative, and even suggesting civil war could set it in motion. I know it is tough to decide how these issues ought to be approached, especially from a journalistic point of view when the purpose is to tell the truth and report the reality on the ground. I don’t envy anyone the challenge that this brings.

—Dean Kotula, online comment

How disingenuous to imply, via quoting a couple of unnamed and perhaps fabricated Trump rally goers, that violence is being advocated by Trump’s side. Never mind that Bernie operative who threatened on tape that if Bernie gets robbed of the nomination, “Milwaukee will burn.”

This incendiary, divisive rhetoric aimed at stirring up division in our country means any Russian efforts at doing the same were, are, and will be moot, since this kind of stuff is doing it in far greater volume.

—Mark Hay, online comment

I think Trump, due to his particular mental disorder and penchant for denying reality, would, if not re-elected, declare the election “phony,” and say it was rigged and a coup. He might declare martial law, suspend the election, and have at his disposal all the police and soldiers who lack the courage to not follow illegal orders. At this point, a violent reaction from the left, however small and disorganized (a couple of Molotov cocktails or even stones thrown), would be used immediately by the corporate press, magnified as evidence that rebels are at war with the government, and the retaliation by the skilled militarized police alone would be a thousand or ten thousand eyes for an eye.

This being said, nonviolent resistance is the ONLY way to respond unless one wants to make a present of justifying mass state terrorism on the part of the Trumpists.

—Brian Carlson, online comment

## Taking the Oath

Dave Zirin’s otherwise informative and timely article (“NFL Health Care’s Bitter Fruit,” December/January issue) contains an interesting mistake. He calls sports team medical staff who care more about getting players back on the field than attending to their health “a grotesque perversion of the Hippocratic Oath.” In fact, no doctor is given the actual Hippocratic Oath. Medical schools would not allow it, since it forbids a physician from being remunerated for teaching other physicians, specifically prohibits training women in the medical arts, and prohibits abortion and physician-assisted death. After a long precedent of disfavoring oaths, many medical schools now use modern oaths that avoid these pitfalls.

—William R. Kerr  
Bryan, Texas

## Don’t Forget Us Inmates

Regarding your proposed Progressive platform for 2020 (February/March issue), one component was glaringly missing: reform (if not abolition) of the criminal injustice system, which consumes billions of tax dollars a year, chews up the souls of those incarcerated, savages whole communities, destroys families, and breeds the very crimes it speciously purports to prevent.

Presidential candidates can and must take action to at least suture the wounds on America’s moral heart. They can push their party to repeal the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996, which makes it harder to challenge unjust convictions, and the Prison Litigation Reform Act, which restricts the ability of inmates to file lawsuits.

Progressives concerned only with their own particular groups are not progressive at all. They are selfish. To paraphrase Martin Luther King Jr., the only way to ensure social justice for yourself is to fight for it for others.

—Nate A. Lindell  
Columbia Correctional Institution  
Portage, Wisconsin

## Renewal Request Granted!

Hello to you at *The Progressive*: Can you possibly keep me on your mailing lists so I can continue to receive your magazine? You sent me magazines in 2019, and I do really appreciate your kindness. I’m going crazy in here because I’m really not able to stay up-to-date and informed on news issues, other than very slanted mainstream TV news. Your magazine helps to give me real and valid input. It would be wonderful if you’ll continue your magazine coming my way. Again, thank you for your kindness.

—Daniel Holmes  
California State Prison  
Corcoran, California

**Editor’s note:** *The Progressive* provides a free one-year subscription to any inmate who requests one.



# THE PANDEMIC OF 1918

*Beginning in January 1918, an influenza pandemic sometimes dubbed “the Spanish Flu” circled the globe. It would eventually kill an estimated 675,000 people in the United States alone. This pandemic occurred at a time when progressives were pushing this country to adopt a system of national health care.*

*Here is an excerpt from an article by Irving Fisher, a professor of economics at Yale University, that appeared in La Follette’s Magazine (later The Progressive) for January 1917, more than a full year before the pandemic started.*

## ***We Need Universal Health Insurance***

At present the United States has the unenviable distinction of being the only great industrial nation without universal health insurance. For a generation the enlightened nations of Europe have one after another discussed the idea and followed discussion by adoption. It has constituted an important part of the policy and career of some of Europe’s greatest statesmen.

It is the poor whose need of health insurance is greatest. Millions of American workmen cannot at present avail themselves of necessary medical, surgical, and nursing aid. Health insurance is like elementary education. In order that it shall function properly it must be universal.

Certain interests which would be, or think they would be, adversely affected by health insurance have made the specious plea that it is an un-American interference with liberty. They forgot that compulsory education, though at first opposed on these very grounds, is highly American and highly liberative.

It is by the compelling hand of the law that society secures liberation from the evils of crime, vice, ignorance, accidents, unemployment, invalidity, and disease.

*The influenza pandemic, which first appeared in the United States in the spring of 1918 on military bases among soldiers returning from World War I, soon spread across the country. Eventually it would infect nearly one third of the U.S. population.*

*By the summer of 1919, the spread had significantly declined, but the social and political ramifications remained well into the presidential election of 1920. What follows is from a talk by Professor John R. Commons that was printed in La Follette’s issue for October 1920.*

## ***Give Health Care to the Poor***

The great question in a health program is how to get this cooperation universally. What it amounts to is practically a revised view of the ethics of the medical profession. It seems that, in our great cities at least, those who get the best medical attention are the very rich and the very poor.

The idea of extending free medicine to the other 90 percent of the population seems revolting to many physicians. Why should not something like this arrangement be extended to the entire population of the state and the nation? It does for five thousand of the great middle class by taxation what the very rich and the very poor have been getting in the great cities, substantially free of cost to themselves.

*In November 1920, as the nation was electing Ohio Lieutenant Governor Warren G. Harding to the presidency to “return normalcy” to the country, William C. Sieker, health officer for the town of Shorewood, Wisconsin, wrote in an article for La Follette’s about efforts to contain communicable diseases and the need for quarantine.*

## ***Isolation Is Good Policy***

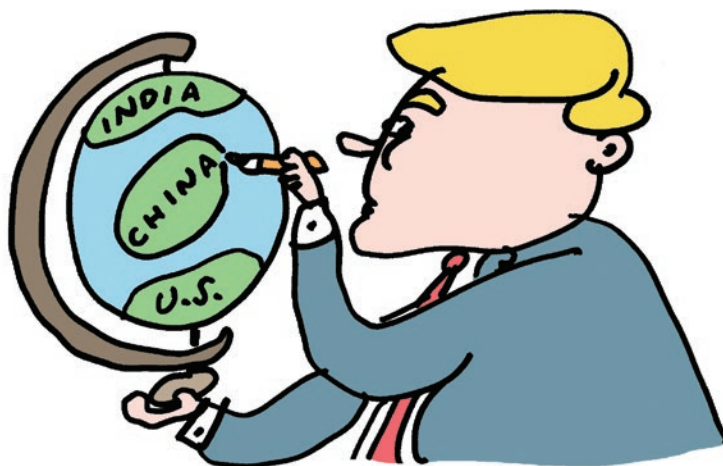
Through occasional conferences, attractively printed bulletins, the columns of the press, and above all, through the schools, the educational process has gone on. The schools, I feel, must be enlisted in this work. Religious observance of the doctrine, “isolation first and diagnosis afterwards,” has borne good results.

When in doubt, the public is given the benefit of the doubt. We would rather quarantine a week too long than a week too little. We cannot afford to have factions in our community. We want all to be active propagandists for good health.

*Many of these lessons of 1918-1919 are being remembered today in the fight against COVID-19; others, like the well-reasoned quest for universal health care, remain unfulfilled.*

## Geography Genius

A Very Stable Genius, a new book about Donald Trump, reveals that he dismissively told Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, “It’s not like you’ve got China on your border.” The two countries have more than 2,000 miles of shared frontier.



## The Inside Poop

Some schools in California began delivering poop buckets to classrooms for use during lockdowns due to active shooters and other emergencies. “There can be no more clear public indicator that we live in a country accepting of gun violence,” muses Ventura County teacher Thomas Smith, “than supplying schools with places for kids to relieve themselves in class.”

## Paging Dr. Hunch

President Donald Trump on the coronavirus, during a Fox News appearance: “I think the 3.4 percent [fatality rate reported by the World Health Organization] is really a false number. Now, this is just my hunch, but based on a lot of conversations with a lot of people that do this, because a lot of people will have this and it is very mild. They will get better very rapidly. They don’t even see a doctor. They don’t even call a doctor, you never hear about those people so you can’t put them down in the category, in overall population in terms of this corona flu, or virus. So you just can’t do that.”

## Unhealth Nut

The Trump Administration, shunting aside healthier eating standards launched by former First Lady Michelle Obama, reduced the amount of fruit and vegetables that public schools must serve and added pizza, burgers, and fries (at the behest of the potato lobby) to the menu.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY STUART GOLDENBERG

## America’s Most Wanted

Rodney Garcia, a Republican state representative in Montana, has declared that socialists are “entering our government,” adding, “actually in the Constitution of the United States, [if people] are found guilty of being a socialist member you either go to prison or are shot.” Asked where in the Constitution this appears, Garcia would not back down, insisting, “They’re enemies of the free state.”

## Grand Theft Inaugural



President Donald Trump’s private business empire pocketed more than \$1 million from Inauguration-related event space rentals at grossly overpriced rates, in some cases for space that was not even used, according to a lawsuit filed by the attorney general of the District of Columbia. The suit accuses Trump affiliates of “blatantly and unlawfully abusing nonprofit funds to enrich the Trump family.”

## American Horror Story

President Donald Trump, in a radio interview, reflecting on Watergate: “Well, it’s a terrible thing and, you know, I think of Nixon more than anybody else and what that dark period was in our country. And the whole thing with the tapes and the horror show. It was dark and it went on for a long time, and I watched it.”

Readers are invited to submit No Comment items. Please send original links or clippings with the name and date of publication to [editorial@progressive.org](mailto:editorial@progressive.org) or 30 West Mifflin Street, Suite 703, Madison, WI 53703. Submissions cannot be acknowledged or returned.



# FOOD WORKERS FACE THE PANDEMIC

The luxury of working remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic does not extend to emergency personnel like nurses, paramedics, and firefighters. But there is another group of workers still on the job that, after the outbreak, some states are designating as essential. With restaurants closed, food workers have now become, quite literally, a lifeline for millions.

Among those putting themselves at risk so others can eat are interstate truck drivers, food bank and food pantry staff, and the grocery store clerks who, despite panic-shopping, make sure our shelves remain stocked.



▲ “It’s killing me, man,” says truck driver Hopeton Francis, sixty-two. He had stopped in Madison, Wisconsin, after two days of driving to do his laundry and, maybe, grab something to eat. At the moment, his only option is a drive-through. Francis is from Jamaica and lives in Miami, Florida, but spends most of his time on the road.

◀ Jane Thurow, twenty-two, a senior at Carthage College in Kenosha, Wisconsin, didn’t want to sit at home feeling guilty about not doing enough. So she volunteered to pack boxes of non-perishable food for families in need at Second Harvest, a food bank in Madison.





Judy Mitchell, fifty-four, works the late shift at a truck stop in DeForest, Wisconsin. “I’d go crazy if I couldn’t work,” Mitchell says, adding that truck drivers depend on the showers she cleans, and the coffee she now must serve from behind the counter.



Jon Clark is a supervisor at the River Food Pantry, in Madison, which recently switched to a curbside pick-up service to slow the spread of the coronavirus. Clark had to improvise to safely and efficiently deliver food to the 191 families who pulled up on the first day after restaurants shut down. The pantry also stocks essential supplies, like diapers, for those in need.



“I kind of feel like a house rat,” says Jose Tercero, a senior at Madison East High School who works at Woodman’s, a local grocery store. Since his school closed, he’s picked up extra hours and appreciates that he can “help people get what they need.” Tercero has a second job at a Wendy’s, which has stayed open as other restaurants shutter.



Jeff Nord, forty-three, is restocking a near-empty cleaning supplies aisle at Woodman’s, where he has worked for twenty-three years. Nord, in all his time at the store, has never seen shelves as empty, or lines as long, as they were in March.



# THE DIRECT CARE WORKER CRISIS



**MIKE ERVIN,**  
a writer and  
disability rights  
activist in Chicago,  
writes the blog  
*Smart Ass Cripple*  
at [smartasscripple](http://smartasscripple.blogspot.com)  
[.blogspot.com](http://smartasscripple.blogspot.com) and  
writes regularly at  
[Progressive.org](http://Progressive.org).

**M**any of the workers I've employed to assist me at home say they are afraid someone is going to ask them what kind of work they do.

When they tell people their job is helping a disabled man get dressed, get in and out of his wheelchair, take a shower, et cetera, they are often told they must be some kind of selfless saints to do that kind of work—even before the advent of COVID-19.

That's funny, because I don't have any selfless saints working for me. I like people who have selves. My best workers are simply people who enjoy helping others and getting paid for it. They do their shifts, even in these trying times, because that's their job.

The canonization of direct care workers is supposed to be high praise, but it's really a reflection of how profoundly their work is misunderstood and devalued. It's a deep disrespect cleverly disguising itself as an equally deep respect. And it begins with the notion that helping disabled people execute our daily bodily, domestic, and community functions is some of the dirtiest of dirty work. It's like ministering to the untouchables—literally.

And that's where the vicious cycle of devaluation begins. Those who provide care for people with disabilities are diminished by association. Because if we're untouchables, then only saints would want to come close to us, right? And being a saint is a dead-end job with no room for advancement. Saints must always be humble and self-sacrificing.

They must live the most austere of lives, like Mother Teresa. That's what makes them saints. A well-paid saint is an oxymoron.

I think that's why their line of work continues to be so poorly compensated, despite it becoming more difficult and more dangerous these days. COVID-19 will only exacerbate the "direct care crisis."



The terms "direct care worker" or "direct support worker" are increasingly being used to describe those who assist disabled people in their communities and homes. Those are kind of dry job classifications, but I like either better than calling them caregivers. I never call my workers caregivers. It sounds too much like a nurse or a babysitter.

But whatever you call them, these are dedicated workers with life-saving jobs, now more than ever.

**A** report called "The Case for Inclusion 2020" was recently put out by United Cerebral

Palsy and the ANCOR Foundation. This periodic report assesses all fifty states and the District of Columbia on how well they are supporting their residents with intellectual and developmental disabilities through programs such as Medicaid.

The new version of this report contains for the first time a section called "Addressing a Workforce in Crisis." It says that in 2017 nationwide, 43.8 percent of direct care workers left their jobs within the previous year.

Nebraska had the highest turnover rate at 68.8 percent, but even where the rate was lowest, in Washington, D.C., it was still 24.4 percent.

And, of course, the fact that these workers are paid an exceedingly crappy wage stokes up the high turnover rate. "The Case for Inclusion 2020" says their median hourly wage nationwide is \$12.09. In Alabama, it's just \$9.40. The District of Columbia is near the top again at \$14.03, but that's still not much, considering how expensive it is to live there.

I'm having a workforce crisis of my own right now. My workers are paid by a Medicaid-funded state program in Illinois. Their hourly wage went up from \$13.48 to \$14 on January 1. When Illinois had a Republican governor from 2014 to 2018, these workers' wages remained stagnant at \$13 an hour. My workers are gig economy workers. They receive no benefits nor any paid sick or vacation days.

When my crew is at full strength, I employ six people.

Since this time last year, I've hired nine people, fired three, and five have moved on. Only two members of my current crew were with me at this time last year. All of them, thankfully, have stayed with me through the coronavirus pandemic so far.

I like to think that my home is a decent workplace. I hope it at least beats working in a corporate soul-crushing environment like a KFC. I also like to think that I'm a fair and easy guy to work for. None of the people who have recently moved on from me said they were doing so because I'm a jerk. One of them signed up for a photography project in the mountains of Bolivia or something like that. But others left to pursue higher-paying jobs. At \$14 an hour with no benefits, it's hard to compete, even with KFC.

But all this stuff that's been happening regarding the coronavirus vividly illustrates how consequential this work is. My workers don't have the luxury of being able to hole up and hide. If they don't show up, well, you can see the impact that has on people like me. And if they spend a week or two at home recovering, that's a week or two without pay.

Last November, the Arc of the United States and the National Domestic Workers Alliance hosted a Congressional briefing entitled "The Hidden Crisis of Care in the U.S.—Addressing the Home Care Workforce Shortage."

Nicole Jorwic, the Arc's senior director of public policy, testified: "Nearly everywhere I go, the number-one issue that I hear about most is the workforce crisis." She added, "The word 'crisis' doesn't really do it justice—having a skilled, properly trained, and fairly paid workforce is the

linchpin for success for so many people with disabilities to live the independent life that they choose."

But because of low pay and lack of benefits, good workers are extremely hard to find and retain, Jorwic said. She offered up as an example her brother, Chris, who has autism.

Chris lives in the suburbs of Chicago and has a crew of three or four workers who help him go out in the community, Jorwic explained. Those workers earn an average of \$10 an hour. Recently, she said, the worker who spent the most time with Chris reluctantly quit so she could take a job with higher pay. More than two months later, that worker still had not been replaced.

The "most direct way to make a significant impact on the workforce crisis," Jorwic said, would be for the state and federal governments to invest more money in funding home and community support programs so pay can be brought up to and sustained at competitive levels.

In March, two U.S. Senators—Maggie Hassan, Democrat of New Hampshire, and Susan Collins, Republican of Maine—introduced legislation called the Recognizing the Role of Direct Support Professionals Act. The bill directs the Office of Management and Budget to revise the Standard Occupational Classification system to include a new category for direct support workers. The goal is to provide more precise data to determine how to best deploy resources by tracking where shortages of these workers are most severe.

I suppose this approach is all well and good and full of the best intentions, but it doesn't get me too excited. Even if the government collects reams and reams

of the most precise data, a few years up the road it will reveal what we've already known for a long time—workers who help people like me stay active, productive, and in good mental and physical health are dismissed and disregarded and deserve a much better shake.

"The lack of investment from the top creates the crisis," Jorwic

**Workers who help people like me stay active, productive, and in good mental and physical health are dismissed and disregarded and deserve a much better shake.**

said in her testimony. "There has been a lack of federal investment for decades and states have not picked up the slack."

And as long as what direct care workers do is still regarded as the toil of saints, I'll know we're not getting very far. This provides a comfortable rationale for their continued devaluation, which allows those at the top who can change things to conveniently avoid facing the hard fact that the real answer is money. There's no way around it, especially now.

We have to invest heavily and enthusiastically in these workers. But that won't happen until the lives of those of us on the receiving end of what they do, like me, are also genuinely valued. Helping us isn't relentless drudgery. It's a vital service. What they do for us is important to everyone because what we do is also important. And we can't do it without them.

These workers won't be paid or treated appropriately until what they contribute is truly respected. So don't canonize my workers. That doesn't buy them any groceries. Show them the money. ♦



# WHAT HAPPENED TO THE REVOLUTION?



**RUTH CONNIFF**

is editor-at-large for *The Progressive* and editor-in-chief of the new state news website the *Wisconsin Examiner*.

A few short months ago, neither the coronavirus pandemic nor Joe Biden's coronation were visible on the horizon.

We're living in a different world now.

As we shelter in place, with our schools, workplaces, restaurants, and playgrounds shut down, watching Donald Trump fumble his way through news conferences—giving himself a “10” for his dangerously inept handling of a global disaster he once called a hoax and now calls the “Chinese virus”—it looks as though the guy who seemed least on his toes in the Democratic primary debates will be representing the majority of Americans who want to defeat Trump in November.

The two events are not directly related. Biden won a majority of Democratic delegates not be-

cause he seems like the safest bet in a crisis (although some voters think he is). He won because the establishment finally and fully threw its weight behind him, after months of considering every other alternative, from an inexperienced small-town mayor to an arrogant former Republican billionaire who dropped in late and spent half a billion dollars, proposing to save our democracy by buying the election.

When none of the other options worked out, the moderate bloc closed ranks behind Biden, and “Joementum” became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

What happened to the most

diverse presidential primary field in U.S. history? What happened to Elizabeth Warren and the powerful group of women who cleaned Biden's clock in the debates? What happened to the revolution?

Bernie Sanders was right. In his debate with Biden on March 15, held in a sealed CNN studio without a live audience to avoid contagion, Sanders said that the current pandemic exposes the great vulnerability of our unequal, increasingly unjust society.

As Sanders pointed out, the United States spends twice as much per capita on health care as other developed countries, but our patchwork of private insurance providers that exclude millions of people leaves us woefully unprepared to launch an effective, coordinated response to this public health crisis.

Add to that the desperate situation of workers already living paycheck to paycheck, and the need to raise the minimum wage, tax the rich, provide universal health care, and restore the social safety net becomes undeniable.

The coronavirus pandemic exposes the huge cracks in our society that Sanders has been pointing out all along.

Biden's response in the debate was to say that the nation is in the throes of “a national crisis” that “has nothing to do with Bernie's Medicare for All.”

Biden has made his case for the Democratic nomination by painting the Sanders revolution as unrealistic. Getting to Medicare for All, he argues, would take years, and people need action now.

Biden projects a knowing confidence in his own familiarity with the system. He can make deals and get things done. He is not alarmed or angry. And that is a big part of his appeal to moderate voters and the establishment. Sure, he has taken money from big donors. But so has nearly everyone in politics. Many Democrats are OK with that.

Young people, on the other hand, can't stand it. The Bernie revolutionaries under thirty I know are appalled by Biden, who strikes them as the ultimate phony.

All the jokes about his senior moments, his out-of-touch comments about “record players,” and, worse, his use of the word “aliens” in that last debate to describe undocumented immigrants, are just depressing now. The Trump campaign is already gleefully grabbing onto this material.

In the March 15 debate, Sanders hectored Biden about his past positions—supporting the bank bailout; making floor speeches in favor of the budget-balancing Bowles-Simpson Act, which included cuts to Social Security and Medicare; taking contributions from the pharmaceutical industry; voting for the Iraq War, the Defense of Marriage Act, and, repeatedly, the Hyde Amendment that bars the use of federal funds for abortion.

Biden copped to his votes on the war and the Defense of Marriage Act, and explained away the Hyde Amendment, which was rolled into other legislation. But he pretended he had never supported austerity and bank deregulation. He seemed incredulous that Sanders even brought it up. After all, he's winning. It's time to pretend he's a progressive champion, and it's Sanders's job to help him with that, not dig into his past.

**The coronavirus pandemic exposes the huge cracks in our society that Sanders has been pointing out all along.**

Sanders had plenty of material. Biden, as a Senator from Delaware, spent years developing a cozy relationship with the banking industry headquartered there. He has a long record of less-than-perfect populism.

