Enslavement, prisons — and the vote

Martin Luther King Jr. Day statement
Prisoners Solidarity Committee of Workers World Party

What does voting mean to an incarcerated person? As we honor Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday in 2022, we consider this question within the context of the struggle for the right to self-determination for the most oppressed members of our class — particularly those who are incarcerated en masse within a system akin to modern-day enslavement.

Four years later, Dr. King’s April 4, 1967, “Beyond Vietnam” speech at Riverside Church in New York City forecast an even more radical evolution — from the right to vote to a worldwide view— when he linked the struggle for economic equality at home with the struggle against the U.S. war on Vietnam.

King spoke of how the U.S. government had violated the principle of self-determination for the Vietnamese people at the cost of growing poverty at home. He stated: “The security we profess to seek in foreign adventures we lose in our decaying cities. The bombs in Viet Nam explode at home; they destroy the hopes and possibilities for a decent America.” His speech was condemned by both the Washington Post and New York Times. It was this evolving political shift that ultimately marked Dr. King for assassination by the U.S. government, which he famously referred to as “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today.”

Dr. King’s legacy

Remembering Dr. King’s political evolution challenges us today to consider the right to vote in relation to the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. It includes this language, “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the person shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.” (Emphasis added)

For those who find themselves in prisons convicted of a crime, they are literally treated as less than a whole human, as an enslaved person, not too far off from the days when enslaved people were considered three-fifths human, as an enslaved person, not too far off from the days when enslaved people were considered three-fifths human, as an enslaved person.

Enslavement, prisons — and the vote

By Marie Kelly

For two years, workers across the U.S. have made enormous sacrifices as government officials continuously put corporate economic interests above the general welfare and public good. Health care and other workers have fought back in the face of government malfeasance and for-profit exploitation. Workers have resisted through hundreds, if not thousands, of spontaneous and organized walkouts and strikes to protest unsafe working conditions.

Health care workers are acutely aware of how the COVID-19 pandemic crisis in the U.S. has pushed hospital systems to the breaking point. Federal agencies, which were set up to regulate safety standards and provide guidance based on scientific evidence, have failed to protect these essential workers from the capitalist, profit-driven health care model.

OSHA, do your job!

National Nurses United (NNU) and a coalition of other labor unions filed a lawsuit Jan. 5 to force the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration to do its job in protecting workers during the pandemic. (tinyurl.com/y3eds6n7) OSHA failed its mandate to keep workers safe on the job, when the agency withdrew its emergency temporary standard (ETS) specific to hospital workers during the pandemic in December 2021. In fact, only after pressure from NNU did OSHA finally issue the ETS in June 2022.

The ETS requirements were a comprehensive list of measures to protect workers, including effective personal protective equipment, adequate ventilation, and other procedures geared to limiting viral transmission. The list guaranteed basic health care workers’ rights such as paid sick time, time off to get the vaccine and the option for contagious workers to work remotely if possible or receive paid time off.

The lawsuit against OSHA calls for the retenction and enforcement of the agency’s emergency temporary standard and the adoption of a permanent standard for health care occupational exposure to COVID-19 within 30 days. In addition to the NNU, the lawsuit coalition includes the Pennsylvania Association of Staff Nurses and Allied Professionals, the New York State Nurses Association, the American Federation of Teachers and the AFL-CIO. Continued on page 5

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Profit plague feeds omicron surge

By Marie Kelly

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What’s next after Ahmaud Arbery’s killers held ‘accountable’?

By Dianne Mathiowetz

Judge Timothy Walmsley delivered sentences to the convicted murderers of Ahmaud Arbery on Jan. 7. The 25-year-old Black man was chased and trapped by the pickup truck-driving, shotgun-wielding father and son team of Gregory and Travis McMichael and their neighbor, William “Robby” Bryan, on Feb. 23, 2020, in Satilla Shores, adjacent to Brunswick, Georgia. A jury of Glynn County residents found the trio of racist vigilantes guilty of multiple felonies on Nov. 24, following a trial watched by millions on television. The jury — 11 white members and one Black man — were unanimous in their verdict that Arbery was an innocent victim of a heinous crime that merited the most severe punishment.

Georgia law mandates that a felony murder conviction receive a life sentence; and that after serving 30 years, there may or may not be the possibility of parole.

Before announcing his decision, Judge Walmsley spoke at some length on the terror Arbery must have felt as he tried to outrun and evade his armed pursuers.

At one point the judge underscored this by remaining silent for 60 seconds, then saying that was just one-fifth of the time Ahmaud was running to save his life. He said he saw no evidence of remorse from the McMichaels, who are seen on the infamous tape turning their backs and walking away from the dying, bleeding Arbery.

After finishing his opening remarks, Walmsley pronounced the McMichaels would be sentenced to life without opportunity for parole after 30 years, but that William “Robby” Bryan would have that possibility. Bryan joined the chase and made the video. Although he was unarmed, he used his truck five times to block Ahmaud in his escape.

Travis McMichael is 35; his father Gregory is 66, and Bryan is 52. All three men are scheduled to be tried on federal hate crimes Feb. 7; and if convicted, they could face additional life terms in prison.

Another public figure, Jackie Johnson, former Glynn County District Attorney, is facing trial this spring. Gregory McMichael, a past county police officer and a recently retired investigator in Johnson’s office, admitted calling Johnson for “advice” after killing Arbery. She is alleged to have then told the Glynn County police not to arrest the three men. Johnson has been charged with “obstructing justice” and “showing favor” to her former employee.

Civil litigation is pending against the McMichaels, Bryan and various police and prosecutorial officials, brought by Arbery’s mother, Wanda Cooper-Jones. While Arbery’s mother, father, family and friends expressed a sense of relief and satisfaction that his killers

Workers World Party is a revolutionary Marxist-Leninist party inside the belly of the imperialist beast. We are a multinational, multigenerational and multigendered organization that not only aims to abolish capitalism, but to build a socialist society because it’s the only way forward:

Capitalism means war and austerity, racism and repression, attacks on im/migrants, misogyny, LGBTQ+ oppression and mistreatment of people with disabilities. It means homelessness, increasing homelessness and impoverishment and lack of hope for the future.

No social problems can be solved under capitalism.

The U.S. is the richest country in the world, yet no one has a guaranteed right to shelter, food, water, health care, education or anything else — unless they can pay for it. Wages are lower than ever, and youth are saddled with seemingly insurmountable student debt, if they even make it to college. Black, Brown and Indigenous youth and trans people are ginned down by cops and bigots on a regular basis.

The ruthless ruling class today seeks to wipe out the working class. It is time to point the blame at — and challenge — the capitalist system.

WWF fights for socialism because the working class produces all wealth in society, and this wealth should remain in their hands, not be stolen in the form of capitalist profits. The wealth workers create should be socially owned