“That’s what leadership is about,” Sanders instructed Biden after one particularly bruising exchange on Biden’s record, in contrast to his own. “It’s having the guts to take an unpopular vote.”

Moderate voters don’t necessarily want a President who takes unpopular positions. They want someone who can reassure Wall Street and stop this nightmare we are all living through.

Biden has adopted Senator Elizabeth Warren’s bankruptcy bill and part of Sanders’s free-college plan that would cover tuition at public universities for families that earn less than \$125,000 per year. But the bankruptcy bill Warren seeks to undo is one Biden helped to write, Sanders pointed out. (“I did not!” Biden huffed.)

Biden wasn’t prepared to relitigate his whole, long record. He expected to be allowed to morph into the candidate voters want him to be. That’s the realistic approach to politics.

**T**he longer the coronavirus emergency goes on, however, the clearer it is that a New Deal style rethinking of our whole society is in order.

Even Mitch McConnell told his Republican colleagues to hold their noses and vote for a House bill that gives workers affected by the coronavirus temporary paid sick leave, boosts unemployment benefits, strengthens government food aid, and helps states meet expenses for Medicaid.

Senator Ron Johnson, Republican of Wisconsin, derided the

bill for “incentivizing people to not show up for work.” Johnson, who has suggested that the government might be overreacting to the pandemic, since it may kill “no more than 3.4 percent of our population,” spoke for a minority of Republicans in Congress and business interests against helping the working poor. He lost that fight.

Biden is seeking the middle ground, even as the Earth heaves and cracks beneath him. He pitches himself as the candidate of a “return to normalcy,” after the dystopian presidency of Donald Trump. But more and more Americans are coming to grips with the fact that we may never see normal again.

Sanders, in that last debate, made the connection between the need for a robust government response to the emergency of the coronavirus pandemic and the way we address the emergency of climate change. Biden’s climate plans are “nowhere near enough,” Sanders said, painting a picture of massive flooding, drought, food insecurity, and populations displaced by global warming.

“This is not a middle-of-the-ground thing,” he added. “It is insane that we continue to have fracking . . . and to give tens of billions of dollars a year in tax breaks and subsidies to the fossil fuel industry.”

While Biden describes coronavirus as an emergency requiring a response akin to war, Sanders said, “I look at climate change in the exact same way.”

Sanders wants to spend billions more than Biden on a transition to renewable energy—a massive \$13 to \$14 trillion investment that others have dismissed as unrealistic.

But continuing as we are is also unrealistic.

“It is time to ask how we get to where we are,” Sanders said in his closing statement. It is time “to re-think America,” to try to make it “a country where we care about each other,” not “a nation of greed and corruption.”

The Democrats are not going to have a brokered convention. But Bernie Sanders and his base still have a lot of power. Before 2016, many of Sanders’s ideas were dismissed as fringe notions, including the \$15 an hour minimum wage,

**Biden pitches himself as the candidate of a “return to normalcy.” But Americans are coming to grips with the fact that we may never see normal again.**

student loan forgiveness, and Medicare for All.

Now, not only have they moved to the mainstream of the Democratic Party, but the whole world is waking up to the need for a more unified, community-minded approach to public health and our general welfare.

Every four years, we see the battle within the Democratic Party—the rise of candidates like Bernie Sanders or Ralph Nader or Elizabeth Warren who show us a vision of what America could be, and then the inevitable collapse into the candidate who is more palatable to the guardians of the status quo.

But the revolution in our politics is about more than winning a single election. We have to keep building power at every level, pushing the idea of a saner, more humane nation. More people are listening to progressive ideas, as the inequities of our current system become increasingly indefensible.

We need the Sanders revolution more than ever. ♦



# EMBARRASSMENT OF RICHES

Some facts regarding wealth and poverty in the United States:

The nation's **three** wealthiest individuals have more money than the **160 million** people who make up the bottom 50 percent of the population combined.



**Bill Gates, Jeff Bezos, and Warren Buffett are collectively worth a total of more than \$250 billion.**



The top **1 percent** of the population has more wealth than the bottom **90 percent**.

In 2018, for the first time in U.S. history, billionaires paid a lower tax rate than the bottom **50 percent**.



The nation's **400** richest families paid an average effective tax rate of **23 percent** ...



... compared to **24.2 percent** for families in the bottom half.

The median black family owns **\$3,600** in household wealth—about one-fortieth as much as the median white family. The median Latinx family has assets worth **\$6,600**—4.5 percent of the white median of **\$147,000**.



A poll from January 2019 found that most Americans support a top marginal tax rate of **70 percent**, the same rate that was in place from the 1950s through 1980.

More than **17 million** Americans live in deep poverty, with incomes below 50 percent of the poverty threshold.



About **15 million** U.S. children—21 percent of the total—live in families with incomes below the federal poverty threshold, a measurement known to greatly underestimate the ability of families to meet basic needs.



**Forty percent** of Americans say they would not be able to handle an unexpected expense of \$400 or more.

**More than half** of all low-income children in the United States have a parent who works full time, year-round.



A survey of low-income women showed that almost **two-thirds** couldn't afford menstrual hygiene products in the past year. More than one in five said this was an issue every month.



About **11 percent** of U.S. households were food insecure in 2018, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. More than **11 million** children live in food-insecure homes.





# Our Endless War on the Poor

American society persistently refuses to address the root cause of poverty.

BY FRANCES FOX PIVEN



**From the earliest initiatives to relieve the condition of the poor in the late middle ages, the design of these programs has been dominated by the fear that even meager resources for subsistence would weaken the motivation of poor people to work. Hence the belief among ruling groups that such poor relief must always be stingy and distributed on punitive terms.**

These principles were cruel, but given the harsh conditions of the laboring poor at the time, they were not irrational.

Contemporary conditions, particularly in rich countries like the United States, are entirely different. Not only are the mass of working people much better off, but extracting more labor effort for economic growth worsens the problem of climate change. For the first time in living memory, reformers are talking about “degrowth” as a remedy for the dangers to the planet posed by constant growth.

In the current coronavirus crisis, the role of the poor and especially low-income workers has been magnified. They are the ones doing the difficult and now-dangerous work of tending to people in nursing homes and old-age facilities, keeping drug and grocery stores open, and caring for the ill.

It is past time to rethink our endless war on the poor.

**The United States** is by some measures the richest and most powerful nation in the world. It also boasts, if that is the right word, the second-highest poverty rate among developed countries, according to a 2017 ranking. (Israel has the highest rate at 17.9 percent. The United States is a smidgeon lower, at 17.8 percent, or about forty million people.) Our child poverty rate, as of 2017, is also among the highest in the world.

Since the eruption of the Occupy protests in 2011, the fact of widening inequality in the United States has become common knowledge and a part of our political discourse. The extent of poverty in the United States is less well-known, even though poverty is one likely result of the policies that produce inequality.

The fortunes reaped from steadily rising housing or health care prices are reflected in the high costs that working and poor families pay for them. Child care costs are another out-of-reach essential, particularly as access to government benefits is increasingly conditional on working for wages.

Meanwhile, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, most workers have seen their wages stagnate or even fall as their fringe benefits or overtime were whittled away. Federal budgets under the Trump Administration have regularly delivered large tax cuts to the affluent while slashing programs that provide services or income support for the poor.

To give just one example, some 700,000 people may lose food stamps under a new Trump regulation, and half a million children will lose free school meals. Meanwhile, the federal minimum wage remains stuck at the level set in 2009: \$7.25 an hour.

None of this is in the least surprising. American policies to support the poor have usually provided meager assistance, and that assistance has usually been conditioned on submission to rituals of degradation, much as was also once true in the European countries on which our policies were modeled.

In fact, the English Poor Law Commission of 1848 articulated the principle that best explains these features of our poverty policies, the principle of “less eligibility,” meaning that no one who survives on the dole should be as well-off as even the lowest paid laborer. This principle can be regarded as a moral injunction, but it has the very practical effect of ensuring that relief for the poor will not have the effect of raising the wage floor.

Over time, and especially in the era of prosperity after World War II, European policies to relieve poverty improved greatly. But despite bursts of short-lived reform in the 1930s and 1960s, American policies to reduce poverty have remained harsh.

Some of the reasons are obvious. American poverty policy was and is shaped within a political culture that denigrates the poor, just as it applauds—indeed, seems to worship—the affluent. In the American mind, to be poor is not simply to have little in the way of money or material goods. Rather, poverty is tightly linked to a wide assortment of personal failures, from sloth to addiction.

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*Frances Fox Piven is the author or co-author of many books, including *Regulating the Poor*, *Poor People's Movements*, and *Why Americans Still Don't Vote*.*

People are believed to be poor because of their personal failings. However, research shows that the opposite is true: When household income increases, other problems like poor school performance or drug use tend to diminish.

The direction of causality is crucial here. When poverty is ascribed to dysfunctional behaviors, the recommended interventions will tend toward efforts to discipline the poor. But if the behaviors considered dysfunctional are in fact the result rather than the cause of poverty, there is a strong argument for more generous support.

And since dealing with poverty by distributing cash is infinitely simpler than dealing with, say, addiction, this should gladden our hearts.

But this is not what's happening. Why not?

**The argument that** poverty can be solved by making people less poor by committing to providing all Americans with a universal basic income—as former presidential candidate Andrew Yang urged during the presidential campaign and politicians are providing in response to the COVID-19 pandemic—runs smack dab into the argument that the poor are in danger of succumbing to a malady called dependency.

This, we are told, is what happens when people do not support themselves through wage work. The disease metaphor is enhanced by vivid portraits of lazy welfare moms with piles of unneeded groceries. Think of Ronald Reagan's attack on the “welfare queen.”

Animus toward the poor is a longstanding element of American political culture. But it can intensify when politicians try to gain attention and support by decrying the indiscipline of the poor and the foolish generosity of our public policies.

This has happened often since the 1980s, which saw the election of Ronald Reagan along with an energetic mobilization of business and political interests to reshape public policy. The anti-poor campaign was outlined in a memo written by a corporate lawyer named Lewis Powell, and sent to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce in 1971. (Powell was nominated to the Supreme Court shortly thereafter.)

“Business must learn the lesson,” Powell wrote,

“that political power is necessary; that such power must be assiduously cultivated; and that, when necessary, it must be used aggressively and with determination—without embarrassment and without the reluctance which has been so characteristic of American business.”

The memo has become famous because it outlined what big business actually went on to do, as it took growing command of public policy in subsequent years. Employer resistance to unions intensified,



business spending on lobbying soared, and corporate offices moved to Washington, D.C.

What unfolded was a historic conflict between capital and labor, and what was at stake was the range of policies to curb predatory capitalism that had been initiated in the twentieth century, particularly in the 1930s and 1960s. Many of the initiatives to roll back programs that protected workers singled out the poor—the immigrant poor, for example, or the disabled poor, or simply the welfare poor—for special scrutiny and penalties.

The poor are not simply victims. They are also political actors, and sometimes very effective. Poor relief programs in late medieval Europe arose in part from the tumult caused by the desperate poor during periods of bad harvest, for example.

Similarly, cyclical depressions in the United States in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries caused unemployment to rise to catastrophic levels, and when it did the poor, especially the urban poor, came to-

**American policies to support the poor have usually provided meager assistance, and that assistance has usually been conditioned on submission to rituals of degradation.**



gether in mass rallies, marches, and mobs to demand assistance.

The Great Depression that began in 1929 was the most severe of these cyclical downturns, because it occurred when most Americans had left the farms for the city and industrial work, and when little existed in the way of an institutionalized relief system. Almost all contemporary American poverty policies were initiated in response to the disturbances caused by the protesting poor in the 1930s, a pattern that was repeated in the 1960s.



**The poor are not simply victims. They are also political actors, and sometimes very effective.**

**In June 1929**, the index of industrial production reached its highest point ever, and a future of economic growth and prosperity seemed assured. Then came the panic of Black Thursday, when the stock market plummeted.

Almost immediately, unemployment began to rise, by one government estimate to 2.5 million persons within two weeks of the crash, then to four million by January of 1930. By 1933, a third of the workforce, or fifteen mil-

lion people, were unemployed.

As unemployment grew, so did the protests, taking the classical forms of food riots and rent riots. Militant organizations like the Unemployed Councils formed by the Communist Party USA joined the fray, occupying local relief centers, organizing demonstrations, and lobbying for more generous government assistance.

Local fiscal resources to deal with the demands of the unemployed were quickly exhausted. The national government elected in 1932 responded, at first with emergency relief programs and thereafter with assistance programs created by the Social Security Act of 1935.

Something like this happened again in the 1960s, in the aftermath of the great migration of black people from the rural South to the cities of the South and North. This time there was an institutional vehicle to provide assistance, the Aid to Families with Depen-

dent Children (AFDC) program created under the Social Security Act.

But the program was deeply flawed. It required states and sometimes localities to foot a big part of the costs of welfare, and it gave enormous discretion to state and local politicians and bureaucrats to refuse assistance to those who applied, or to eject people deemed unworthy from the rolls. And since the impoverished newcomers to the cities were often black, and increasingly Latinx as well, there were political advantages to state and local politicians tied to white constituencies in refusing assistance.

So once again, cash assistance failed to reach many of the poor.

The larger racial politics of the era overwhelmed this restrictive assistance policy. By the early 1960s, racial minorities, largely newcomers to the big cities of the North, had grown in numbers and become a voter bloc that mattered in elections, including presidential elections. At the same time, the black freedom movement had also traveled to the northern cities where the black population was concentrating.

The shift from the Jim Crow South to the North also transformed the movement, as protests focused more on the harsh economic conditions that confronted black people in the northern cities, where lunch counters and buses were racially integrated. The response of the national government was to launch a series of programs which together came to be called the Great Society, and the centerpiece of the Great Society was the poverty program.

For a relatively brief time, these developments taken together transformed our national poverty policies. Black people in northern cities had electoral leverage with Democratic Presidents or presidential aspirants. At the same time, the combination of intensifying grievances and rising hope contributed to the anger and volatility of the black urban population.

Local groups sprang up in black (and brown) neighborhoods all over the country to take up manifold grievances of the poor, having to do with housing, welfare, employment, policing, education, health care, and so on. With the threat and sometimes reality of urban uprisings and property destruction in the background, these groups became politically potent.

They also had some resources. The poverty program opened storefronts staffed by residents or by VISTA employees, and the storefronts became centers of local activism, meetings, rallies, and protests. For a time during the 1960s and early 1970s, many cities were rocked by turmoil. And some of that turmoil was about poverty and the failure of income support policies, mainly AFDC, to assist the poor.

Angry local groups occupied welfare centers to air myriad grievances, while crowds sometimes gathered on the surrounding streets to reinforce the point. Unsurprisingly, welfare policy became much more generous under these conditions. Many more people were admitted to the rolls, and welfare benefits rose. Excited talk of a “welfare crisis” notwithstanding, this was an accomplishment in the straightforward sense that poverty levels in the U.S. fell substantially.

As the black freedom movement including its welfare rights component subsided, poverty policies became harsher. The rhetoric of elites became less inclusive and more degrading, the better to justify the growing meanness of our poverty policy. Welfare benefit levels fell, and new restrictions on access were put in place.

And then, in 1996, Bill Clinton, a Democratic President, made good on his promise to “end welfare as we know it” by pushing through the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act that led to the slashing of the welfare rolls, and the reiteration of our national drama of humiliating the poor.

This impulse to cruelty toward the poor has gotten a new life under President Donald Trump. First were the travesties at the U.S.-Mexico border, where children were ripped away from their parents and then heedlessly unaccounted for, placed in cages, and left in the freezing cold. Then there were the huge cuts proposed to Medicare and Medicaid, despite Trump’s repeated promises at his rallies to protect those programs.

The Trump Administration also unveiled a “public charge” policy that blocks entry to immigrants who are deemed likely to need some kind of government assistance. And it adopted changes in the rules governing access to disability benefits that make it much harder to gain access to benefits and harder also to retain them.

Trump’s efforts to divide Americans against each other have paralleled with his attacks on the poor.

**But maybe,** just maybe, we are on the cusp of a new era. Maybe there is the possibility of breaking away from the cycle

of harshness and turmoil that has characterized poverty policy until now. The COVID-19 pandemic may make it possible to break with our traditions and value and reward low-wage workers, and indeed to rethink the role of work, given the reality of climate change.

Some years ago, Naomi Klein wrote a book titled *This Changes Everything*. She was right. The prospect of a warming and drowning planet raises large questions about bedrock elements of our communal life.

One such element is our axiomatic conviction that continuing economic growth is essential to our well-being. If economic growth is so important, we must make sure all able-bodied adults are in the labor market, working. But if this mandate ever made sense, does it still? Economic growth, after all, fuels climate change.

Also axiomatic to our communal life, and a twin to our belief in economic growth, is our obsession with accumulating possessions—the things that mindless economic growth produces. We Americans have become cargo cultists, and our compulsive purchases sustain the vast webs of warehouses and storage facilities that surround our cities. Even worse, the rest of the world is following in our footsteps.

And to complete the trap created by an insistence on economic growth and an obsession with consumer goods, there is our almost religious insistence on the imperative of wage work. Everyone must have a job, and the more hours spent working, the better. Just as economic growth produces the stuff that is sopped up by mindless consumer demand, it also produces the demand for workers whose labor is rewarded by wages that can be used to buy the stuff that ends up in a storage space somewhere.

Each of these beliefs supports the others. And each has become unmoored by the imminent prospect of climate change. But to act effectively on this new understanding of our condition, we need to change not only our policy agenda, but our culture, including our very fundamental beliefs about economic well-being. ♦

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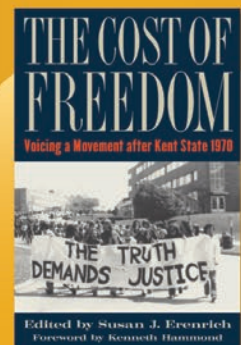
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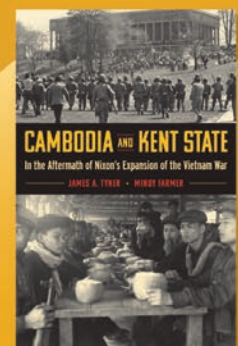
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# Turning Shame to Blame

*Advancing the fortunes of the poor starts with a change in perspective.*

BY WILSON SHERWIN

**The last time the United States grappled with the cruelty of “poverty in the midst of plenty”—a term coined by President John F. Kennedy in a letter to Vice President Lyndon Johnson—was more than fifty years ago. The similarities between that era and today are notable.**

Then, as now, the government has seemingly limitless funds for wars abroad while implementing austerity for domestic needs. Working people face the threat of widespread job losses due to automation and the economic impact of the coronavirus. They are on the front lines of fighting the COVID-19 outbreak, doing essential jobs in a dangerous time.

The pandemic has added urgency to calls for solving poverty with a guaranteed or universal basic income. And these issues are being brought to the national consciousness largely by grassroots collectives of poor people demanding respect and economic security.

The Poor People’s Campaign, which frames its political project as “A National Call for Moral Revival,” is a unique and much-welcomed presence on the U.S. political scene, in part because for the past fifty years poverty was rarely seen as an issue of any political import.

Those who haven’t managed to climb the illusive ladder of success—the 59 percent of Americans who live paycheck to paycheck, the 14.3 million households who were food insecure at some point in 2018, or the 40 percent of Americans who would not be able to cover an unforeseen financial crisis of \$400 or more—often come to believe these situations are their own doing. If only they had made better decisions, worked harder, held off on having kids a little longer, and so on, they wouldn’t be in this position.

Overcoming shame and isolation, and replacing self-blame with feelings of outrage and belief in an alternative future, have been crucial to successful mobilizations of poor people throughout history. Turning the sense of individual misfortune and shame into collective fury and mobilization helped make possible the groundbreaking (if insufficient) social and economic protections of the New Deal.

A similar shift in blame—from the individual to structural causes—helped embolden the mobilizations of poor people in the late 1960s, the last time politicians spoke seriously about eradicating poverty in the United States.

The Poor People’s Campaign—which shares its name with the major campaign launched by the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.—emerged on the national scene in 2018. One of the modern campaign’s key goals is to challenge the belief that poverty results from individual missteps, insisting instead on a collective responsibility.

Led by the Reverends Dr. William J. Barber II and Dr. Liz Theoharis, the Poor People’s Campaign draws explicitly on numerous political projects of the 1960s, including the civil rights movement and the welfare rights movement. One of the current campaign’s prominent slogans, “Everybody Has the Right to Live,” was popularized by the welfare rights movement in the 1960s as it attempted, along with sympathetic lawyers at Columbia University’s Center on Social Welfare Policy and Law, to establish a Constitutional “right to live.”

To these militant anti-poverty activists, this was not just an abstract idea, but a concrete demand. They believed that if people did not have enough money to live decent lives, they would be unable to exercise their Constitutional rights. They sought to establish this right by securing a guaranteed annual income, similar to today’s calls for a universal basic income.

One significant feature of the Poor People’s Campaign, which sets it apart from past attempts at addressing poverty, is the central role given to environmental concerns. Besides fighting against “systemic racism, poverty, the war economy” as King and welfare activists did, the campaign has added addressing “ecological devastation” to its list of priorities.

Indeed, the current COVID-19 pandemic and the climate crisis lend urgency to all major social and economic issues. If we are to be hopeful for a moment, this urgency may buttress the argument made by the welfare rights movement fifty years ago: Increased economic growth and trickle down economics will not solve poverty. But the militant mobilization of pissed-off poor people might. ♦

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*Wilson Sherwin is an author, activist, and scholar based in Mexico City. She recently received her Ph.D. in sociology from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.*

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# Cutting the Poor a Break

*San Francisco pioneers a program to reduce the fees and fines that keep people from succeeding.*

BY REBECCA NATHANSON

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During the year she spent in the Orange County jail in Southern California, Amika Mota wrote letters to her oldest kids, aged fourteen and eleven. That wasn't an option for her six-year-old—she needed to hear her mother's voice.

So once a month, the former midwife called her children, who were then living in the Bay Area with Mota's father.

She had fifteen minutes for these calls; the kids would set a timer to make sure they each got five. It was 2008 and, despite having been in and out of the criminal justice system, Mota had never before been away from her children for such a long time. But each fifteen-minute phone call cost at least \$15, so once a month was all Mota and her family could afford.

After county jail, Mota served a seven-year prison sentence for vehicular manslaughter, for killing a man after running a red light while high on meth. When she got out, she owed \$12,000 in restitution and had been charged about \$4,000 in other costs. Until she paid, she could not return to the Bay Area to reunite with her children.

"One of the requirements for getting an out-of-county transfer was that a certain amount of your fines and fees had to have been paid off already," Mota explains in an interview in the Oakland office of the Young Women's Freedom Center, where she now

serves as policy director. "At that point, I was panicking, thinking I wasn't going to be able to get to my kids."

Mota, however, was lucky. She managed to borrow the money and headed north to her children.

The Young Women's Freedom Center is a leadership and advocacy organization for women, trans, and gender non-conforming people. It works with a population disproportionately affected by the criminal justice system and the financial burden it puts on all who come in contact with it. A 2015 report found that 83 percent of family members responsible for care and visitation costs for an incarcerated person are women.

"Every single one of us is dealing with this stuff," Mota says. "We know what it looks like to be dealing with these systems that continue to trip us up when we're trying to get on our feet."

So a few years ago, when Mota's group was approached by the Financial Justice Project of the San Francisco Treasurer's Office to join its campaign to eliminate fees on phone calls and end markups on commissary items in San Francisco County jails, it



Amika Mota of the Young Women's Freedom Center.



was a no-brainer. “All of us are individually impacted by this,” she says. “We know the story. And then when we hear the movement is happening, it’s like, ‘Yes!’”

It is an issue that gains more urgency in view of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is impacting poor people and communities disproportionately, even as it requires a new level of civic sacrifice and engagement from citizens throughout the land. In this time of global crisis, saddling the poor with onerous debt is the last thing that will help anyone.

IN 2015, when the U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division released its report on Ferguson, Missouri, after the police shooting of Michael Brown, Anne Stuhldreher was working at the California Endowment, an organization focused on improving health.

The report found that fines and fees comprised the city of Ferguson’s second-greatest revenue source. Stuhldreher approached her connections to grassroots organizations in California. “I started asking them: ‘Is this happening in California or San Francisco? Please tell me that it’s not happening.’”

It was. “People would get out [of jail] and get this bill for thousands of dollars, and I just was flabbergasted,” Stuhldreher relates. “I started seeing this pattern all over the state: courts suspending people’s driver’s licenses when they couldn’t pay traffic tickets, money bail, people getting their cars towed and not being able to get them back.”

Stuhldreher, who had previously worked in the governor’s office, approached City Treasurer José Cisneros. The Financial Justice Project—a two-woman operation tucked into a corner in the treasurer’s office—was the fruit of their conversation. Since creating the project in 2016, Stuhldreher and project manager Christa Brown have worked with a web of community organizations and city departments to eliminate or reform many of the charges that, taken together, work to keep low-income communities in debt at every turn.

The project’s accomplishments are manifold: It has eliminated criminal justice administrative fees and canceled \$32.7 million in debt owed by 21,000 people; ended fees on calls from county jails and markups on items in jail stores; cut or eliminated car-towing fees for low-income people; cleared 88,000 holds on driver’s licenses for people who missed traffic court; forgiven overdue library fines and waived \$1.5 million in debt from overdue books; allowed free entry to museums for people with a public benefits card; launched payment plans and community service options for low-income people who receive parking citations; and created a new ability-to-pay process with the city’s



Anne Stuhldreher,  
director of the Financial  
Justice Project.

traffic court to allow low-income people to apply for discounts.

The difference between fees, which aim to recoup costs, and fines, which are punitive monetary sanctions, can get lost when one is handed a bill with multiple line items that total in the thousands. A sample 2017 bill received by someone in the San Francisco Public Defender’s Clean Slate program lists probation costs, a restitution fine, a booking fee, and a court operations assessment, among many other charges. The total comes to \$5,020. The largest item—and a feature on most bills of this type—is \$1,800 for probation.

Stuhldreher’s general operating principle is to eliminate fees and make fines income-based.

“These fees, they weren’t meant to be an additional layer of punishment, but they are,” she explains, speaking in the treasurer’s office at City Hall while, just outside, a newly married couple poses for pictures at the top of a regal staircase. The fines hold people back but most go unpaid: “The collection rate on the largest fee, the probation fee, was just 9 percent.”

Of course, these efforts to cut fees and fines have not come without costs, nor have they always been easy sells to the courts or city departments. “If we’re talking about a reduction of thousands, or likely tens of thousands, or possibly even hundreds of thousands of dollars, which typically would go to cover the costs of running their department and providing valuable services, naturally they’d be crazy not to be concerned about that,” says Cisneros. But the project has worked closely with the mayor’s budget office to make losses more manageable.

The Financial Justice Project has no ability to make changes—it can merely bring the relevant stakeholders together, compile research, and present compelling arguments. “A lot of [the success] is due to just opening up that conversation the right way: not being

Left: Juthaporn Chaloeicheep.  
Right: Willard Birts Jr.



accusatory, not being insulting, not being blaming, but rather saying, ‘We probably have the power to fix this because it’s our organization that is controlling it,’ ” says Cisneros. “And we’ve seen, more often than not, people are interested in doing that.”

JUTHAPORN CHALOEICHEEP has spent a lot of time around San Francisco’s City Hall. Homeless and addicted to drugs for about fifteen years, she slept in the Tenderloin, the downtown neighborhood next to the government building.

Born in Thailand, Chaloeicheep moved to the Bay Area with her family when she was a child; her relatives ran Thai restaurants. She claims San Francisco is the only place where a person could survive without money for as long as she did, thanks to an array of social services and nonprofits. She was even able to drastically reduce the \$20,000 she owed in restitution after a jail stay, and transition into stable housing.

Chaloeicheep now lives in a one-bedroom apartment in the Tenderloin with her four-year-old son and is on track to graduate from San Francisco State University with a degree in liberal studies this spring. These days, her time around City Hall has a different feel.

“I’m speaking on behalf of the other homeless people and drug addicts,” she says, during an interview at an outdoor cafe near City Hall. “It feels good to be able to be part of something bigger than yourself.”

It has also proven effective: Providing space for people directly impacted by fines and fees to share their stories with officials who have decision-making



power has been one of the Financial Justice Project’s best tactics in convincing others to adopt its suggestions.

The building where Chaloeicheep lives is run by Community Housing Partnership, a San Francisco-based group that houses formerly homeless people and provides supportive services. The Financial Justice Project contacted the group early on, looking for impacted people. The partnership became a member of a coalition called Debt Free SF, which began working with Stuhldreher at the outset of the project.

“It can get very wonky on the legislative end, but someone tells their story and officials who are drowning in paperwork can better understand the magnitude of the issue,” says Javier Bremond, an organizer with Community Housing Partnership.

The effort to reduce fines and fees on the poor has drawn vital energy from community organizations and activists throughout the state, especially in Los Angeles, where officials discharged nearly \$90 million in juvenile justice system fees. The results have been tangible, particularly for people leaving jail or prison.

Willard Birts Jr., sixty-two, is an organizer with All of Us or None, a grassroots organizing project that does legal and policy advocacy and is part of the Debt Free SF coalition. Birts, following a complicated legal battle and a long history of incarceration, had to pay \$25 a day for a court-ordered ankle GPS device; after a year, it totaled more than \$10,000, which on top of multiple bail payments brought his bill closer to \$20,000, which he ended up having to pay in full.



"It's all a game to keep you in debt," he says, sitting under a large black banner in the organization's Oakland office. "So I commend San Francisco."

WORD OF SAN FRANCISCO'S reforms has spread throughout California, inspiring a state bill to eliminate criminal justice fees and the creation of a national Fines and Fees Justice Center and a National League of Cities program focused on this issue. There are campaigns to adopt similar measures in numerous other cities and states: Chicago ended driver's license suspensions for unpaid parking tickets; New York City eliminated fees on jail phone calls; and in the juvenile justice system, New Jersey stopped using fines as penalties and Nevada ended the use of fees. The Fines and Fees Justice Center is currently working to end driver's license suspensions and eliminate court fees in Florida and New York State.

Stuhldreher considers the Financial Justice Project to be a replicable template, noting the frequent calls she receives from other curious cities. "There is a methodology to this that I think starts with listening to community groups and people who see this problem up close," she says. That prompts some key questions: "What is the purpose of this fine or fee? Who is getting it? What happens when they can't pay?"

From there, Stuhldreher usually applies her standard prescription: eliminate fees that predominantly hit low-income people and scale fines proportionally to income. "We also think hard about non-monetary alternatives," she adds.

Research shows that courts often misuse ability-to-pay processes, when they exist at all, and still charge people with fines and fees they clearly cannot pay. Some argue that fines can be an alternative to incarceration; others say unrealistically high fines remain too punitive and that abolition is the only way forward.

A 2017 report from the Policy Advocacy Clinic at the University of California, Berkeley, School of Law looked at the impact of fees on the juvenile justice system. Students interviewed financial evaluation officers in Alameda County, which includes Berkeley and Oakland, and asked the officers how they make determinations about what a family can afford. One officer based her decision on whether she thought the child's mother was lying. The student followed up: How can you tell? The officer said she could tell by "mom's handbag."

"So that was what due process looked like and ability to pay looked like in Alameda County, one of the bluest counties in one of the bluest states in the country," says Jeffrey Selbin, director of the Policy Advocacy Clinic and clinical professor of law at UC Berkeley.

A September 2019 report from the Criminal Justice Policy Program at Harvard Law School suggests an alternative found in some European countries: day fines. Under this system, courts and legislatures assign a certain number of "units" to every offense, corresponding to its severity. The individual is then assessed a cost per unit based on ability to pay. This process is applied to everyone, which explains how a Finnish businessman ended up getting a \$58,000 bill for a speeding ticket in 2015.

In the United States, however, the context is more complicated.

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"Fines are never going to be an appropriate solution for somebody who's homeless and has no money."

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"As opposed to Europe, we have tremendous income inequality in this country, and we have people who really can't afford to pay anything," notes Joanna Weiss, co-founder and co-director of the Fines and Fees Justice Center. "So there also have to be alternative ways that we hold people accountable and deter behaviors we as a society don't want when fines aren't appropriate. Fines are never going to be an appropriate solution for somebody who's homeless and has no money."

But while the minutiae of fines and fees may bring out varied opinions, the new approach has generated a surprising level of popular and public support. Most of the opposition met by the Financial Justice Project has stemmed from budgetary concerns, not political disagreements.

There was, of course, some of the latter—most frequently in regard to public safety and accountability—but support for reform has also come from surprising corners, including a supportive resolution from the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) and an article by the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a conservative think tank.

"Everybody's concerned about safety," says Mota at the Young Women's Freedom Center office. She wishes people thought through how criminal justice charges impact communities in this regard.

"There's this saying: 'We're all coming home. We'll be your neighbors one day. We will be living next to you, working next to you,'" she says. "And I think it's a public safety benefit to have people really have some economic opportunity when they come home and not carry this incredible burden." ♦



# Taking Choice to the Next Level

*Reproductive justice means helping poor families who want to have kids.*

BY AMY LITTLEFIELD

C. Melodi Stone-Spies, a doula and reproductive justice activist.

Last September, several months after Alabama lawmakers attempted to ban almost all abortions in the state, C. Melodi Stone-Spies received an urgent plea for help. A friend who is a doula was at a Birmingham hospital supporting a black mother through her birth. The patient had mentioned while a nurse was in the room that she didn't have hot water at home. Then the hospital called in the state child welfare agency, and it seemed like the woman's newborn might be taken away.

For Stone-Spies, a doula and reproductive justice activist, it was a familiar pattern. The state, which despite its efforts to eliminate abortion, provides little support for parents in poverty, and will often take custody of children because of the consequences of that poverty. This is especially true for black women; the percentage of black children in Alabama's foster care system exceeds the percentage of the state's child population that is black.

So Stone-Spies, who uses the pronoun they, moved fast. They called Home Depot to ask how much a hot water heater cost. After some quick math to factor in installation and other costs, Stone-Spies headed to the bank, withdrew a stack of bills that had been raised by the reproductive justice group the Yellowhammer Fund, and headed to the hospital.

"I walked into that room and I was like, 'Ma'am, if you had a case for neglect before . . . you don't have one now, because I have \$6,000 in my hand to fix this person's hot water heater,'" Stone-Spies says. The social worker left and the case was dropped.

Stone-Spies is part of a network of grassroots activists committed to reproductive justice, a term coined by black women in 1994. It supports the human right to have and raise children as well as the right to

abortion. It helps people in states hit with wave after wave of laws restricting access by extending support to those who choose to raise children—or who are forced to do so because of these anti-abortion laws.

"The same person can have an abortion and have a miscarriage and then give birth the next year," Stone-Spies notes. By supporting families across a full spectrum of pregnancy experiences, Stone-Spies and others have drawn attention to gaping holes in the social safety net, and a glaring contradiction in the Republican agenda.

States that have passed the most abortion restrictions consistently have among the fewest policies to support families, and among the worst health and well-being outcomes for women and children. The coronavirus has laid bare the deadly implications of this absent safety net.

Alabama, for example, has declined to expand Medicaid, leaving hundreds of thousands of people without health insurance. The state has also not raised the minimum wage beyond the federal floor of \$7.25 an hour. Its monthly cash assistance payments, just \$215 for a single-parent family of three, amount to only over a quarter the cost of fair-market rent in the state.

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Amy Littlefield is a freelance journalist focused on the intersection of religion and health care.



And Alabama is far from alone. Louisiana, where legislators passed a law currently under consideration by the Supreme Court that could leave the state with just one abortion doctor at a single clinic, ranks last in the nation when it comes to the economic well-being of children.

Internationally, the United States is the only wealthy nation that lacks paid family leave and lags far behind on spending for child care. In recent years, the Trump Administration has waged unprecedented assaults on the parenting ability of poorer people—by cutting funding to Planned Parenthood, for example, and seeking to slash safety-net programs like Medicaid and SNAP (food stamps).

All of this has deprived many people facing unintended pregnancies of the ability to make decisions free from the coercive influence of austerity. Indeed, one of the most common reasons for seeking an abortion is a lack of money. In one survey, 73 percent of women said they had an abortion because they “can’t afford a baby now.”

The majority of people who have abortions are already parents. This puts groups that support reproductive rights in a difficult position—trying to support people making decisions about their pregnancies while acknowledging that there are few resources available if they choose to parent.

“There are people who are considering abortion who would actually like to continue their pregnancy and become parents, but they have a very accurate understanding of the lack of support that is available to families,” says Parker Dockray, executive director of All-Options, which runs a pregnancy resource center in Indiana. Her organization provides funding for abortions as well as free diapers and help with Medicaid enrollment. Indiana has not raised its monthly cash assistance payments since the 1980s.

This legislative session, Indiana state lawmakers failed to advance a bill that would have expanded such assistance, even as they proposed another measure to consider abortion murder. “The hypocrisy of the anti-abortion groups is so painful,” Dockray says, “because there are people who would like to not have an abortion, but they’re making a pragmatic decision based on what’s available to them.”

Over the past few decades, low-income families have suffered from two overlapping trends: the erosion of the social safety net and the rising difficulty of accessing an abortion. People who are denied access to abortion suffer a range of negative economic outcomes; one major study found that being forced to carry an unwanted pregnancy to term quadrupled the chances that a new parent and child would live

“There are people who are considering abortion who would actually like to continue their pregnancy and become parents, but they have a very accurate understanding of the lack of support that is available to families.”

below the poverty line. The odds of this happening will likely increase as workers lose wages due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since the 1990s, state legislatures have passed hundreds of anti-abortion laws, many in states that have diverted money from basic assistance programs. In many states, these programs have also become increasingly difficult to access.

In 1997, the year after President Clinton signed legislation converting welfare into state-issued block grants known as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, states nationwide spent 71 percent of such funding on basic assistance for families. By 2018, that number had fallen to 21 percent.

“What we’ve seen over time is that that share has significantly reduced, and mainly because caseloads have declined,” says Ife Floyd, senior policy analyst at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. States have added cumbersome strings to such assistance. Consequently, in sixteen states including Alabama and Indiana, ten or fewer families received cash assistance for every 100 families with children in poverty in the state.

Some states have even used funding intended for low-income families to advance an explicitly anti-abortion agenda. Indiana is among more than half a dozen states that have diverted funds away from basic assistance and into anti-choice crisis pregnancy centers that use misinformation to deter people from seeking abortions. These centers provide baby supplies to parents, but often only if they complete classes or worksheets that have an anti-choice, religious message. Echoing the logic used by Republican lawmakers, these programs compel people to “earn” benefits in order to combat the “entitlement mentality.”

Yet in states with sparse alternatives, some low-income parents must rely on such programs.

Samantha Starks, a twenty-seven-year-old resident of Bloomington, Indiana, who is raising her sister’s child and three of her own with her husband, says she has earned baby supplies by completing lessons at crisis pregnancy centers.

While her family receives some state assistance, including Medicaid, Starks says the requirements for these programs are at times prohibitively cumbersome. Her family’s food stamps were shut off for two months because her husband’s bank sent the state a bank statement in the wrong format, she says. The family survived on meals Starks brought home from her job at a Japanese restaurant.

With three kids currently in diapers, Starks is enrolled in the diapers program offered by the pro-choice group All-Options, where she feels more comfortable than at the crisis pregnancy centers. “All-Options, it

just really stuck out to me because of the name, there were always all the options,” Starks says. “They’re not going to judge you in any way.”

All-Options launched its Indiana center for this very reason—to create a pro-choice counterpoint to the coercive tactics of crisis pregnancy centers. But unlike the anti-abortion centers, it hasn’t received federal or state support, and it can be hard to raise money for child care from donors who are focused on the mounting crisis in abortion access.

“It’s so much easier to raise money for our abortion fund than for our diaper program,” Dockray says.

Foundations that support abortion access may also balk at extending support to parents. As a result, All-Options has had to stop accepting new diaper clients, with about 100 people on the waiting list. The state’s failure to implement policies supportive of families has created too large of a demand. “Nonprofits cannot fill the gap,” Dockray says. “It’s not possible.”

Nationwide, many reproductive justice groups applaud the kind of holistic work All-Options and the Yellowhammer Fund are doing, but say they lack the capacity to do it. Stone-Spies in Alabama, who no longer works with Yellowhammer, sees that as a cop-out.

“When we tell a community, we’re only going to pay for your abortion, but we’re not going to help you stay in your house, that’s just eugenics,” Stone-Spies says. They add that the movement needs to generate grassroots solutions that don’t rely on the state. “We are looking beyond what the state can do, because the state has never offered comfort to black families.”

Even small contributions can make the difference between whether someone remains in their home or keeps custody of a child, Stone-Spies says. Yellowhammer’s work has been bolstered by an influx of millions of dollars in donations last year, after Alabama’s attempt to ban almost all abortions rocketed the issue of access in the state into the national spotlight.

But most abortion funds struggle to provide for patients seeking abortion care in a landscape where more and more people have to travel across state lines to obtain abortions—a dilemma that will likely worsen due to the coronavirus pandemic. The roughly seventy groups that make up the National Network of Abortion Funds can, on average, help only one-fifth

of all callers who need help paying for an abortion.

“I don’t know any abortion fund that ever feels [it’s in] a stable place in terms of funding coming in versus need,” says Caitlin Lejarzar-Gaffin, co-director of Holler Health Justice in West Virginia. The group helps people afford abortions and the related costs of

child care, gas, and lodging in a state with one clinic and one of the highest poverty rates in the nation. They’re proud of having so far been able to help every caller secure funding and get to their appointment.

The vast majority of Holler Health Justice’s clients are rural residents who may travel hours from mountain communities to access abortion. While the group has branched out by supporting harm reduction efforts in a state at the center of the opioid crisis, it would like to do more comprehensive work supporting parents, Lejarzar-Gaffin says.

But not all activists think it should be their job to compensate for the failures of the state. Hunter Starks, a board member of Holler Health Justice who is a single parent, survives on an income of \$12,000 a year, in part because income requirements for Medicaid, food stamps, and day care subsidies are so low that Starks

could lose benefits by earning more.

“Each time I look at getting a new job, I do the math and see if it makes sense, kind of like a cost-benefit analysis, and it really never does,” Starks says. “The need is so great and access is so limited in West Virginia that reproductive justice and reproductive health organizations should be focusing on abortion. I think that’s the job of the state, to provide that safety net.”

Still, other activists say it’s a “false dichotomy” to force groups to choose between supporting abortion or supporting parents. Laurie Bertram Roberts, executive director of Mississippi Reproductive Freedom Fund, said her group accepts that it can’t fund every abortion, especially since Mississippi is one of a majority of states where Medicaid doesn’t cover the procedure. But she still chooses to provide diapers, food, cribs, and other support to parents.

“The bottom line, for me, is I don’t ever want someone to choose to have an abortion they do not want simply because no one was there to support the decision they actually wanted to have,” she says. “Just like I never want someone to have to carry to term because they didn’t have anyone who could help them.” ♦



Samantha Starks and two of her children.



# Shelter from the Storm


Solving the housing crisis in Missoula, Montana.

BY EMILY WITHNALL



**It's Christmas Eve, 2019, and members of the Homeless Outreach Team in Missoula, Montana, pile out of a van near the Reserve Street Bridge. They unload rucksacks filled with sandwiches, hand warmers, and water bottles. Several volunteers tag along—one with blankets and another with gift-wrapped wool socks.**





A homeless tent city along the Clark Fork River under the Reserve Street Bridge in Missoula, Montana.

The outreach team goes down a steep, icy embankment to an island in the Clark Fork River behind the Walmart Supercenter, just upstream from a sewage treatment plant that delivers an intolerable sewage stench in summer months. On the island, homeless individuals camp alone in tents, or in small clusters.

According to the outreach team, there are about 100 unsheltered people in Missoula most winters. The reasons people don't sleep at Missoula's main emergency shelter, the Poverello Center, are numerous. Some with alcohol or drug addictions are not permitted to stay there; others with post-traumatic stress disorder or sensory issues are so averse to the shelter environment that they opt to camp in temperatures that can dip to -20 degrees Fahrenheit. As one outreach team member frames it, "Would you want 175 roommates?"

Not far upstream from the camps, a four-acre plot of land on Mullan Road next to the Missoula County Detention Center is one of two sites designated for what will be the Trinity Apartments. Trinity Partnership, a joint project between Homeword, BlueLine Development, and the Missoula Housing Authority, will be building a low-income, low-threshold apartment complex. BlueLine Development completed a similar project, Arroyo Village, in Denver last year.

Combined, the 202 Trinity Apartments will make a sizable dent in Missoula's affordable housing demand.

Thirty of the Mullan Road apartments will be reserved as permanent supportive housing for chronically homeless individuals and will come with Section 8 housing vouchers. The 100 remaining Mullan Road units will be rented to people earning at or below 60 percent of the area median income. A twenty-four-hour, fully staffed on-site navigation center will offer a range of services, including health care, job training, and addiction services.

The center will also serve as an overflow shelter in the winter and as a resource to those who need assistance. Its proximity to the jail will allow people being released to receive help with finding employment and housing, and with applying for safety net programs.

Unlike the Poverello Center, the apartments on Mullan Road will be open to people struggling with addictions. "We have to let people change on their own and provide support when they want it," says Keenan Whitt, BlueLine's project manager.

**MISSOULA IS THE** second largest city in Montana, with a population of 73,340. Still, it has the state's highest homelessness rate. In 2019, according to the city of Missoula's reaching home coordinator, Theresa Williams, 325 people were without a permanent home in Missoula—that's one out of every 230 Missoulians,

more than double the national rate. And although Missoula's population is 90 percent white, 15 percent of Missoula's homeless population is Native American. Native people are also disproportionately represented in the jail.

Like other cities in the United States, Missoula's housing costs are skyrocketing while wages remain low. With a population of roughly one million people, Montana is largely rural and agricultural, so resources for supporting low-income housing initiatives are limited.

"We've always figured out how to do this with every scrap we can find, instead of it being a budgeted line item," says Heather McMilin, Homeword's project development director. "We're a frontier state, and we expect people to be self-sustaining. It's absolutely pervasive in the legislature."

Montana is one of just five states in the nation that doesn't receive state housing funds, says Eran Pehan, director of housing and development with the city of Missoula. An affordable Housing Trust Fund exists, but it only receives federal dollars.

"Housing advocates rally for it every legislative session, but rural legislators don't share urban concerns," Pehan says. "But the tide is turning as rural communities like Havre face housing struggles, too."

The 2008 recession resulted in an exodus of labor as people left Missoula to work in the Bakken oil fields in North Dakota. Many of those workers have not returned. Prior to 2008, low- and middle-income homes were being built, but now developments are largely profit-driven. Due to recent U.S. trade wars, building supply costs are skyrocketing. Land prices are soaring, too. Hemmed in by mountains, Missoula is restricted in its options for building out.

Simultaneously, a boom in tech and health companies in Missoula is also complicating the housing shortage. Although these industries offer higher-paying jobs, housing isn't being created fast enough, and higher-income earners are competing for housing with people making much lower wages.

**ON MISSOULA'S NORTH SIDE**, on Cooley Street, a chain-link fence surrounds a city block filled with mature trees. What looks like a park is actually the old Skyview Trailer Park. In 2018, the lot's owner evicted the residents who lived in the thirty-four trailers there.

While some residents owned their homes, many rented for \$300 a month. Most of the trailers were too costly to move. Community organizations hosted clinics to help residents navigate the rental market in Missoula and identify sources of assistance. But assistance is also in high demand, and waiting lists are long; according to Lori Davidson, executive director



of the Missoula Housing Authority, the local Section 8 voucher program has a three-year waiting list.

It's not an immediate solution, but Trinity Partnership is planning replacement homes at the old Skyview site, along with the Mullan Road apartments. Because the rents will be low, at least 200 units are needed to make the project viable.

Taken together, Trinity Apartments will provide seventy-two units on Cooley Street and 130 on Mullan Road. Trinity Partnership hopes to break ground in the fall of 2020 and complete both buildings by late 2021.

Last November, Homeword hosted an informational session at a bistro up the street from the Skyview lot to address community concerns. McMilin talked about Homeword's commitment to revitalizing old buildings, repurposing building materials, and fighting for the right locations for the people it serves. Neighborhood residents asked about property management, traffic flow, and sidewalks. Others asked about drunk drivers, squatters, and how the apartments would benefit the public.

While Missoula is often called a blue bubble in a red state, some of these questions reflected a not-uncommon "Not In My Backyard" (NIMBY) mindset.

"We try to hear everyone's views," McMilin says. "If we can agree on 80 percent, the 20 percent we don't agree on matters less."

The Cooley Street building will consist of two- and three-bedroom apartments reserved for families living below 70 percent of the area median income, or \$43,980 for a family of four. Because of federal funding, development rents are capped according to the cost of living in each county. Owners are obligated to keep rents affordable for a minimum of forty-six years, but both Homeword and BlueLine are committed to

keeping their properties affordable in perpetuity.

Although the ideas for the two sites developed separately, the partnership came together when each of the three organizations involved realized they could pool resources.

"I don't think any one of us could have done it ourselves," says Davidson, of the Missoula Housing Authority, noting that BlueLine "brings the expertise of having done this in another place" while Homeword has "developed projects all around the state."

Local government has thrown its support behind the project. The City of Missoula is issuing a bond for Trinity and waiving the \$700,000 in fees the bond would typically carry. Pehan, who has been working toward this kind of project for more than five years, says waiving the fees requires no taxpayer dollars.

"As we do innovative projects, we're discovering these new financing tools," she says.

The project is the result of years of planning and coordination between the city, county, and outside organizations. Missoula County invested the four acres of land, at no taxpayer cost. Acquired through a bond in 1996, the land had been intended for jail expansion and administration, but the current sheriff and county commissioners are dedicated to reducing the jail's population. Trinity Apartments helps with this goal.

"The county needed to have some teeth in the game," says Whitt.

In 2012, the city and county released a "Ten-Year Plan to End Homelessness." It commits to a "housing first" model that advocates for permanent supportive housing for all. "Our goal is to have more people entering housing than becoming homeless," Pehan says. "And if someone falls into homelessness, we want it to be rare and one-time-only."

Left: The Poverello Center. Right: Rob Thompson, who lives unsheltered in Missoula, Montana.



**IN 2019**, the city also released a housing policy called “A Place to Call Home: Meeting Missoula’s Housing Needs.” It calls for spurring the market by reducing barriers to development, and investing in affordable housing for people at all income levels.

By looking at the number of people on the Missoula Housing Authority’s housing voucher waiting list, officials estimate a need for 1,600 affordable housing units. It plans to create 590 units of affordable housing in five years. So far, between Trinity and a few other projects in progress, 420 units will be built in the next three years.

Another report, the 2016 “Jail Diversion Master Plan,” reinforces the need for more permanent supportive housing. The plan pivots away from jail expansion and calls instead for reducing recidivism by connecting more people to supportive and rehabilitative resources. More than half of the city’s homeless population has previously been incarcerated. Many were reincarcerated for failing to meet a parole requirement, not because they committed a new offense.

When homeless, some people reoffend during winter months because the jail provides warmth and food. Others are jailed for reasons that are solely connected to living outside, like urination, trespassing, and camping. Amy Allison Thompson, executive director of the Poverello Center, says she urges landlords to consider that these offenses occurred as a result of living outside, asking, “Can you please look past these recent infractions and let them get housed?”

Jesse MacKenna has lived at the Poverello for a year. She is seventy-one and in the shelter’s crowded quarters she’s more vulnerable to illnesses like COVID-19. MacKenna was evicted just as she completed her six-year parole. She had left the state in her thirties after being charged with a felony for forging checks to buy alcohol. When she came back decades later, she turned herself in and was convicted, which has made it difficult for her to obtain housing or employment.

MacKenna’s experiences are not isolated, and the discrimination she’s faced is legal.

Under the Fair Housing Act, criminal records, credit scores, income, homeless status, and rental history do not qualify as protected categories or classes. Even when people in protected classes experience housing discrimination, they often lack the time or resources to pursue legal action. “We’re all stereotyped as drug addicts or alcoholics,” MacKenna says. “We just want our lives back.”

Some states and municipalities have passed laws prohibiting landlords from discriminating against individuals with criminal records; others prohibit form-of-income discrimination to ensure protection

for individuals with Section 8 vouchers. Neither is true for Missoula, nor the state of Montana.

“We lack a lot of protections that other states have,” Pehan acknowledges.

The National Alliance to End Homelessness reports that permanent supportive housing has caused U.S. homelessness to decline by 20 percent across the United States in the last thirteen years. Some cities are building housing as community infrastructure.

“Everyone being able to afford their own home helps the economy,” McMilin says. “When we have recessions, it’s usually the building of homes that saves the economy.”

Trinity Partnership and the efforts by local officials in Missoula could serve as a model for future projects—and for other cities.

“A lot of the effort in the community’s ten-year plan to end homelessness is the re-patronization of resources,” says Andrea Davis, Homeward’s executive director. “Before, people were siloed and didn’t want to give up what they had fought to build.”

The work is only just beginning. Housing solutions will require community engagement and a willingness to re-examine values. Locating permanent supportive housing near the jail, for example, was easier than if Trinity Partnership had tried to locate it in a neighborhood of single-family homes.

“The public are always a little wary when you start talking about putting homeless people next door,” Whitt says.

Thompson is frustrated by the myths that shelter guests are lazy. Some 40 percent of Poverello guests are employed, as are a few people living in the Reserve Street Bridge encampment. People who are not working, she says, usually have a disability or other barriers. “The folks we’re serving are hustling. They’re really trying to make ends meet.”

Getting landlords and employers to take a chance on people trying to climb out of homelessness will require continued education. Meanwhile, Missoula is looking to other cities for additional ideas for how to meet low-income housing goals. Minneapolis, for example, has eliminated single-family home zoning.

“We need to grow out and up responsibly,” McMilin says. “We’ve tried to hold on to four of our own walls, but right now some building options are more attractive than they were in the past.”

In a state like Montana, where people are drawn to open spaces, this could be a tough sell. But the city’s population is projected to keep growing.

“Neighborhoods will have to change to be inclusive if we want to grow in a way that doesn’t leave anyone behind,” Pehan says. “We have to continue to have difficult conversations about who we want to be.” ♦



# Q: What Policy Change Would Have the Biggest Impact on Alleviating Poverty?



## **ELISE GOULD**

### **Senior Economist, Economic Policy Institute**

Today, the U.S. tax and transfer system—largely Social Security—lifts millions of people out of poverty. While this safety net should be strengthened, a well-functioning labor market cannot only lift people out of poverty, but also bolster their incomes enough so they are far less likely to fall into poverty in the first place. Pay for low and moderate-wage workers has nearly stagnated in recent decades as a vastly disproportionate share of overall income growth has concentrated at the very top. This has forced the safety net to work even harder to offset slow growing wages for most workers.

Prioritizing a strong labor market increases the likelihood that anyone who wants a job can get one with the hours that they need. A tight labor market gives employers less incentive to discriminate and more incentive to pay decent wages to attract and retain workers. Stronger labor standards and better enforcement—such as raising the minimum wage, reducing wage theft, and removing barriers to form unions and bargain collectively—are key ways to boost incomes, increase economic security, and reduce poverty.



## **ANASTASIA CHRISTMAN**

### **Worker Power Program Director, National Employment Law Project**

We need a real commitment to democratic participation in the workplace and at the ballot box. Workers must be able to freely vote to join a union. Those who do earn 10 to 20 percent more than non-union workers in comparable jobs. Unionized workers are more likely to have employer-provided health care and workplace-funded child care. And the benefits are multigenerational. Even if their parents are not in a union, a child who grows up in a community with high union density has a greater chance for economic mobility.

Making change through a union is a real-world experience of collective decision-making and builds civic skills to participate at the ballot box. Unionized workers are better informed about political issues and help put working-class people in elected office. By contrast, states that limit the right to unionize depress votes in presidential elections by more than 2 percent.



## **JITU BROWN**

### **National Director, Journey for Justice Alliance**

According to the United Nations, America ranks twenty-first in education globally among high-income nations. When you remove poverty, the United States is number two. This tells me that America knows how to educate children, but refuses to educate the poor, the black, brown, and Native American.

We need a twenty-first century equity mandate for public education. This would stop school vouchers and charter expansion, fully fund both Title I for America's neediest schools and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and create 25,000 community schools by 2025.

The mandate will also end racist zero-tolerance policies that target black and brown children, in many cases suspending them five times as often as their white counterparts for the same incidents. We will replace these policies with restorative justice practices and student leadership development programs. Finally, we need a national equity assessment in partnership with communities and the government, with federal penalties for school districts that continue inequitable education practices.

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# Hell No, You Can't Go

*Non-compete agreements chain even low-wage workers to their current employers.*

BY SHARON JOHNSON



PETE RYAN

In July 2016, Margaret Beebe of Syracuse, New York, suffered a career setback when a local laboratory rescinded a job offer, which included higher wages, regular hours, and no travel. The laboratory discovered that Beebe had signed a non-compete agreement with her former employer, a Texas-based nationwide provider of clinical services.

The agreement prohibited her from working for competitors within a fifty-mile radius for nine months. Beebe was devastated because she felt trapped in her job, which required long hours driving to homes and offices in upstate New York, where she conducted basic physical exams, drew blood, and collected other bodily samples for laboratory analysis.

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*Sharon Johnson is a freelance writer in New York City.*

Beebe was released from her non-compete agreement after she reached out to New York State Attorney General Eric Schneiderman, who contacted the Texas-based firm, which agreed to no longer require New York-based employees to sign agreements. Most of them were low-level employees like Beebe who did not have unique skills or access to trade secrets.

Once limited to senior executives, engineers, and scientists, non-compete agreements prohibiting a departing employee from taking a job with a competitor—even if he or she is fired—are spreading to blue-collar jobs like warehouse employees, home health care workers, fast-food workers, janitors, and hair stylists who are bearing the economic brunt of the new coronavirus because they lack paid sick leave.

A 2016 Treasury Department report found that 18 percent of American workers, including 15 percent of those without a four-year college degree and 14 percent of those earning less than \$40,000 a year, have had to sign non-compete agreements.

“Non-compete agreements have been used for many years by employers who claimed that agreements were necessary to prevent departing employees from sharing their trade secrets,” says Ryan Nunn, the report’s principal author, in a recent phone interview.

But today, non-compete agreements are common among workers who “possess trade secrets at less than half the rate of their better educated, higher earning colleagues,” says Nunn, now policy director of the Hamilton Project at the Brookings Institution, a non-profit public policy organization in Washington, D.C. “This suggests that employers are using non-compete agreements for other reasons, which has serious implications for individual workers as well as the overall labor market.”

Evan Starr, an assistant professor of management and organization at the University of Maryland, agrees: “Non-compete agreements deprive employees of their most important asset: their ability to apply their skills in new positions that will advance their career and improve their lives.”

Starr’s 2014 survey of 11,505 workers found that only 10 percent had negotiated their non-compete agreements, and most received no additional training or benefits in exchange for signing away their post-employment rights. Indeed, he says, “Many workers did not realize they had signed agreements because they were included in a stack of forms they completed after accepting the offer or after joining the firm.”

Forty percent of employees have signed agreements at some point in their careers, Starr’s research showed.

The use of non-compete agreements has serious

long-term consequences. Workers cannot bargain for higher wages and improved benefits because employers know they cannot leave for similar jobs elsewhere. Wages stagnate, making it difficult for workers to keep up with the rising cost of living and to save for their children’s education or their own retirement.

“Many workers, especially women and people of color who have suffered sexual harassment and other forms of workplace abuse, stay in dead-end jobs because they lack savings to support themselves during the period of no wages,” says Orly Lobel, professor of labor and employment law at the University of San Diego School of Law.

Employees who do leave often start over in new occupations and industries where their skills are less applicable and their pay lower, Lobel adds.

Non-compete agreements also keep employees from starting their own businesses, which hits individuals hard because they often can earn more as entrepreneurs than they do as employees, she explains.

“The overall labor market suffers,” Lobel says. “Employers spend more time and effort finding the employees they need. High-growth regions that depend on start-ups are deprived of the workers they need to get their products on the market in record time.”

**F**or eight years, Brendan Lynch, an attorney with Community Legal Services in Philadelphia, championed the cause of low-wage workers saddled with non-compete agreements. He considers them an invisible population.

“We usually learn that our clients have non-compete agreements when they come to us for help with housing, consumer, and other matters, or when they have received a letter from a former employer threatening to enforce the agreement,” says Lynch, whose nonprofit group has served more than one million low-income residents since its 1966 founding by the Philadelphia Bar Association.

Low-wage workers eager to land jobs don’t scrutinize the huge stack of forms employers have them sign and don’t try to negotiate better terms the way engineers, executives, and other highly paid workers do.

While it’s unlikely that a court would order an employee who cleans offices or buses dishes in a restaurant to pay damages and legal fees to a former employer for violating a non-compete agreement, the mere possibility of being taken to court is enough to keep home health care aides, janitors, and fast-food workers trapped in jobs they want to leave, Lynch says.

Single parents struggling to feed their children and couples worried about paying next month’s rent don’t have the savings or emotional stamina to get through the litigation, which could drag on for years.



Non-compete agreements also intimidate prospective employers. Lynch cites a case in which a school refused to hire his client after the principal received a letter from the former employer.

“The school didn’t want to incur legal expenses fighting the janitorial service,” Lynch says. “It was cheaper and easier to give the job to someone else who had the same skills and similar experience.”

Although home health aides are in great demand because of the aging population and expansion of Medicaid, they often find that non-compete agreements prevent them from earning higher wages.

“Home health care is an occupation where it is important for the employee and employer to trust each other and get along because the work involves intimate tasks like bathing and changing clothes,” Lynch says. “Some home health care aides who have non-compete agreements end up working indefinitely for employers who demean them.”

**N**ot only are more employers requiring non-compete agreements, but an increasing number of workers are being sued by former employers for breach of non-compete agreements. According to a report in *The Wall Street Journal*, the number of workers sued by former employers over non-compete agreements increased 61 percent from 2002 to 2013.

Despite the dire impact on their lives, most workers assume non-compete agreements are valid even when they are not, says Russell Beck, an attorney with Beck Reed Riden LLP in Boston, Massachusetts.

“Even in states like California, Montana, and Oklahoma, which don’t recognize or enforce non-compete agreements, workers won’t challenge agreements in court because they can’t afford to hire a lawyer and don’t have the funds, time, and emotional stamina to get through the litigation, which can take years,” Beck says in a phone interview.

Fortunately, says Beck, governmental efforts to solve the problem have increased since 2016, when the Obama Administration issued a call to enact reforms. Studies showed that the prevalence of non-compete agreements was hurting the wages of workers earning less and impeding the growth of regional economies.

“In 2019 alone, more than ten states passed legislation,” says Beck, who completed a fifty-state analysis of laws to curb abuses.

State attorneys general have launched investigations of the misuse of non-compete agreements by fast-food chains and other businesses that employ large numbers of low-wage workers. Bipartisan legislation has also been introduced in Congress to prohibit the use of non-compete agreements in almost all situations.

Some states have tried to protect low-wage workers by restricting the use of non-compete agreements to higher-wage earners. Others have excluded young people in internships and workers in certain fields like health aides.

“A few states like Massachusetts and Washington require employers to pay a percentage of the employee’s salary during the period when the non-compete agreements prohibit him or her from working for a competitor,” Beck adds.

**S**ome state attorneys general are adding their legal muscle to efforts to protect low-wage workers from the harmful effects of non-compete agreements.

In 2016, the attorneys general of the states of Illinois and New York each sued Jimmy John’s, an Illinois-based sandwich company that has 2,800 stores

**“Many workers, especially women and people of color who have suffered sexual harassment and other forms of workplace abuse, stay in dead-end jobs because they lack savings to support themselves during the period of no wages.”**

across the nation. Its non-compete agreement prohibited all employees from working for any business that earned more than 10 percent of its revenue from selling “submarine, hero type, deli style, pita, and/or wrapped or rolled sandwiches” within three miles of any of the Jimmy John’s shops for two years.

“In addition to requiring Jimmy John’s to notify all current and former employers that the non-compete agreements were unenforceable, the settlement was designed to protect future workers,” says Jane Flanagan, former chief of the Workplace Rights Bureau of the Illinois Attorney General’s office.

Jimmy John’s had to remove non-compete forms from packets given to newly hired workers and require franchise owners to rescind any additional non-compete agreements they may have used based on the Jimmy John’s corporate model, Flanagan says.

To build public awareness of the misuse of non-compete agreements, Jimmy John’s agreed to pay the state of Illinois \$100,000, which the attorney general’s office is using to educate employers about what is legally permissible, says Flanagan, now a fellow at the Open Society Foundations and a visiting scholar at the Chicago-Kent College of Law at the Illinois Institute of Technology.

The attorneys general of Illinois and New York conducted a similar investigation of WeWork, which

provides shared office space for rent and associated services to clients in the United States and internationally.

They found that the New York City-based company's non-compete agreement prevented nearly all of its 3,300 employees nationwide from taking jobs with competitors for two years. They worked out a settlement that removed 800 rank-and-file employees in New York City and an additional 600 across the country from the non-compete restrictions.

"Many of these employees were cleaners, mail associates, and executive assistants, some of whom earned as little as \$15 an hour," says Terri Gerstein, who led the investigation by the New York State Attorney General's office and is now the director of the State and Local Enforcement Project at the Harvard Law School's Labor and Worklife Project.

"The agreement violated basic fairness," Gerstein says in a phone interview. "Just because an employee works for a company now doesn't mean that he or she should do so forever. The mere mention of a non-compete agreement was enough to keep some terrified employees in dead-end jobs for years."

One countervailing force against the abusive use of non-compete agreements has been media exposure. In 2015, Amazon, the nation's largest online retailer, removed a non-compete clause in its employment contract for warehouse employees the day after *The Verge* reported that the clause could have kept these workers, including temporary ones, unable to work for competitors for up to eighteen months. The workers typically earned \$10 to \$12 an hour.

"Exposure by the media increases the awareness that non-compete agreements are unfair and that state and national legislation is needed to get rid of the abuses," Lynch says.

Advocates have urged the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) to use its power to enforce antitrust laws to ban non-compete agreements. In March 2019, the Open Markets Institute, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit that promotes awareness of the economic dangers of monopolies, presented a petition signed by the AFL-CIO and more than sixty other labor organizations, public interest groups, and legal scholars.

Seven Democratic Senators, including Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts and Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota, signed a letter urging the FTC to "use its rule-making authority along with other tools to combat the scourge of non-compete clauses rigging our economy against workers."

Eighteen state attorneys general, all Democrats, also urged the FTC to crack down on the use of non-compete agreements. "We are interested in en-

suring that our economies prosper in an environment free of anticompetitive restraints," they wrote.

But advocates face an uphill fight because three of the five Federal Trade Commissioners are Republicans. On January 9, 2020, Commissioner Noah Joshua Phillips, who was appointed by President Trump, said that he had reservations about whether the FTC had the authority to issue such a rule.

Congress may be more receptive.

"There is a bipartisan consensus evolving in Congress that scarcely seemed possible in 2015 when we were government lawyers coordinating investigations of the Illinois and New York attorneys general," says Gerstein.

In October 2019, Senators Chris Murphy, Democrat of Connecticut, and Senator Todd Young, Republican of Indiana, introduced the Workforce Mobility Act, which would prohibit the use of non-compete agreements in almost all settings. The bill, which has been referred to the Senate Committee on Small Business and Entrepreneurship, would ban non-compete agreements for all workers and delegate enforcement and reporting responsibilities to the FTC and the U.S. Department of Labor.

"One of the strongest arguments for Congress passing this bill is the positive effect that eliminating non-compete agreements has on workers' wages," says Flanagan.

A 2019 study by professors Starr of the University of Maryland and Michael Lipsitz of Miami University found that wages of hourly workers in Oregon increased by 2 to 3 percent on average after the state banned non-compete agreements in 2008. Positive wage effects occurred across the age, education, and wage spectrums, but the greatest gains were for female workers and in occupations where non-compete agreements were more common.

"Companies are not playing by the rules," says Bob Ferguson, Washington state attorney general, "so our office is pursuing a variety of initiatives to ensure that workers won't be exploited."

One of the most widespread abuses is the use of non-poaching agreements by franchises, which prevent workers from leaving one franchise and moving to another within the same chain, which offers higher pay or a better work schedule, Ferguson explains.

More than 150 corporate chains have reached settlements with Ferguson's office to get rid of non-compete agreements, including fast-food restaurants, painting companies, cleaning services, and shipping and business services.

"These [decisions] are a win-win for workers as well as states because they ensure that our future economy will be healthy," Ferguson says. ♦





SEIU Local 105 members after the wage increase passed in Denver.

SEIU LOCAL 105

# The Fight Against Preemption

*Colorado beat back laws to prevent local governments from improving worker pay and conditions.*

BY BRYCE COVERT

**M**arilyn Sorensen has been a personal care provider for elderly, disabled, and sick patients in Denver, her native city, for about a quarter century. She loves her work. “My whole life, I’ve always loved the elder communities and the young communities,” she says. “They make my heart sing.”

Sorensen’s elderly clients tell her stories and create deep bonds with her. “I’ve learned so much from them, each and every one of them,” she shares. “I stayed just doing what I was doing because I got a lot of rewards in my heart that helped me to grow and thrive.”

But the pay she receives has been far less rewarding. “It’s hard to put food on the table, gas in the car,” Sorensen says. She drives her own car to visit patients, but if she has a flat tire or gets in an accident, the agencies that employ her won’t help cover the cost

of repair. Once she was driving to visit a patient in heavy snow and her tire blew out, flinging her into an embankment. She had to pay almost \$400 to have her car towed and the tire replaced; she had to borrow money from friends to cover the cost.

For a while, Sorensen was making \$11 an hour. Then another company offered her \$14 an hour—but never gave her enough hours to add up to full-time work, so she still wasn’t making enough to get by. “It makes you very insecure,” she says. “Picking [shit]

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*Bryce Covert is an independent journalist writing about the economy. She is a contributing op-ed writer at The New York Times and a contributor at The Nation.*

with the chickens”—salvaging—“trying to figure it out.” She talks about making steak for clients and going home to ramen noodles.

But Sorensen’s financial situation is about to change. In 2019, Colorado became the first state in the nation to repeal a law that banned cities and counties from raising their minimum wages above that of the state. Shortly after it passed, Denver pushed through a minimum-wage increase to more than \$15 an hour by 2022.

It’s a huge victory—not just for poorer residents of Colorado like Sorensen but in the nationwide fight against preemption laws that tie the hands of local officials.

“For years, we’ve seen the rapid growth of preemption laws around the country to block minimum wages,” says Laura Huizar, senior staff attorney at the National Employment Law Project. But the current flurry of activity began as a backlash to the movement for higher pay.

“As the Fight for \$15 gained momentum, we saw a dramatic increase,” she says. In some states, lawmakers acted to prevent local communities from raising wages before they even tried.

These bills are typically introduced by Republicans and passed at the behest of corporate lobbying interests and patterned on model legislation from the conservative American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC). “The corporate lobby has seen preemption as a very effective tactic to block policies they don’t like,” Huizar notes.

Now advocates want to use Colorado’s success as a model to turn the tide and reverse preemption in other states.

**C**urrently, twenty-five states have laws preempting local governments from raising their minimum wages, according to the National Employment Law Project. A number of states also block better workplace benefits and rights.

These laws have concrete consequences: In the twelve cities and counties that tried to raise their wages only to have the efforts be stymied by state preemption, the group found some 346,000 workers lost out on an extra \$1.5 billion annually—nearly \$4,100 per person.

Sorensen was deeply involved in the fight for better pay in Colorado. “It was a multi-year effort to raise wages,” she says. “It didn’t just happen.” The Fight for \$15 movement arrived in Colorado in 2013, when

workers at a McDonald’s just north of Denver went on strike. Sorensen got involved after meeting with Service Employees International Union (SEIU) organizers and fellow care providers to talk about the challenges they were facing in their work.

“In that process we found that there’s other low-wage earners, not just home care,” she says. “It’s the airport, it’s McDonald’s. People are working two, three jobs.”

So Sorensen and her fellow providers started protesting and marching with other low-wage workers, including fast-food employees, janitors, and adjunct professors, to demand better pay. According to Ron

Ruggiero, president of SEIU Local 105, more than 100 Colorado workers went on strike as part of the Fight for \$15 in 2014; in 2015, more than 1,000 people marched and rallied along Colfax Avenue, a major thoroughfare in Denver.

But while advocates wanted a \$15 minimum wage, they knew it would be a tough sell. So they focused their energy on winning \$12 through a ballot measure put directly before voters—and won in 2016.

That was always intended as a first step. “We made a commitment that we were going to continue to fight to increase wages,” notes Lizeth Chacon, executive director of Colorado People’s Action.

But they didn’t just want to keep putting higher wages on the ballot, fighting every election cycle. They wanted deeper change. Chacon recalls telling her allies,

“Let’s not do business as usual. Let’s really think about a long-term strategy to support working Coloradans.”

Knowing how difficult it was for low-wage state residents to survive, Chacon says, fueled the campaign’s momentum. “There was a deep understanding of what was at stake for us that was so helpful to ground us on the importance of moving something like this forward.”

Preemption became a clear target. Advocates partnered with legal experts who were able to dig into the state constitution and figure out how to craft a bill that would expressly grant the power to raise the minimum wage to local governments. “We didn’t have a model policy from somewhere else we could pull from,” Chacon says. “We literally had to start from scratch.”



Personal care provider  
Marilyn Sorensen with her  
grandson, James.



Getting legislation passed to foreclose preemption required a big coalition. Colorado People's Action got together with SEIU, the Colorado Working Families Party, United Food and Commercial Workers International Union, and faith-based groups. The campaign also involved elected officials at the city and county levels, some of whom had tried getting the state legislature to raise the minimum wage on its own, to no avail. They were frustrated.

"They deeply believed that, as a locality, they needed to have more tools in their toolbox," Chacon recalls. They wanted to "expand the level of work they could actually do to have a direct impact on their constituents' lives." The effort gained momentum.

"When the frame is local democracy, a lot of other groups that may not prioritize minimum wage come forward," says Huizar of the National Employment Law Project. "We saw local officials, county associations, and others recognize the value of recovering local authority and advancing local democracy."

Many people feel most politically connected to their local elected officials, so advocates made it clear this was about empowering those officials to make meaningful changes. That required educating lawmakers and state residents about what preemption—a technical, obscure term—really means.

Nothing would have passed, however, without an electoral strategy. A bill to roll back preemption was introduced in 2018; it passed the state house, and died in the senate. So advocates focused on flipping the senate to Democratic control in 2018—and electing not just any Democrats, but strong progressives.

Getting rid of preemption "had been a source of conversation for a while, but no Democrats were willing to carry that and be champions for it," says Carlos Valverde, state director of the Colorado Working Families Party. The campaign needed champions to push it through. Then Jared Polis, a Democratic candidate for governor, pledged to support local control over the minimum wage as he campaigned for the seat, and won, in November 2018.

In May 2019, the Colorado legislature passed and Polis signed a bill to protect local minimum wage laws. Last November, the Denver City Council voted unanimously to gradually raise the city's minimum wage to \$15.87 by 2022. Even the advocates were surprised by how quickly the ordinance moved through the council. The first of three scheduled minimum wage increases, to \$12.85 per hour, took effect on January 1.

Sabel Watson was one of the workers who testified in front of the Denver City Council about raising the minimum wage. She originally lived in downtown Denver but had to move further out because it was "just too pricey" on her low restaurant

wages. Then she had to worry about getting transportation to and from work. During the winter months, when tourism slowed, her tips would dip as well, and she had to turn to family and friends to get by.

"In the moment, you feel so helpless," she says. But being around others going through the same thing changed her perspective.

"Seeing that organizers have made this happen . . . makes you feel like I can do it too



Colorado People's Action activists rally at the Colorado state capitol when the preemption rollback bill was introduced.

and be part of this."

The victory in Denver was "powerful," Watson says. "It will not only improve the lives of thousands of people, but also prove that working people have the power to improve an economy that works for us." And she thinks it's setting an example elsewhere. "Once Denver did it, now everyone's really excited to gear up."

Huizar agrees. "Colorado emerged as a true success story and a model for 2020 and beyond," she says, noting an increased desire across the country for unraveling state preemption. "Cities and counties and residents are recognizing that all of their energy and ideas are being squashed by their state legislature. It's really undermining the entire concept of local democracy."

The goal of opposing preemption has led to a number of new state coalitions and brought in some

unlikely allies, such as the American Heart Association and the Sierra Club.

Last year, bills to roll back preemption laws were introduced in twenty-two states, including eleven that would have emulated Colorado and given local governments the authority to raise the minimum wage, according to the National Employment Law Project. They also addressed a range of issues, from the banning of plastic bags to requiring employers to offer paid sick leave—an issue gaining momentum amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

None of the other minimum wage preemption rollbacks passed last year, but advocates are ready to keep pressing forward. “We expect those bills that didn’t succeed to come back up and we expect to see new efforts around the country,” Huizar says. “There is significant and growing energy to win power back for local communities.”

Colorado activists aren’t finished, either. Chacon’s organization is still working on raising wages outside of Denver, focusing on at least four other cities and counties this year.

For the poorest Denverites, the impact of a higher wage will be huge. Housing prices are skyrocketing as people flock to the state and developers focus on

building luxury units. But the wage bump will mean that more people can afford to live in the city.

“Anyone that’s working full-time, two or more jobs, should never have to sit at their kitchen table and say, ‘Hey, we’re either buying groceries or [still] have a house,’” Chacon says. “That’s the situation in Denver and in Colorado that so many of our families are going through.”

“Some people will be able to quit that second job or have [fewer] hours,” says Ruggiero, who tells of a father who works at Denver International Airport and gets just four hours of sleep a night because he works two jobs. “Some of the stuff I’ve heard from workers is, ‘I’m going to be able to afford my prescriptions,’ ‘I’m going to afford a toy for my kid,’” he says. “This stuff is so basic.”

For Sorensen, a higher wage “will help in times of emergency” and help build a buffer against unexpected costs—a broken-down car, a broken hot water heater. “Anything that might come up, I’ll have a little bit of savings.”

Sorensen’s takeaway from the battle against preemption is instructive. “What I’ve realized is that when we fight, we win,” she says. “If you don’t fight, you don’t win.” ♦

**“Anyone that’s working full-time, two or more jobs, should never have to sit at their kitchen table and say, ‘Hey, we’re either buying groceries or [still] have a house.’”**

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# THE HIGH COST OF DYING

*How the funeral industry takes advantage of grieving families.*



BY MIKE KUHNENBECK

**The grim business of laying the dead to rest, known by the gentle-sounding euphemism as the “Death Care Industry,” has established a unique place in American society, invoking a sort of reverence in the public mind. But while they provide necessary services, they are in business to make money, and consumers need to be aware.**

“Unfortunately, every profession has a few rotten apples,” says National Funeral Directors Association Treasurer Jack Mitchell. “There are some people in our profession that would take advantage of families in their grieving, who are going through a difficult situation and upsell them. The vast majority of us despise that, because it makes the rest of us look bad.”

Complicating matters is that death, including funerals, is seldom seriously discussed. As people confront the economic challenges of their daily lives, the need to plan for death, even their own, is far from their minds.

“With the last generation or two, there’s been less discussion ahead of time about death,” Mitchell says. “We sit down with families who don’t have a clue what they want to do, and I think they end up making deci-

sions that further down the road they look back and say, ‘We should have done this instead.’”

People struggling to afford basic needs are more likely to “have shorter lives than those with higher incomes,” according to a 2019 report from the Government Accountability Office.

Families with loved ones who die unexpectedly, especially from illness and injury, face even greater monetary challenges when arranging for final resting places and accompanying services. Sadly, this discussion has become more urgent with the outbreak of COVID-19 in the United States, as the risk of death is much higher for those who are elderly and impoverished or who have pre-existing conditions.

The potential costs even for modest funeral services can be overwhelming, given that four in ten

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Americans say they would be unable to afford a \$400 emergency. The financial burden compounded with the grief of losing a loved one can cause traumatic distress.

Those tasked with the somber responsibility of making funeral arrangements must make tough decisions in a limited amount of time, attempting to honor the wishes of the departed as well as recognize financial limitations. Emotions are heightened, leaving consumers vulnerable.

The National Directory of Morticians Redbook lists more than 19,000 funeral homes in the United States. Funeral homes generated revenues of around \$17 billion in 2019, with the average funeral costing more than \$9,000. The funeral industry is projected to have annual revenues of \$68 billion by 2023.

“From December 1986 to September 2017, funeral expenses rose 227.1 percent, while prices for all items rose 123.4 percent,” states a report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The National Funeral Directors Association pub-

served family members in the past. Checking with other funeral homes to compare prices could save them hundreds, if not thousands, of dollars.

It is no coincidence that funeral homes have dramatic names for their products. Boxes to bury the dead are called “caskets.” Jars for cremated ashes are called “urns,” and fancier models are “decorative urns.” It is not as if through some act of alchemy funeral directors were able to transform these objects into something more than they are. When such terms are applied, however, the numbers on the price tags go up.

“We reformers and advocates have known since the mid-twentieth century that funeral homes use the same retail merchandising tactics that furniture stores and everybody else does,” says Joshua Slocum, executive director of the Funeral Consumers Alliance, a nonprofit group that monitors the funeral industry and advocates for fair practices. “Our expression of grief and mourning has been written over by this capitalist logic, that the only right and proper way we show our love for the dead is through commercial consumption.”

Slocum wants to demystify the funeral industry, to help people reframe the situation as any other kind of financial transaction. By pulling back the mysterious curtain that shrouds the industry, consumers can reassert their rights.

“The only way to really keep control of your costs,” Slocum says, is to “comparison shop for prices ahead of time and have a clear idea you share with your family about what your values are in terms of a funeral.”

Funeral homes often push basic products that would be cheaper if they were provided by the consumers themselves. For example, memorial packages and card folders that cost \$250 at a funeral home can be bought elsewhere for around \$50. Instead of selecting an urn from the business’s catalogue, people can bring their own urns. The same goes for coffins, which consumers have the right to purchase from a place other than a funeral home.

As with any business, people can be misled on costs and surprised with hidden fees.

“They often go to great lengths to put that package under your nose before you see the a la carte options,” Slocum says. “It’s these packages where a lot of padding goes on.”

About 80 percent of funeral homes are privately owned by families or individuals. But as with nearly every sector in our society, corporations are getting into the industry.

Service Corporation International (SCI) and its signature brand, Dignity Memorial, own the largest

**“Our expression of grief and mourning has been written over by this capitalist logic, that the only right and proper way we show our love for the dead is through commercial consumption.”**

lished its annual “Member General Price List Study” last September, which surveyed more than a thousand of its members to collect data on prices. According to the study, the average cost of a funeral with burial ranges from around \$6,000 to \$7,500, depending on the region; the average cost of a funeral with cremation is around \$5,000.

The cost of funerals has grown so dramatically that many families now request financial contributions “in lieu of flowers.” The crowdfunding platform GoFundMe has a whole section dedicated to funerals, memorials, and assistance with survivors’ living expenses.

The trend toward favoring cremation over burial is also on the rise. According to the National Funeral Directors Association, the cremation rate has risen from 40 percent in 2010 to 53 percent in 2018 and is projected to grow to nearly 75 percent by 2035.

This is unsurprising, as “the bereaved can reduce their costs substantially through immediate cremation, obviating the need for embalming, a viewing, a burial plot, and burial,” says Stephen Brobeck, a senior fellow at the Consumer Federation of America.

Traditionally, people turn to funeral homes that



chain of funeral homes and cemeteries in the country. With more than 1,900 locations in the United States, Canada, and Puerto Rico, the company has created a flourishing enterprise built on high-pressure sales tactics to create the highest-priced market in the funeral industry.

The median price of SCI funeral homes, compared to those with price disclosures, is 30 percent higher for simple cremation, 32 percent higher for simple burial, and 50 percent higher for a full-service funeral, according to a 2017 report from the Funeral Consumers Alliance and the Consumer Federation of America.

If SCI purchases a funeral home previously owned by a family, it will generally keep the family's name, such as "Johnson and Son," leaving consumers unaware of the change in ownership until the time comes to write the check.

"They know that the family name has brand value," Slocum says, "and brand value means consumers have no idea that it's not the Johnson family, and they're inappropriately transferring a warm emotional feeling about the Johnsons to this corporate funeral home."

*The Progressive* contacted SCI-Dignity Memorial to ask why it does not provide price listings on its websites. Instead of answering the question, the company responded, "Prices are available upon request, directly from the location."

The funeral industry is regulated by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), which in 1984 created the Funeral Rule to better protect consumers. It allows them to choose only the goods and services they want, and requires that they be shown an itemized list of prices before reaching a decision. From 1996 to 2018, the FTC investigated nearly 3,200 funeral homes and found that 559 of them had violated this rule. In 2017, twenty-nine of the 134 funeral homes inspected undercover by the FTC in eleven states failed to disclose their prices.

As the rule was created before the Internet was in popular use, it does not require funeral homes to list their prices on websites. "Requiring funeral homes to post existing price lists online would be relatively easy and inexpensive," says Brobeck, from the Consumer Federation of America. "Just create a PDF and post it."

California is the only state that requires funeral homes to disclose price information on their websites, thanks to a bill enacted in 2013. Mitchell, with the National Funeral Directors Association, says he is "on the fence" regarding such a requirement, but adds, "I feel like funeral homes, knowing that's how most people shop nowadays, it would behoove them to do it."

One of the shadiest operators in the funeral industry is Heritage Cremation Provider, owned by the father-son team Joseph and Anthony Damiano. The company, which claims to be "Everything you could possibly need from a cremation provider," subcontracts with local funeral homes to provide the services it charges for. Heritage and its sister website Legacy Funeral Services have "F" ratings from the Better Business Bureau, and have been subjected to multiple legal actions.

"There are families all over the country that have terrible experiences with them," Mitchell says. "Families go to them and wherever they are in the country they assign a local funeral home to handle the crema-

## **"They've misrepresented their prices and lost cremated remains."**

tion for really, really cheap. They've misrepresented their prices and lost cremated remains."

In 2003, Joseph Damiano became embroiled in scandal when it was revealed that his business, Professional Transport System Inc., supplied cadavers to the mortuary school at Lynn University in Boca Raton, Florida, without the consent or knowledge of family members. His son Anthony was banned from the funeral business in Florida.

Mitchell wants the FTC and the FBI to "chase after them and to shut them down," but says they have proven to be elusive.

Slocum calls the funeral industry "probably the best example of regulatory capture I have ever seen." Regulatory capture is when a government regulatory agency becomes a commercial and political force advancing the interests of the industry the agency is supposed to be regulating.

"Most regulators that oversee funeral homes on the state level are governed by a majority voting bloc of industry," Slocum says. "It's like seven funeral directors and one so-called consumer member on the regulatory board. These actually function more like a trade lobbying group with the fig-leaf of government consumer protection."

As the funeral business continues to evolve, there needs to be progress in the way people view the industry. Change can come only when people start recognizing the brutal realities surrounding it.

"There is nothing degrading or terrible about being a funeral director," Slocum says, "but they have never done anything to earn this sort of hands-off, awe-struck silence that we as consumers have given them, and we need to stop it." ♦

# MAKING THE PANDEMIC WORSE

*By punishing vulnerable people, Trump's policy of "maximum pressure" is undermining efforts to fight COVID-19.*

BY KATHY KELLY



Protesters demand a de-escalation of the Iran conflict in New York City on January 9, 2020.

During the United States' 1991 "Desert Storm" war against Iraq, I was part of the Gulf Peace Team—at first, living in a "peace camp" set up near the Iraq-Saudi border. We found an abandoned typewriter, attached a lit candle so that we could see (the United States had destroyed Iraq's electrical stations, and most of the hotel rooms were pitch black), and, in lieu of a typewriter ribbon, placed a sheet of red carbon paper over our stationery.

Iraqi authorities, lacking a functioning typewriter of their own, asked us to type their letter to Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, the secretary-general of the United Nations, imploring him to prevent the United States from bombing a road between Iraq and Jordan, the only way out for refugees and the only way in for humanitarian relief.

Now, in 2020, Iraqis still suffering from impoverishment, displacement, and war earnestly want the United States to practice "physical distance" and leave their country.

Meanwhile, U.S. sanctions against Iran, which the Trump Administration has cruelly strengthened, continue to collectively punish extremely vulnerable people. The United States' current "maximum pressure" policy severely undermines Iranian efforts to cope with the ravages of COVID-19, causing hardship and tragedy while contributing to the global spread of the disease.

On March 12, Iran's foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, urged member states of the United Nations to end the United States' unconscionable and lethal economic warfare. Addressing U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres, Zarif's letter detailed how

U.S. economic sanctions prevent Iranians from importing necessary medicine and medical equipment.

While the world experiences sweeping transformation and bold new questions, United States foreign policy has stubbornly "stayed the course," continuing the divisive, corrosive policies of a permanent warfare state. The recent decision to tighten economic sanctions against Iran shows a U.S. foreign policy staunchly predicated on threat and force.

**IRONICALLY, THE TRUMP** Administration's policy of "maximum pressure" against Iran actually helps spread "the invisible enemy"—COVID-19—as economic sanctions undermine Iran's capacity to tackle the new coronavirus.

On March 19, Iran's health ministry said the coronavirus was killing one Iranian every ten minutes and infecting fifty more people each hour. On the same day, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo blacklisted twelve international companies for doing business with Iran's petrochemical sector.

Efforts by the Iranian government to address the crisis have included releasing 85,000 nonviolent prisoners from overcrowded prisons. Yet the Iranian government didn't impose radical restrictions that would have prevented hundreds of thousands of people from traveling and congregating to celebrate Nowruz, the Persian New Year on March 20.

Why has the Iranian government, in spite of a rising death toll, been reluctant to impose compulsory quarantines? *The Guardian* newspaper suggests the government is so strapped financially that it can't afford to make welfare payments to low-income workers, and it must continue to keep them employed. The

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Kathy Kelly is a peace activist, pacifist, and author who co-coordinates the group *Voices for Creative Nonviolence*.



United States bears direct responsibility for enforcing Iran's economic decline.

Oil sales constitute 70 percent of Iran's revenues. Since May 2018, the United States has strong-armed Europe, South Korea, India, Japan, and other countries into refraining from purchasing Iranian oil. Iran's oil sales tumbled from 2.5 million barrels per day in 2017 to a few hundred thousand in recent months. By interfering with Iran's shipping, insurance, financial, and banking systems, the United States has severely restricted Iran's capacity to obtain desperately needed medicines and supplies.

Regionally, Iran is surrounded by dozens of U.S. military bases scattered across countries including Afghanistan, Kuwait, Iraq, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates. Yet Iran poses no direct threat to the United States, with its vastly superior weapons arsenal and unrivaled military superiority.

The United States accuses Iran of meddling in the affairs of other countries, supplying weapons and training to Yemen's Houthi rebels battling against Saudi Arabia, and bolstering Hezbollah and Hamas in their fight against Israel. But the United States also meddles, as evidenced by the invasion and occupation of neighboring Iraq and Afghanistan, and its interventions in Libya and Syria.

Now, Iran's devastated economy and worsening coronavirus outbreak is driving migrants and refugees back to Afghanistan at dramatically increased rates. In a two-week period in March alone, more than 50,000 Afghans returned from Iran, increasing the likelihood that cases of COVID-19 will surge in Afghanistan. Decades of war, including the U.S. invasion and occupation since October 2001, have decimated Afghanistan's health care and food distribution systems.

Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, in his letter to U.N. Secretary-General Guterres, accused the United States of crimes against humanity and demanded that the U.S. government "abandon its malign and fruitless approach against Iran."

**ARE WE NOW** living in a watershed time? A new, unstoppable, deadly virus ignores all borders, including those the United States tries to reinforce or redraw. The U.S. military-industrial complex, with its massive arsenals and cruel capacity for siege, is no longer relevant to "security" needs.

Why should the United States, at this crucial juncture, approach other countries with threats and seek to preserve global inequities? Such arrogance doesn't ensure security for even the U.S. military. If the United States further isolates and batters Iran, conditions will worsen in Afghanistan, and U.S. troops stationed there will ultimately be at risk. The simple observation, "We are all part of one another," becomes acutely evident.

It's perhaps helpful to revisit guidance from those who faced wars and pandemics in the past. The influenza pandemic that ravaged the world beginning in 1918 killed an estimated fifty million people worldwide, including 675,000

in the United States alone.

Thousands of nurses were on the "front lines," delivering health care. Among them were black nurses who not only risked their lives to practice works of mercy but also fought discrimination and racism in their determination to serve. These brave women arduously paved the way for the first eighteen black nurses to serve in the Army Nurse Corps, and they provided "a small turning point in the continuing movement for health equity."

It also may be helpful to learn from health care professionals who are right now caring for people in the world's poorest places.

Writing in mid-March, from a rural village in Tamil Nadu, India, three doctors explained how "public health advisories that have been released in the past few weeks" were geared toward urban residents in the upper and middle classes. They described their encounter with a patient who showed symptoms of COVID-19 infection and advised that she and her daughter home isolate. But the daughter responded that this advice wasn't practical.

"Our house is a little hut, and all four of us live in the same room," she said. "We have enough room just to lie down and sleep. Keeping a one-meter distance is impossible. Three of us are women, and it is not safe for women to sleep outside the house. There is also the threat of scorpions and snakes outside."

When advised to at least keep her mother home until she was well, the daughter explained that "rain or shine, sick or healthy, my mother must go out to graze the goats."

"At the end of this little conversation," noted the doctors, "we understood how impractical social distancing is, for a vast majority of the poor population with whom we work."

In a recent series of tweets, Jonathan Whittall, director of the analysis department for Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders), posed some agonizing questions:

How are you supposed to wash your hands regularly if you have no running water or soap? How are you supposed to implement "social distancing" if you live in a slum or a refugee or containment camp? How are you supposed to stay home if your work pays by the hour and requires you to show up? How are you supposed to stop crossing borders if you are fleeing from war? How are you supposed to get tested for #COVID-19 if the health system is privatized and you can't afford it? How are those with pre-existing health conditions supposed to take extra precautions when they already can't even access the treatment they need?

As COVID-19 continues to spread, many people worldwide are evaluating the glaring, deadly inequalities in our societies. One way to improve survival is to insist that the United States lift sanctions against Iran and instead support acts of practical care. We must jointly confront the coronavirus while constructing a humane future for the world, without wasting time or resources on the continuation of brutal wars. ♦

# The Day the Earth Moved

*On the fiftieth anniversary of Earth Day, environmental activism has never been more important.*

BY TIA NELSON

I was almost fourteen years old on April 22, 1970, the first Earth Day. I spent the day picking up trash at my junior high school, along with other young people.

My father, the late Wisconsin U.S. Senator Gaylord Nelson, came up with the idea of Earth Day. He said its purpose was to “get a nationwide demonstration of concern for the environment so large that it would shake the political establishment out of its lethargy.”

Twenty million people responded to his call to action that day. In doing so, they demonstrated the power of individual action to change the course of history and help build a brighter future.

That first Earth Day ended up sparking a global movement that was successful beyond my father’s wildest dreams. It united people across political lines to take concrete steps toward a healthier planet, including passage of the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act and the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency.

Now, as we approach the fiftieth anniversary of that first Earth Day, the planet is in the throes of a sweeping pandemic that requires an unprecedented level of global commitment and cooperation. It is a moment that could have a profound impact on humankind’s response to the existential threat posed by climate change.

The disruption brought by the coronavirus is as great but much more sudden than that of climate change. Perhaps we will, in the spirit of Earth Day, learn that we are able to make the collective sacrifices required to combat a common threat.

Even before the COVID-19 outbreak, the modern environmental movement was energized. Yet when it comes to my father’s original vision of an inclusive, bipartisan environmental movement rooted in social justice, we still have work to do. Today, as we face the most significant health and environmental challenges of all time, it’s critical that we take stock of the problems and opportunities they bring.

“Our goal is not just an environment of clean air and



Tia and Gaylord Nelson at a Wisconsin campaign event in 1968.

water and scenic beauty,” my father said on Earth Day 1970 during his speech in Denver. “The objective is an environment of decency, quality, and mutual respect for all human beings and all other living creatures.”

His message was that ecology is a big science, not a narrow one. He believed we all have the right to clean air and clean water, and to a bright future of economic and environmental well-being. And he believed in the power of everyday Americans to make a difference.

In recent years, the environmental community and the general public have begun to see our challenge through this lens. Groups like the Sunrise Movement have framed the issue through a much-needed social justice viewpoint and helped give birth to a new movement that views the environment, the economy, and a socially just world as inextricably linked.

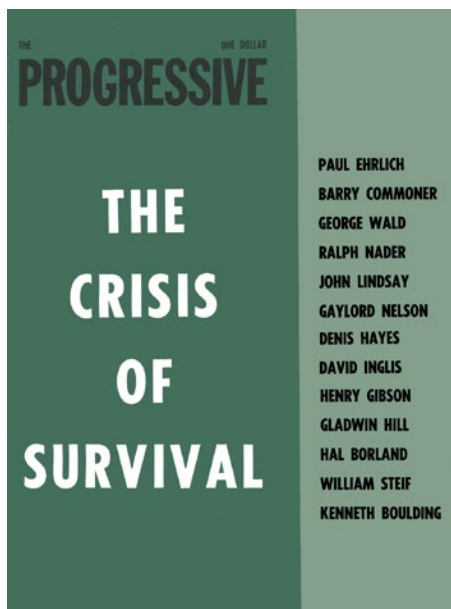
What gives me hope? The power of the individual to make a difference. I reflect on Rosa Parks’s single word of defiance: “No.” Or Greta Thunberg’s simple lonely act of protest in front of the Swedish parliament.

Surely, they could have never dreamed that these simple acts of principle and conscience would change the course of history, just as my father could not have imagined that Earth Day would advance the modern environmental movement in the manner that it did.

What matters, what we desperately need, is a conversation about how we can move forward, with the social will and political capital necessary to build a brighter future. ♦

*Tia Nelson is managing director of the Outrider Foundation, a Madison-based, globally focused not-for-profit dedicated to providing comprehensive, science-based information on issues affecting the long-term well-being of the planet.*





# Earth Day 1970: Action for Survival

*The April 1970 issue of The Progressive was devoted to the first Earth Day. Extra copies were printed and given to organizers and activists for a variety of events. The issue featured articles by key environmental thinkers, as well as a prologue and a final article on actions and resources prepared by the magazine's staff. For this fiftieth anniversary of the first Earth Day, we bring you an excerpt from the introduction:*

It may sound apocalyptic to suggest that man and the nature he corrupts are speeding toward extinction. But the harsh reality, as emphasized by many of our hard-headed experts, is that a new Four Horsemen—Overpopulation, Pollution, the Famine of Resources, and Nuclear War—are riding relentlessly on their mission of destruction.

The process of ravaging our planet has been going on for a long time. The obsessive American hunger for growth, more creature comforts, and an ever fatter Gross National Product—no matter how great the price for polluting and pillaging our national heritage—has contributed significantly to the mounting crisis. To question the sacred assumption that economic growth is always an unmixed blessing is, as *The Wall Street Journal* noted recently, “to threaten the American dream itself.”

But the dream has become a nightmare. A runaway technology, whose only law is profit, has for decades corrupted our air, ravished our soil, denuded our forests, and polluted our water resources. The result is an environment assailed by noxious doses of fumes, sewage, smoke, noise, filth, chemicals, ugliness, and urban decay. And the crisis is compounded by a steadily rising population in defiance of all sense and science.

The choice, both within and between parties, will be between those who make speeches and pass resolutions and those who recognize and act upon the

fact that time is running out, that only the resolute rejection of war, profits-as-usual, procreation-as-usual, comforts-as-usual, and politics-as-usual will prevent our planet from sliding into disaster.

It may be that neither major party will move quickly nor boldly enough. The result could be the long talked-about political realignment in America which would enable those who want to clean up our social and economic pollution, as well as the physical environment, to build a great new movement dedicated to striking at the status quo through the instruments of democracy.

If such a new and forward-looking political instrument is forged, it will be the enlightened vanguard of the nation's youth—those who have mastered the methods of democratic action—who will provide much of its dynamism.

The young have been rebelling against an immoral war and unjust social system and a tawdry culture; now they are massing against the polluted physical environment as well. They have designated the day of their national teach-in on the environment as Earth Day.

It could also become the birthday of a new and more hopeful movement affecting all of our lives in all ways. It is with this hope that we of *The Progressive* dedicate this special issue to these, the young, who understand and are prepared to act on the Crisis of Survival. ♦

Fred Armisen co-hosting  
an episode of *The Inside  
Show* with Mark Arnold.



*Editor's note: This story was conceived, assigned, and completed well before the coronavirus pandemic. The program it describes was suspended prior to the outbreak. Nevertheless, the story remains relevant as an account of how comedy can provide not just an escape but an opportunity for personal growth.*



***How a prison comedy program  
featuring Fred Armisen has helped  
transform inmates' lives.***

BY HALLIE LIEBERMAN

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF COLUMBIA RIVER CREATIVE INITIATIVES

"I'm going to cast thy ass on the floor with my fist," says inmate Benjamin Hall as he sits next to *Saturday Night Live* alum Fred Armisen in a cramped classroom in a Portland, Oregon, prison, workshopping his sketch. In the scene, a character named Dave is threatening to fight a wizard who won't let him sit at a table in the prison mess hall.

The dozen or so inmates in the audience erupt in laughter. "You must yield to my spell," demands another inmate, who is playing the wizard.

Hall clenches his fist and jabs a left hook into his script, simulating a punch, then leans back into his beige plastic chair, wiping his forehead.

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*Hallie Lieberman is a sex historian, journalist, and the author of Buzz: A Stimulating History of the Sex Toy.*





Left: Christian “Scotty” Freeman, third from left, and other inmates prep for “Microwave Magic.” Right: David “Homer” Edmunds, Long Winborn, and Fred Armisen film the fashion show skit from episode 1 of *The Inside Show*.

“There might be a nicer ending than with you just punching him,” says Armisen affably. The star of *Portlandia*, *Los Espookys*, and *Documentary Now!* is clad in thick-rimmed black glasses, black jeans, and a grey hoodie with a visitor badge dangling from it. The inmate-actor, wearing a blue sweatshirt and blue pants with “inmate” stamped on them, nods in agreement.

“And it’s not even a moral thing,” Armisen adds. “It’s just for the fun of watching. What you want to see at the end of this is that you have a change in character.”

Mark Arnold, a bald, forty-seven-year-old inmate, raises his hand. Armisen calls on him. “It’s a satire on how prison actually is,” Arnold explains. “In prison, you actually have gang tables and places where people can’t sit, so it’s real.”

It’s real, all right. The comedy school program began operating at Columbia River Correctional Institution in Portland in 2018 as part of the Columbia River Creative Initiatives, a series of artist-run programs offered at the prison. It has brought in comedians including Armisen, an *SNL* cast member from 2002 to 2013, and led to an ongoing open-mic comedy and variety show at the prison.

The comedy school was founded by Harrell Fletcher, a professor of art and social practice at Portland State University, and co-created by Roshani Thakore, an artist and student in the university’s art and social practice MFA program. It is possibly the only such venture teaching sketch and stand-up comedy in a U.S. prison. (Other prisons, including Dell’Arte’s prison arts program at California’s Pelican Bay State Prison, offer classes in play production, including comedies.)

Starting a comedy program in prison is risky. Comedy is subversive. It’s dangerous. And prison of-

ficials as a group are not known for their keen sense of humor.

“The idea of teaching stand-up comedy in prison wouldn’t even occur to me, because I can’t imagine how you could do it with the level of censoring in most prisons,” says Keramet Reiter, a professor of criminology and law at University of California, Irvine. “I often talk about how anything you think is a First Amendment right is probably just not allowed in prison.”

Yet Reiter thinks comedy in prison is a good idea. “I’ve looked a lot at how people survived decades in solitary confinement,” she says. “The people who survive find ways to keep their mind busy often by doing beautiful drawings or writing poetry or learning a new language.”

Spencer Byrne-Seres, who helped run the comedy program at Columbia River when he was a graduate student at Portland State University, says many of the program’s participants have told him “it’s like the only three hours where they feel like they’re not in prison.”

**THE COMEDY SCHOOL** at Columbia River began as a weekly three-hour class. Local comedians came to the prison and taught joke writing and performing. The first meetings drew about twenty students. The program is funded by Portland State University and the Regional Arts and Culture Council.

“The advantages to comedy are that it’s something that everybody sort of knows about,” Fletcher says. “It was really easy when we first started doing classes to go around the room and just be like, ‘Who are some of your favorite comedians?’ There were a lot of Richard Pryor fans and people who knew about Andy

Kaufman and George Carlin. If we went around the room and asked, 'Who's your favorite contemporary artist?', most people wouldn't have an answer."

Prison officials weren't exactly hostile to the idea of comedy, but they were hesitant, with good reason. Some of the most revered American stand-up comedians have had brushes with the law, including Lenny Bruce, George Carlin, and Mae West, who served eight days of a ten-day sentence for appearing in a play called *Sex*.

When Arnold, a father of two and former Navy man, heard about the comedy class from a fellow inmate, he was surprised: "I'm like, 'What? Comedy in prison?' You know, it was one of those things that really doesn't happen in here."

Arnold began his comedy career by performing three minutes of stand-up material. As Fletcher recalls, it did not go well: "He would mumble a lot and it was sort of confusing, and nobody really quite knew what to make of it." Then Arnold got sent to solitary, which meant he could no longer take part. Fletcher wasn't sure if he'd ever come back.

The first prison program manager wasn't too impressed by the course, notes Thakore, who helped run the comedy school. "We recorded their rehearsals, sent them to her, and she's like, 'I don't find anything funny,'" Thakore says. But the program was allowed to continue.

The first class culminated in a stand-up showcase that was performed in May 2018 and open to the public. The jokes had to be vetted by prison officials.

"There were a couple ground rules that they gave us: no jokes about COs [correctional officers] and police, and no jokes that in any way made criminal life out to be positive," Fletcher says. "From our perspective, we weren't concerned about those things, but we [also] didn't want them to make fun of other people's sexuality, gender, race."

The show was a hit, and Fletcher decided to expand the school further by drawing in national comedians. He knew Armisen through their mutual friend Carrie Brownstein, the Sleater-Kinney guitarist and vocalist who co-starred with Armisen on the hit show *Portlandia*.

It was an easy sell. "When I heard that Harrell does this in Portland, I just wanted to get involved," Armisen says. As he drove to the Columbia River prison to teach his first course on stand-up in 2018, he realized he didn't know Portland as well as he had thought.

"I didn't even know this road that goes all the way out here—a road that doesn't have coffee shops on it," he jokes. "It was a good education for me."

It was Armisen's first time inside a prison, other than an abandoned prison he had used to shoot a few episodes of *Portlandia*, but he was not afraid. "It didn't feel like a dark corner of the world," he says. "It actu-

Fred Armisen teaches a comedy workshop inside a Columbia River Correctional Institution classroom.





ally felt like a well-lit corner of the world. The fact that there's a comedy class going on clearly [means] there's some sense of civility, you know?" Per prison rules, he left his cell phone in his car and made sure not to wear blue because it's the color of prison uniforms.

When Armisen entered the classroom, he was greeted by about twenty students, many bearing gifts they'd made him, such as little drawings and booklets. "Their kindness toward me was one of the most moving things ever," he says. The correctional officers asked for pictures and autographs. He happily obliged.

"I wouldn't even call what I did teaching," Armisen says of the first course. He sees his role as being more of a "comedy helper." But he did offer feedback on the inmates' material, and he came away impressed. "Some of them were good stand-ups," he says. "They take their comedy seriously."

As the school continued, the prison got a bit more lenient. Thakore says she "never asked [inmates] to shy away from critiquing their experience in a prison. They just had to make it funny." But there was some self-censorship. "They [knew that] if they're gonna make fun of a guard, they'll probably get hell."

**IN EARLY 2019**, an inmate who goes by the name Lil Bubbly is sashaying down a makeshift runway at the Columbia River prison clad in loose-fitting jeans and a T-shirt. He gracefully spins and faces his fashion critics: two inmates and Armisen.

"I love it," one of them declares. "I want to say I don't love it," Armisen replies, in a video of the session. "I found it to be very derivative."

Lil Bubbly is, in fact, wearing the same outfit as the guy who modeled before him, as are the guys who prance down the runway after him. They are in prison, after all, and dressing identically is the rule. Perched behind the camera, artist Xi Jie Ng (Salty) films the sketch, which will later air on YouTube as part of the first episode of *The Inside Show*, a variety show and sketch comedy program that she developed with Byrne-Seres and a group of inmates.

"My main goal was for everyone to have fun in a variety show and highlight everyone's eccentricities," Xi Jie Ng says. "The fashion show sketch is meant to point to the indoctrination of people and homogenization of prisoners."

How did Xi Jie Ng and Byrne-Seres convince prison officials to let her not only film a critique of prison culture, but also air the episodes on YouTube?

It's a process. All episodes must be reviewed by four prison officials before they're posted online. Xi Jie Ng, who was in the MFA program when she worked on *The Inside Show*, says they've had only two parts edited out, though she won't describe them.

James Hanley, the prison's corrections rehabilitation manager, calls himself "an extremely liberal person" who does not take offense easily. "These are adults in custody in a prison, and it's not a church group," he says. His concern in reviewing the episodes was to make sure that "people weren't glorifying criminal activity or being homophobic or sexist or racist." One scene he edited out involved an inmate who said he wanted to be President and get his own Melania Trump-type woman.

Both Xi Jie Ng and Fletcher are impressed with how accommodating the prison has been. Fletcher thinks it helps that the program is focused on creating art, not structural change.

"If you entered the prison with an explicit agenda, you're going to be less likely to be allowed to do what you want to do," Fletcher says. "If you go in and say, 'We're doing a comedy show,' then it's a little bit of a Trojan horse. It allows you in and then once you're in, you can start to mess with those things."

Six months after the fashion show, Hanley notes, the prison changed its mandated clothing rules. He thinks the two developments may be related: "The assistant director who was part of that decision process had seen that episode."

**BY THE TIME** Lil Bubbly was showing off his prison garb, Arnold had gotten out of solitary and started attending classes again. "He just started to improve dramatically," Fletcher says. "It just got funnier and funnier. He became a better public speaker, more confident, and kind of just transformed."

Arnold improved so much that Xi Jie Ng asked him to co-host *The Inside Show*, six episodes of which have now been filmed. (Two are currently online; the rest will be posted after a review by prison officials.) Armisen joined Arnold as co-host of the first episode.

Arnold, who was released from prison in September 2019 on transitional leave, says the comedy program "gave me self-confidence and a chance to get away from the [prison] environment, and express myself in, you know, a way that's positive."

Another inmate transformed by the program is Christian "Scotty" Freeman, who appears in a cooking sketch called "Microwave Magic" that Xi Jie Ng developed with Byrne-Seres and several inmates.

"The main idea behind 'Microwave Magic' is that we wanted to show people that like, you don't have to be stuck eating this disgusting shit that they serve to you at the chow hall," he says, mentioning mashed potatoes that he had to empty an entire salt shaker on.

A twenty-one-year-old with dark hair and perfect teeth, Freeman has been in and out of jail or prison



since he was a teenager. He was reluctant at first to be a part of the arts program.

"I'm totally camera shy, and I don't do good in front of groups and stuff like that," Freeman says. But when Freeman first made his way down the hallway to the classroom, it was in the middle of a session and Xi Jie Ng was working so intently that she didn't even notice that he had entered the room. Freeman saw a board at the front of the room with scrawls from a brainstorming session. "Do you guys have a host for the cooking show?" he asked. Xi Jie Ng's "eyes just lit up," he recalls.

In "Microwave Magic," Freeman narrates as his fellow inmates cook items in the microwave (the only cooking tool they have access to), using ingredients from the commissary. During the filming of the first episode, Freeman was scared. "I started sweating bullets," he recalls. "I remember just looking at everybody like, 'Oh my God, I gotta perform in front of all these people. Hopefully I don't do something super embarrassing.'"

In the episode, Freeman narrates as an inmate makes a rameritto, a burrito stuffed with ramen, Tang-marinated pork rinds, Cheez Whiz, and refried beans. (It's actually quite tasty.)

As he shot more episodes, Freeman began to feel more comfortable on camera. "I start warming up to everybody. It starts getting funnier," he says. "*The*

*Inside Show* has really opened up this big door for me." He still gets nervous but now knows how to work through it.

Hanley agrees the program has changed inmates' lives.

"I've seen people performing their stand-up act," he says. "They walk a little taller and prouder and more confident." He thinks it may have improved behavior as well. "If they were going to be confronted by a situation in the past which could have resulted in punching a person, they're like, I don't want to do that because I don't want to risk [being kicked out of] this program."

Armisen's perspective has changed, too. He considers teaching at the prison to be one of the most satisfying experiences of his career and wishes he'd started volunteering earlier.

"I feel like I learned so much about people and what works with comedy," he says. "It's easy to dehumanize [incarcerated people] because there's a crime involved," he says. "But then you go and they're human beings."

And that's what *The Inside Show* is trying to do: allow inmates to be seen as normal people and not be defined, as Hanley says, "by their worst moments." And what better way to humanize prison than through comedy: the least pretentious art form around, one that accepts outlaws and weirdos into its ranks. As Armisen says, "If you're into it, we're already in the same club." ♦

Xi Jie Ng (Salty), front row center, poses with *Inside Show* cast members, including Christian "Scotty" Freeman, back row second from right.



# Henry Wallace and the Fight Against American Fascism

BY JOHN NICHOLS

**Amid all the perfervid debate about whether Trump or Trumpism was ushering in homegrown fascism during the first year of the forty-fifth presidency, a social-media meme started making the rounds. It purported to quote Henry Wallace, Vice President to Franklin D. Roosevelt, defining an American fascist as “one whose lust for money or power is combined with such an intensity of intolerance toward those of other races, parties, classes, religions, cultures, regions, or nations as to make him ruthless in his use of deceit or violence to attain the fight for the soul of the democratic party his ends.”**

That read like too perfect a prediction of Trump and Trumpism. People were skeptical, as they often are of online memes. The fact-checking website *Snopes.com* recognized why people would doubt that a sitting Vice President might have made so bold a statement. But Snopes certified that the quote had been “correctly attributed.”

It is a measure of how time and bias unwind our history that Wallace’s engagement with the threat of American fascism was forgotten. Seventy-five years earlier, however, what Wallace was doing went to the very heart of the struggle for the soul of the Democratic Party and the country.

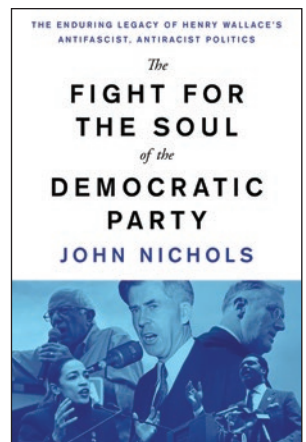
For the better part of a year, from the summer of 1943 to the summer of 1944, everyone who was paying attention knew that Wallace was defining fascism in an American context. As he wrote in his landmark essay, “The Danger of American Fascism,” published in *The New York Times* Sunday magazine in April 1944: “Every Jew-baiter, every Catholic hater, is a fascist at heart. The hoodlums who have been desecrating churches, cathedrals, and synagogues in some of our larger cities are ripe material for fascist leadership.”

Wallace was expanding the definition of American fascism. He was not just talking about Fritz Julius Kuhn’s Nazi-inspired German American Bund and the Fascist League of North America that Mussolini’s agent, Paolo Ignazio Maria Thaon di Revel, had organized in New York and Boston.

This was about more than the incidents like those in which young men dressed in the SS-inspired uniforms of the American Ordnungsdienst marched into Milwaukee public meetings and beat up anyone who dared to object when the jagged thunderbolt symbol of the SS was raised beside the stars and stripes.

“The dangerous American fascist is the man who wants to do in the United States in an American way what Hitler did in Germany in a Prussian way,” argued Wallace in his essay. He charged that those who sought to divide the United States along lines of race, religion, and class could be “encountered in Wall Street, Main Street, or Tobacco Road.”

“Some even suspect,” Wallace wrote, “that they can detect incipient traces of it along the Potomac.”



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*From The Fight for the Soul of the Democratic Party: The Enduring Legacy of Henry Wallace's Antifascist, Antiracist Politics, by John Nichols. Publication date: May 5, 2020. Excerpted with permission from Verso Books.*

Wallace did not limit his critique of American fascism to the overt racists and anti-Semites that at least some of the mainstream politicians of his day decried. He was determined to go deeper, to talk about the enablers of the racists and anti-Semites.

“The obvious types of American fascists are dealt with on the air and in the press. These demagogues and stooges are fronts for others,” Wallace wrote. “The really dangerous American fascists are not those who are hooked up directly or indirectly with the Axis.” Rather, he warned of “a purposeful coalition among the cartelists, the deliberate poisoners of public information and those who stand for the KKK type of demagoguery.”

This was a definition of fascism that brought the issues of authoritarianism and totalitarianism, of media manipulation and political machination, home to America. Wallace even saw the prospects of an American fascism in the predictable machinations of big business.

“Monopolists who fear competition and who distrust democracy because it stands for equal opportunity would like to secure their position against small and energetic enterprise,” he wrote. “In an effort to eliminate the possibility of any rival growing up, some monopolists would sacrifice democracy itself.”

This was all too much for the editorial page of the *Times*, which took the extraordinary step of denouncing Wallace’s essay on the very Sunday it was published in the newspaper’s magazine. Decrying what it referred to as the “shrill cries of ‘Fascist’ ” that foster “an atmosphere charged with emotion, suspicion, and bitterness,” the *Times* editorial accused Wallace of going too far in his denunciations of monopolies and cartels.

“It is astonishing that Mr. Wallace cannot see that in going to such lengths he approaches the very intolerance that he condemns,” the editorial said. The *Times* was effectively arguing that “it can’t happen here.”

Had Wallace been more cautious in his approach, he might well have earned the praise of the *Times*, the grudging embrace of his fellow Democrats, a second term as Vice President and, with the death of Franklin Roosevelt less than three months after his fourth Inauguration Day, almost a full term as President.

But Wallace felt a sense of urgency for his party, for his country, and for the world, that would cost him almost everything—except the bully pulpit from which he came close to writing his own alternative history.

As Wallace turned the volume up, the columnist Max Lerner declared, “There is not a man in the country, or anywhere in the world, who is saying the things Wallace is saying.” Wallace was making the biggest play of his career. He well understood the risks, and he embraced them.

“Time will not wait,” he declared at a September 1943 rally organized by the Chicago United Nations Committee to Win the Peace. “The breath of the future is on us as it has never been before.”

Through the long wartime winter of 1943 into 1944, Wallace traveled the country at his own expense, speaking in union halls and on factory floors, on waterfronts and in hotel ballrooms, in farm country and big cities, about what was at stake. He rallied with African Americans against racism, with Jews against anti-Semitism, with women for an Equal Rights Amendment, with returning soldiers about what the country owed them for their sacrifices. He did not limit himself to Democratic audiences.

“Those who fight for us in this war belong to many parties, many creeds, and many races,” he said. “This is a people’s war. The peace must be a people’s peace.”

Historian Peter Dreier has referred to Wallace as “the New Deal’s evangelist” and never was the Vice President’s missionary zeal so ardent as in February 1944, when he embarked on a speaking tour that focused on the theme “America Tomorrow.”

It took him to Los Angeles; San Diego; San Francisco; Portland, Oregon; Seattle; Milwaukee; Chicago; Springfield, Illinois; St. Louis; and Minneapolis, where a young professor of political science at Macalester College, Hubert Humphrey, would introduce him to a crowd of 10,000 at the Minneapolis Armory and tell the Vice President “progressive forces look to you for inspiration and leadership.”

Historian John Morton Blum observed that the tour put Wallace “unequivocally on his party’s left,” with speeches in which he “called for a ‘general welfare economy’ and predicted ‘a profound revolution’ after the war that would be ‘gradual and bloodless’ if the press, politicians, and men of wealth used their influence ‘on behalf of the public good.’ ” Their cooperation was not assured, however, as Wallace explained in the opening address of the tour to a crowd of 5,000 gathered in Los Angeles.

“Big business must not have such control of Congress and the executive branch as to make it easy for them to write the rules of the postwar game,” he warned.



The next day, Wallace spoke to thousands of workers at the Wilmington shipyard in Los Angeles and then rallied Teamsters to oppose the threat of fascism in the postwar era.

"It is so easy in government to put the dollar and the plant before the man," he said. "This is a fascistic idea. Yet, unless labor makes itself heard among the Congressional and governmental committees which have so much to do with problems of reconversion of industry and postwar activity, we shall see a tendency for property rights to be placed ahead of human rights."

*The New York Times* was not impressed. In an editorial published a week after the America Tomorrow tour began, the editors asked of Wallace, "Who are the 'stooges' who put Wall Street first and the country second?"

Accusing the Vice President of endangering the war effort with reckless charges and suggesting he had disregarded "the tolerance and good temper that must lie at the heart of any democracy that is to work," the editors asked, "Who are these American fascists?" It wanted evidence that the men about whom Wallace spoke met the narrowest definition of a "fascist," as believers in "one-party totalitarian government" and "the suppression of all opposition," using violence so extreme that "those who disagree with them [are] either to be shot or thrown into concentration camps."

Wallace initially ignored the *Times* editorials demanding that he explain what he meant when he spoke of the "American fascist." But he eventually wrote his famous reply, which filled three pages of its Sunday magazine on April 9, 1944.

"The American fascists are most easily recognized by their deliberate perversion of truth and fact," Wallace wrote. "Their newspapers and propaganda carefully cultivate every fissure of disunity, every crack in the common front against fascism. They use every opportunity to impugn democracy . . . They claim to be super-patriots, but they would destroy every liberty guaranteed by the Constitution."

The fight against American fascism would not be waged by pointing fingers of blame at this industrialist or that editor, Wallace wrote, but rather by remaining on "guard against intolerance, bigotry, and the pretension of invidious distinction."

Even today, there are debates about how to define fascism, but we recognize now that it cannot be identified by a single rigid set of characteristics. Fascism "takes on the colors and practices of each nation

it infects," author Adam Gopnik observed in 2016. "In Italy, it is bombastic and neo-classical in form. In Spain, Catholic and religious. In Germany, violent and romantic." He added: "It is no surprise that the American face of fascism would take on the forms of celebrity television."

## The fight that Henry Wallace waged against American fascism was a fight for democracy. A vital American democracy, he argued, was the antidote to American fascism.

And Henry Giroux, a cultural critic who has written extensively on authoritarianism, says: "Fascism looks different in different cultures, depending on that culture. In fact, it is the essence of fascism to have no single, fixed form."

The fight that Henry Wallace waged against American fascism was a fight for democracy. A vital American democracy, he argued, was the antidote to American fascism. As he put it:

"We must not tolerate oppressive government or industrial oligarchy in the form of monopolies and cartels. As long as scientific research and inventive ingenuity outrun our ability to devise social mechanisms to raise the living standards of the people, we may expect the liberal potential of the United States to increase. If this liberal potential is properly channeled, we may expect the area of freedom of the United States to increase. The problem is to spend up our rate of social invention in the service of the welfare of all the people."

If that read like a political appeal, it was. At the very opening of his essay for the *Times*, Wallace wrote, "The supreme god of a fascist, to which his ends are directed, may be money or power; may be a race or a class; may be a military, clique, or an economic group; or may be a culture, religion, or a political party." (Emphasis added.)

As Wallace readied to battle for a second nomination as Vice President, one that would ultimately be denied him, he wrote his friend William Allen White, a liberal Republican editor from Kansas.

"Well," Wallace concluded, "we shall each keep fighting in our own way and perhaps between us we can produce results." That was a knowing wink to the broader struggle, and to Wallace's own circumstance as he prepared to wrestle for the soul of the Democratic Party. ♦



# ‘We Need Both Equity and Rights’

*Felicia Wong of the Roosevelt Institute on how to reclaim FDR’s vision for America.*

BY NORMAN STOCKWELL

**F**elicia Wong is the president and chief executive officer of the Roosevelt Institute, a New York-based think tank and campus network, and the co-author of *The Hidden Rules of Race: Barriers to an Inclusive Economy* (Cambridge University Press, 2017).

The Roosevelt Institute, founded in 1939 by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, is the nonprofit partner of the Roosevelt Presidential Library in Hyde Park, New York, the first U.S. presidential library. The institute today is a think tank for progressive economic policy ideas and runs the nation’s largest student policy network on college campuses.

Wong grew up in California and says her politics were shaped in part by her parents’ lives and experiences. Her father, Ed Wong, grew up in Augusta, Georgia, in the Jim Crow South. At that time, Chinese Americans lived on the black side of the railroad tracks, but were considered “honorary white” for the purposes of schooling.

Wong’s mother, artist and poet Flo Oy Wong, grew up in Oakland’s Chinatown. Her mother’s mixed-media assemblages have addressed the experiences of Chinese immigrants entering the country through California’s Angel Island, and the often buried history of Japanese Americans in U.S. internment camps during World War II.

We spoke by telephone in early March, before the full effects of the coronavirus pandemic were being

felt, and continued our conversation via email later in the month.

**Q: Let’s start by talking about Franklin Roosevelt’s Economic Bill of Rights, which he delivered in the State of the Union Address in January 1944. Bernie Sanders has called it one of the most important speeches ever made by a President.**

**Wong:** I think it’s really important that the Economic Bill of Rights is coming back into our politics. I think Sanders is not the only person invoking the idea that we need both equity and rights, and those rights must be more than civil, more than social. They also must be economic, and in fact all those three things go together.

**Q: How did we get away from that notion of government as the provider of economic rights to its citizens?**

**Wong:** In a word, neoliberalism. We got away from this notion of true freedom including economic freedom, and the neoliberal turn in our politics was a very

*Norman Stockwell is publisher of The Progressive.*



big part of that. Neoliberalism is this idea that only the market can bring freedom, and only the market and not government can provide choice. So you must therefore get government “out of the way” in order to let the market function properly.

In some ways, you can date it to the 1980s. You can date it to the 1940s, if you want to. You can certainly date it to 1964, with the failed but in some ways successful Goldwater campaign. Or the 1970s and the tax revolution in California whereby property owners—white, older property owners—successfully argued that they were being strangled by property taxation. That led to lowering those taxes, which really lowered school and transportation and other kinds of revenues that are essential for a well-functioning democracy.

The idea that economic rights are human rights and that those things are essential to human flour-

**“The current public health and economy crisis lays bare the deep inequalities that are already endemic to our society.”**

ishing really was severed intellectually starting in the 1940s. It continued through the 1970s and 1980s with the advent of the Chicago school of economics, and came into political power in the 1980s in the United States with [Ronald] Reagan and in the United Kingdom with [Margaret] Thatcher.

**Q: So this idea of economic rights as human rights is very much a part of our democratic history, and yet also has been kind of severed from it. What do you see today as the main factors promoting and perpetuating income inequality in America?**

**Wong:** There are a lot of policy choices that we made starting in the 1970s and 1980s and continue to make today that drive economic inequality. But I think it’s important to take a step back from the policy choices. What makes us think a policy choice to lower taxation, to deregulate banking, or to loosen some of the regulations put forward on “medium sized banks” by Dodd-Frank, et cetera, are the right choices? To me, you have to go back to our worldview.

So the Roosevelt Institute’s day-to-day mission is actually to change the way that people think about the economy, and therefore to change the way we think about what’s possible economically.

Neoliberals argue that the economy is driven by “free markets.” We know empirically now that a healthy economy is not driven by those kinds of markets. The economy is shaped by choices. It’s shaped by institu-

tions. It’s shaped by the rules that structure our markets. Our rules determine who benefits or who loses in a changing and dynamic economy. We have to look at how we structure those rules.

So it’s not about rules “getting out of the way.” Those rules never did get out of the way. They just ended up ensuring that powerful companies could take more market share and be more powerful. They ensure that rich people could become super-rich. It’s about making those rules more visible so we can begin to understand what is driving this kind of radical inequality of income and of wealth that we see today.

How we think about the economy is an important foundational starting point.

**Q: How should we think about the economy?**

**Wong:** You have to look at our economic policies, and our democracy policies. I’ll name just a few that are really toxic.

The first is definitely tax policy. We have seen taxation on the super-rich, like wealth taxation, go down radically since FDR’s day and even since Eisenhower. We have seen corporate taxation reduced significantly. We’ve seen individual income taxes come down. We’ve also seen this plethora of tax havens, corporations stashing profits away from taxes overseas.

The second element of policy focuses squarely on race and gender. We have had a number of rules, since well before neoliberalism. Going all the way back to the days of enslaving people of African descent, we have excluded some people from the labor market, from earning living wages, and ultimately, from accumulating wealth and capital in a system that privileges wealth and capital.

We’ve defined economic participation according to identities and, in the case I just mentioned, race. We’ve also, since the beginning of American history, asked women to do labor and not compensated them for it, and not given them legal rights to property, to contracts, to have a credit card, et cetera.

Many of these laws have been changed now but their effects still linger. This is why you see such radical inequality by race and by gender. We have had rules that excluded people and we now need rules that include people.

Then I think the third thing is the way our democracy works in and of itself. We have a system whereby political rule-writing is dominated by the wealthy and a few corporations who can afford massive lobbying, whether it’s through the U.S. Chamber of Commerce or through other kinds of associations, trade associ-

ations, the real estate lobby, the oil and gas lobby, or individual companies.

The super-rich have far greater access to politics than ordinary people do, and corporations and corporate lobbyists win the vast preponderance of any policy fights. And they're able to write rules, whether it's minimum wage rules, or rules about regulating pollution. They can write rules that benefit them and are literally anti-democratic in that they do not reflect the will of the majority of Americans.

**Q: Given the landscape we're in, what are some changes that we can implement to address those inequalities?**

**Wong:** The critiques actually suggest their own solutions. To take that tax policy example, you can raise taxes on the wealthy. You see more calls for that in today's political environment, Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders having done the best job of making arguments for taxing the super-rich. We need wealth taxation, increasing corporate taxation, and international and trade agreements that focus on closing international tax havens.

With respect to affirmative inclusion, we need to make sure people are included by race and by gender in the labor market and in the ability to gain and accumulate wealth. One set of new ideas is childhood trusts or baby bonds. This idea that all children should be given some modest amount of capital at birth and that capital would accumulate until they're eighteen. Property, of course, is the primary way we accumulate wealth.

Finally, we've got to look at the anti-corruption proposals that Roosevelt put out and Warren has put out. Reversing *Citizens United*, and closing those revolving-door loopholes to ensure that people in public jobs actually work for the public. It's important to appoint people to those jobs who have demonstrated a fidelity to more egalitarian policies, which are publicly popular. These ideas are popular not just with Democrats but also with Republicans and independents.

**Q: What about reparations as a way of addressing some of this historical racial income inequality?**

**Wong:** Absolutely. Reparations are a really important part of our politics and our policy. It's important to calculate, and to debate how to calculate, the cost to descendants of enslaved people, and to our nation as a whole. Imagining that enslaving an entire race of human beings for hundreds of years is cost-free 150 years

after Emancipation is naïve. So really reckoning with those costs, economic and human, is a critical part of our thinking about economics. It's also fundamentally important to think about the cost to our politics.

And this idea of battling for the soul of progressivism. Sometimes you're battling for the soul of the Democratic Party. That's kind of the framework you see out there these days.

But one way to battle for the soul of our nation is to recognize the immense and enormous cost of slavery to black Americans, to white Americans, to Americans of all races. Reparations play an enormous part in that conversation.

I recognize we're going to see enormous white patriarchal backlash from even suggesting that we have that conversation. As Eleanor Roosevelt said, you need the courage to "do the thing you think you cannot do." I think America needs the courage to have this conversation if we're legitimately going to begin to heal.

**Q: In what ways are the impacts of economic inequality highlighted and exacerbated by the current crisis we are experiencing with the COVID-19 pandemic?**

**Wong:** The current public health and economy crisis lays bare the deep inequalities that are already endemic to our society. Everyone is, of course, frightened by the virus itself. The times are extraordinarily stressful for all. But many wealthier people can isolate, while low-income workers—often people of color, new immigrants, women, people in the retail or health care or caregiving sectors—need to keep taking public transportation or physically showing up for work. And the first people to be laid off in the case of a demand shortfall are usually the lowest paid employees.

The good news is that we can do something about this. The federal government can absolutely afford to provide cash backstops—at least \$1,000 per person—to those in need. We can mandate paid sick leave for all workers. We can extend unemployment insurance benefits. We can expand health insurance coverage and put in motion public production of basic medicines. In fact, given the amount of wealth in this country that could be put to better public use, we can't afford *not* to do these things.

The COVID-19 crisis shows that we are all equal—equally vulnerable to illness, and part of an inextricably connected society. Our economics can and must reflect this reality. ♦



# Religion and the Left

BY ERIK GUNN

In the effort to pass the Affordable Care Act and the subsequent court fights to get it upheld, some of the most powerful opponents were conservative Christian institutions, from the Catholic Church to the evangelical, family-owned Hobby Lobby retail chain.

Their role in fighting the passage of President Barack Obama's signature policy, and then trying to blunt its inclusion of reproductive rights as an essential component of a national health care plan, is widely known.

Yet how many people are aware that among Obama's staunchest allies in lobbying to pass the ACA were two Catholic nuns, one of whom headed the national organization for Catholic hospitals and nursing homes? How many know that even as an evangelical Christian movement helped whip up opposition to universal health care as an attack on religious freedom, other faith-based organizations helped drag Obamacare across the finish line, albeit without a single Republican vote in Congress?

This less sung, if not unsung, story of the role of faith-based activism on behalf of the first successful attempt to provide something close to universal health care in the United States is among those that Jack Jenkins tells in his new book, *American Prophets: The Religious Roots of Progressive Politics and the Ongoing Fight for the Soul of the Country*. As Jenkins declares in the book's opening pages, "if it weren't for the Religious Left, the ACA probably wouldn't exist."

It is an astonishing claim, but one that Jenkins convincingly defends. And, in the rest of the book, he demonstrates with equal conviction that faith groups have played an important role in some of the

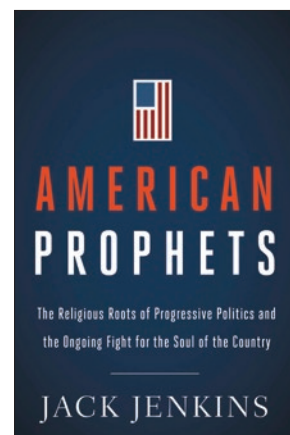
most important social movements of our era. It spans as widely as the Occupy Wall Street movement to Black Lives Matter to the struggle to protect Native American lands at the Standing Rock Indian Reservation in North and South Dakota. Even the conservative Christian war on LGBTQ rights and marriage equality in the name of "religious liberty" has been met with a multi-faith progressive response.

Yet, as with the story of the ACA, the role of faith groups in progressive movements has frequently been all but invisible in public consciousness.

We're all well aware that white evangelical Christians, more than 80 percent of whom voted for Donald Trump in 2016, were key to his victory, and have since been rewarded with rightwing judicial appointments and attempts to roll back policies that protect the rights of LGBTQ people.

Evangelical leaders, including Franklin Graham and Jerry Falwell Jr., have embraced Trump with an enthusiasm not seen since Falwell's father helped mobilize what was then a new "Christian Right" voting bloc to elect Ronald Reagan.

These undeniable political facts have fueled an oversimplified and monolithic assumption about the influence of religion in contemporary politics: that it has operated on only one side of the argument, on behalf of wealth and power. *American Prophets* is a necessary and highly readable corrective to that assumption.



*American Prophets: The Religious Roots of Progressive Politics and the Ongoing Fight for the Soul of the Country*

By Jack Jenkins

HarperOne, 352 pages,

Publication date: April 21, 2020.

In the 400 years since white colonists arrived on the shores of what is now North America, religion has been intertwined with some of the most important and wrenching battles for justice.

It has, undeniably, often taken the side of power—or, in the case of theocratic early New England, held the seat of power, using it oppressively to uphold privilege. Religious leaders have extolled the rights of slaveholders, condemned organized labor, declared segregation to be God's will.

Yet religion has also animated many of the movements that struggled for a more just society. The same Bible which the slaveholders' preachers used to justify human bondage inspired abolitionists and the Underground Railroad. As workers organized and formed unions in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they gave rise to pro-worker movements among Jews, Catholics, and Protestant Christians.

The modern civil rights movement began in the black church, and both the antiwar movement of the 1960s and the nuclear freeze campaign, two decades later, had strong participation from people of religious faith.

Erik Gunn, a frequent contributor to *The Progressive*, reports on work and economics for the Wisconsin Examiner state news bureau.

It's a dichotomy that, as Jenkins himself wrote recently, persists into this time of COVID-19, when some evangelical pastors—there are notable exceptions—seem more inclined to express support for Trump's handling of the pandemic.

*American Prophets* addresses those earlier historical points in passing (it went to press before the novel coronavirus was even in the headlines), but it is primarily a history of the past two decades of progressive, faith-based activism.

"It may not have the same laser-focused legislative agenda as the Religious Right's inside-the-Beltway power brokers," Jenkins writes, "but the Religious Left's passion—combined an admittedly ephemeral and sometimes heavily Catholic religion-and-politics apparatus that helps grassroots activists influence the influential—has proven strong enough to force laws through Congress, stoke the ire of the Vatican, and stare down Donald Trump."

After a brief introduction describing a prayer service at an Occupy gathering in lower Manhattan in 2011, Jenkins takes us back to the campaign to pass the ACA. He maps out how the Democratic Party's half-hearted outreach to left-leaning faith groups in the 2004 election grew into a sophisticated organizing project that four years later elected Obama, whose fluency in appealing to his own Christian faith made false claims of his secretly being a Muslim all the more obnoxious.

Next, Jenkins examines how Trump and the evangelical right courted each other in the 2016 election, fusing two long-oppositional wings of conservative Christianity: traditional evangelicalism and the prosperity gospel. Jenkins also throws a spotlight on the faith leaders and groups that have emerged to resist Trump and the white nationalism he's unleashed.

The chapters that follow take us to the Reverend William J. Barber II's "Moral Mondays" campaign in North Carolina; to Ferguson, Missouri, and the growth of the Black Lives Matter movement follow-

ing the August 2014 shooting of Michael Brown by a white police officer; to Arizona, a site of the new sanctuary movement to protect undocumented immigrants from deportation; and to the role of Native American spirituality in animating the protests against oil pipelines along with the larger, faith-based component of the fight against climate change.

Jenkins then returns to the 2011 Occupy movement and the subsequent revival in 2018 of Martin Luther King's Poor People's Campaign by Barber and the Reverend Liz Theoharis. He chronicles the story, at once painful and uplifting, of mainline

**It's a dichotomy that persists into this time of COVID-19, when some evangelical pastors seem more inclined to express support for Trump's handling of the pandemic.**

Christianity—especially as it stumbles toward acceptance of LGBTQ equality, a journey by no means finished.

Probably no one is more qualified than Jenkins to write this book. A divinity school graduate as well as a veteran journalist, he's been reporting on the subject of faith and politics for nearly two decades. Formerly writing about religion at the website *Think Progress*, Jenkins now covers religion and politics for the Religion News Service, where he has paid close attention to the varieties of religious exposition on the campaign trail.

Perhaps his most important contribution will be to inform secularly oriented, atheist, and agnostic progressives of the huge role that faith communities have played, especially in the social justice struggles of the past two decades. "For modern religious progressives," Jenkins writes, "there is little, if any, distinction between the spiritual and the political, and activism is often seen as a religious edict."

Jenkins also recognizes the work being done to construct a multi-religious movement that Barber has called a "fusion coalition."

Of course, there is a significant difference between the "Religious Left"—a term Jenkins uses throughout, even as he acknowledges early on that it is simplistic and would likely be rejected by some of those included under that umbrella—and the Religious Right.

The latter has shown a ready willingness to yoke political and theological loyalty, with a theology centered on what the late progressive Christian writer Marcus Borg has called "rules and requirements" for avoiding an afterlife of everlasting torment. Meanwhile, as Elizabeth Bruenig wrote last year in *The Washington Post*, "religion simply isn't the mass mobilizing force on the left that it has been on the right."

It is true that younger generations of voters are increasingly secular. But it would be wrong to write off

those generations as uniformly secular, considering the cadre of millennial religious writers and activists who have emerged in the last decade.

Paraphrasing Diana Butler Bass, the Episcopalian writer and historian on contemporary religion, Jenkins writes that "the prominent role of women in the Religious Left helped the movement transcend the patriarchal constraints of individual denominations." He continues: "As an even more diverse band of faith leaders occupy positions of prominence—be they LGBTQ, immigrants, or non-Christians—so too will the religious institutions they need reflect a broader more progressive corpus of political concerns."

The presidential campaign now underway seems likely to offer a defining test of that assertion. There's every sign that, once again, white evangelicals will vote to reelect Trump in overwhelming numbers.

Jenkins helps us see the other part of that story: the faith-driven struggle by Jews, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Earth-centered religionists, and "nones" as well, to write a new and more hopeful chapter in our communal life. ♦



# THE LESSONS WE SHOULDN'T LEARN



**NEGIN FARSAD**

(@NeginFarsad) is the host of the political comedy podcast *Fake the Nation* and author of the book *How to Make White People Laugh*.

**A**s we roll through this global pandemic, we're learning a lot about how disease spreads, how interconnected the globe is, and how quickly we should be responding to outbreaks of this nature. There are valuable lessons here and, if we're not short-sighted and ridiculous, we'll come out of it stronger.

But—this wouldn't be a column without a “but”—I'm worried about the truly garbage lessons we might accidentally “learn” from this global pandemic.

We might think that social distancing should be a way of life. If I never shake hands with anyone ever again, I'll be safe. If I stay at a distance and never feel the heat of another person, we can keep our interactions short and germ free.

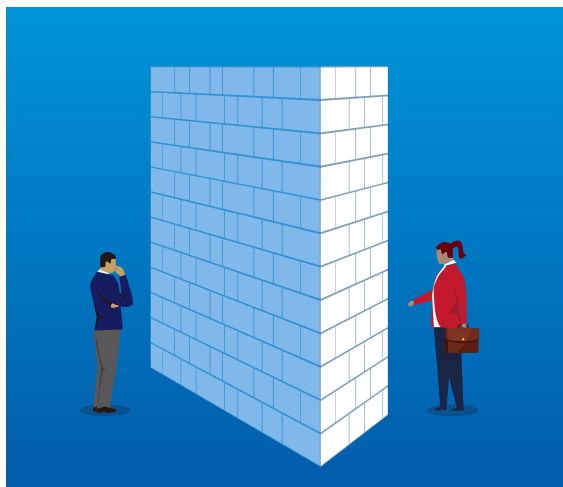
If I order everything and never leave my house, I'll be safe. I can get everything I need delivered to my door.

If I work from home, I won't ever have to breathe the same air as my colleagues. We'll use Slack. We'll get by as our personhood is mediated by screens. Of course, in this scenario, we're not thinking about the wage workers whose livelihoods require them to be among other humans, engaging in social if not actual commerce.

In the post-apocalyptic world of the film *I Am Legend*, Will Smith manages to have conversations with a dog; in *Cast Away*, Tom Hanks befriends a volleyball. You can do that but remember, the volleyball never talks back. All of

us need human connection, and our goal through this terrible time must be to find creative ways to maintain it, without the actual contact.

There are other bad lessons that might come from the fact that President Donald Trump has proven utterly unable to provide the kind of leadership that this mo-



ment requires. Even some Republicans admit he's the wrong person for this gargantuan challenge. His constant lying and complete lack of competence require that he must be ignored, as much as possible, at this critical time.

Yet this is a time when we *need* a strong federal government, so that there is uniformity in our response. Leaders including Governor Andrew Cuomo of New York and Mayor Bill DeBlasio of New York City have done the best they can to fill the void left by Trump's lack of leadership. But even they admit that they can't do this alone. That leadership needs to come from the top. If we can't speak with one voice, do we even have a national identity?

Another danger is that we might come to feel that authoritarianism is good. Look at what China did! They flattened the pants out of that curve! Maybe limited civil liberties aren't so bad. Maybe that's how we fight future pandemics. Maybe the President should have some unchecked power so he—because it's always a he—can quickly respond to pandemics or whatever crazy global event that might come our way in the future.

These are some terrible takeaways and they're all wrong. Let's work from home because we must, but let us not accept this as the new normal. Getting everything delivered to our door is fine and dandy—except that a whole bunch of someones have to deliver everything to our door.

We're already creating two classes of people: those who consume and those who deliver. It's easy to work from home if you have that kind of job, but many people do not.

Of course, we need to restrict movement and reduce person-to-person contact, *for a time*. Of course, we have to work from home if possible, *temporarily*! We need to learn how to react nimbly to outbreaks, but also prepare for a time when things will get better.

I can't wait to get back to my community, to share a space with people I know and don't know. I also can't wait to see the kind of leadership that will make that possible. ♦

# ABOUT THOSE ‘ILLEGAL ALIENS’

**A**s a writer, I have two daily obsessions. One is coffee, the other is language. I’m not a snob about either; I just need them both to make my brain work. In these strange and dangerous days of COVID-19, both of them keep me sane.

But if I had to choose only one, I’d give up my beloved coffee for words. I understand how important language is in my own life, so I keep an eye on how it operates, the work it does, and the influence it has.

An important choice must be made by each of us when we talk about people who were not born in the United States but are living here without legal status. Perhaps that’s you, or someone in your family. It’s surely someone in your community. Best estimates place the number of people in this circumstance at about 10.5 million.

When I talk about this group, I use the words “undocumented immigrants.” When President Donald Trump talks, he prefers the words “illegal aliens.” Or at least that’s the term he uses now. *The Washington Post* reported that Trump said “illegal alien” only twice in his first year as President. In 2019, he suddenly started using the phrase a lot, including three times in ten minutes in his first prime-time Oval Office address.

In her award-winning book, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*, Mae Ngai writes, “The illegal alien that is abstractly defined is something of a spectre, a body stripped of individual personage.” So that’s what the President is doing: “Illegal” sounds like a criminal and “alien” sounds like a

monster. It’s easier to deny human rights to criminals and monsters than, say, your gentle uncle who happens to live here without the correct paperwork.

During the March 15 debate, Joe Biden referred to “an undocumented alien,” then quickly corrected himself to “an undocumented person.” This seeming slip-up came as he answered a question about the danger of undocumented people underreporting cases of COVID-19 out of the fear that if they make themselves known, they will be reported to immigration authorities and potentially deported.

Biden insisted they should be safe to report an illness and get help without repercussions. Bernie Sanders added that his proposed Medicare for All plan includes the undocumented, saying, “That should be a general principle, above and beyond the coronavirus.”

The U.S. economy has always needed immigrant labor, and being the relentlessly capitalistic nation that it is, the cheaper that labor, the better. These undocumented hands and bodies do the tough work of fruit picking, meat packing, and dish washing, as well as care work for American children and elderly people.

We are all interdependent. The Department of Agriculture estimates that about half of the nation’s farmworkers are unauthorized, while 15 percent of those in construction lack papers—more than the share of legal immigrants in either industry. In the service sector, which would include jobs such as fast-food and domestic help, the figure is about 9 percent.

These immigrants may have families and pay taxes, but they have no rights here. They are lucky to just get a paycheck in a country that takes so much from them. So the undocumented are a source of compliant labor that the United States has never had to take care of in any way. Isn’t that just charming? A neoliberal dream come true. The new coronavirus does not check our papers, it comes for us all. In this emergency, governments need to stop checking papers too. And we all need to make sure that our language does not, literally, alienate others.

“This cycle of restricted labor mobility and deportation is crucial to the maintenance of global apartheid,” sociologist Tanya Golash-Boza has written. Cru-

**It’s easier to deny human rights to criminals and monsters than, say, your gentle uncle who happens to live here without the correct paperwork.**

cially, she traces why immigrants came here in the first place, the economic realities that caused them to move, and the need in the United States’ economy for a “disposable” labor force.

Surely, humans aren’t disposable, but perhaps “illegal aliens” are? The words we choose to use about other people tell a bigger story than their meaning, and that story is ultimately about us. If we do not make health insurance a priority for all citizens and immigrants, documented or not, many of us may have a deadly price to pay. ♦



## MAEVE HIGGINS

writes for *The New York Times* and co-hosts the climate justice podcast *Mothers of Invention*. Her new book is *Maeve in America: Essays by a Girl from Somewhere Else*.



# A LIFE WITHOUT SPORTS



**DAVE ZIRIN** writes about sports for *The Nation* and *The Progressive*.

In the world of sports, we are in a time without precedent and without a compass. We are lost in the woods, with no idea how to find our way out.

The NBA was the first domino, canceling its season, followed by the NHL, the NCAA's men's and women's March Madness tournaments, Major League Baseball spring training, scouting trips by the NFL, NASCAR, and everybody else. Across the world, India is shutting down cricket while UEFA has postponed the 2020

third of the world's population at the time, and killed an estimated fifty million including 675,000 in the United States. Unlike the coronavirus, high mortality rates occurred in the twenty-to-forty-years-old age range, and officials became wildly concerned, with public gatherings strongly discouraged.

While MLB's season ended right before the pandemic erupted, the 1918 World Series saw the banning of the "spitball" due to health concerns. And yet, it wasn't canceled—despite multiple players dying after contracting the flu, and the famed Babe Ruth contracting it twice.

Even 9/11 delayed NFL games by only one week. What's happening now is different because, instead of sports becoming a distraction from national calamity, sports teams could have become a traveling road show of disease clusters, a band of Patient Zeros, traveling from city to city, infecting fans along the way.

This is why it took Utah Jazz player Rudy Gobert testing positive for COVID-19, and spreading the disease to his All-Star teammate Donovan Mitchell, to wake the sports world up to the reality that it was not immune. In one day, the NBA went from merely saying that players should fist bump instead of high-fiving fans, to shutting the whole multibillion-dollar operation down.

This was the correct decision for public safety, but it's hell on the low-wage stadium and arena workers who now have no income at all.

Several players have stepped up—including Zion Williamson, the nineteen-year-old rookie for

the New Orleans Pelicans—and pledged to pay the stadium workers out of their own pockets. But it really should be the billionaire owners who step up and offer paid leave to all employees.

Most of these teams play in publicly funded sports cathedrals that were built with promises of job creation. It was always a specious argument, since the sports world offers mostly seasonal work. But now is the time for sports-team owners to make good on their assurances that stadiums would help working people, not leave them destitute.

Tony Ressler, the majority owner of the Atlanta Hawks, announced in mid-March that he would guarantee the wages of arena staff. "We have a pretty clear set of priorities in this kind of remarkable time that we're living through," Ressler said. "Protecting our fans, protecting our employees, and protecting the reputation of our league, all of which is important. But let there be no confusion: that means taking care of all of our employees."

What is truly remarkable and utterly unacceptable is that all franchise owners across sports have not followed suit. These billionaires need to show some sense of responsibility. They should not have to be shamed into doing so.

For now, we do not know how long we will be a world without sports. The best we can do is stay healthy, follow the advice we are getting from trusted sources—that is, not from the President—and wait for the time when we can join together once again in collective joy.

That's more than sports. That's just being human. But to experience that once again, we first need to survive. ♦



Utah Jazz center Rudy Gobert, right, talks with guard Donovan Mitchell, left. Both players have tested positive for COVID-19.

European Football Championship until 2021 and England's Premier League is closed.

Now we prepare for a life without sports, a stunning development. Sports kept going during two world wars and the 1918 influenza pandemic. Sports help keep up morale and a sense of normalcy during times of crisis. During the First World War, Woodrow Wilson said, "I hope that sports will be continued as a real contribution to the national defense." Franklin Roosevelt spoke similarly during World War II.

The influenza pandemic of 1918 infected 500 million people, one-

## GETTING DARK

in my brain, the apertures  
 of my heart. Doctors  
 rarely believe black women  
 suffer, fat people care,  
 or that queer people  
 matter. Even when  
 they do, insurance claims  
 disagree. Thus, in my office,  
 a stained chair. Blood,  
 my blood all over my bed  
 & bright carpet, the off-white  
 tiles & too-white porcelain, smarting  
 the warm, pale yellow  
 of old walls. I oversleep, bleed  
 & scrub in silence save  
 for my own rasping. This trail  
 of gore born of misfortune  
 & choice may never come  
 all the way out. So many things  
 never come. But everything goes.  
 Surely. Surely, what I need most  
 is what I can't compel  
 anyone whom I adore to be,  
 nor would I want to. Getting little  
 too late *is* worse than never getting  
 after all. Kick rocks, Need!  
 Hello open, moon-kissed roads  
 beckoning to saner elsewhere—  
 to a new home not sparkling  
 with pain.

## GRACE

After 1 p.m., the winter sun  
 crawls through the window  
 to lay her perfect shine  
 across my chest & pours  
 into my lap, warm & luxurious  
 as a sated lover. How I wish  
 we could hold each other  
 like this always, just enough heat  
 & light to heal without harm,  
 just enough heaven seeping  
 into my skin,  
 my barely covered heart,  
 to justify waiting a little longer  
 to get there.

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*Kamilah Aisha Moon is the author of She Has a Name (2013) and Starshine & Clay (2017), both published by Four Way Books. She lives and teaches in Decatur, Georgia.*



# THE PERILS OF ‘SMALL GOVERNMENT’



Populist author, public speaker, and radio commentator **JIM HIGHTOWER** writes *The Hightower Lowdown*, a monthly newsletter chronicling the ongoing fights by America's ordinary people against rule by plutocratic elites. Sign up at [HightowerLowdown.org](http://HightowerLowdown.org).

**S**uddenly, America is a nation of socialists, asking in dismay: “Where’s the government?”

These are not born-again Bernie Sanders activists, but everyday people of all political stripes, *including* the previously apolitical multitudes, who’re now clamoring for big government intervention in their lives. There’s nothing like a rapidly growing pandemic to bring home the fact that all of us need a generously funded, fully functioning government. Alas, as everyone can see in our present moment, the government today has been reduced to a rickety medicine show run by an inept, small-minded flimflammer peddling laissez-fairlyland snake oil.

“We have it totally under control,” Trump pompously declared after the first U.S. case of COVID-19 was confirmed in January, then tweeted: “It will all work out well.”

**Trump is now showing us what such a drownable government looks like. And what it costs us.**

As it spread out of control through February and into March, he continued to be nonchalant: “We’ve done a great job.”

But an increasingly anxious public couldn’t even get reliable test kits from Trump’s holloed-out government health agencies. Still, he shrugged off all concern and responsibility: “Looks like by April, you know, in theory, when it gets a little warmer, it miraculously goes away.”

This was not exactly a can-do Rooseveltian response to a nation-

al crisis, but Trump stayed blasé, denying scientific reality and assuring us that one day—it’s like a miracle—it will disappear.

Of course, it hasn’t. And by March a rising death toll exposed this imposter of a President as incompetent, uncaring . . . and silly.

So, after weeks of the complete absence of White House leadership, a deadly pathogen is raging practically everywhere across our land. Unknown numbers are being infected, and a “closed indefinitely” sign has literally been hung on the American economy. Even our social and civic interactions—the essence of community life—have been halted.

Rightwing politico Grover Norquist once said he wanted a government so small “I can drag it into the bathroom and drown it in the bathtub.” Trump is now showing us what such a drownable government looks like. And what it costs us.

Now “social distancing” has become the official ethical standard for human relationships, abruptly supplanting eons of ingrained communal behavior by us humanoids (handshakes, hugs, pub life, ceremonial gatherings, et cetera). Awkward. Disconcerting. Isolating.

Yet, as we scramble to deter the ravages of COVID-19, we might benefit by pondering a self-inflicted cause of the contagion’s disastrous spread.

For some forty years, American corporations and governments have colluded to push economic, political, and social policies that have intentionally distanced the financial fortunes

of the wealthy from the workaday majority.

Consider the interrelationship of multimillionaires with the unseen kitchen staff of the restaurants where they dine. To further enrich themselves, these moguls have denied health coverage for food preparers, and lobbied to kill proposals to provide them with paid sick leave.

So, say one kitchen worker coughs. He or she is infected with the new coronavirus, but doesn’t know it, because of a lack of access to testing. And with no sick leave, even though running a fever, the worker must come to work. Later, somewhere a multimillionaire coughs. After all, COVID-19 doesn’t distinguish between rich and poor.

The very progressive policies that plutocrats have been blocking for years—such as a living wage, Medicare for All, and free college tuition—are exactly what a sane government would adopt to fend off the wholly destructive inequality confronting every American.

While we’re now forced to temporarily distance ourselves from each other, our country also suffers from another lethal disease: the widening separation of elites from the rest of us. And the only cure for this is a national push for renewed social cohesiveness.

As a friend and fellow writer Glenn W. Smith recently put it, “[COVID-19] puts into focus a biological, psychological, economic, and socio-political fact we too often deny: We are a species of completely interdependent beings.” ♦

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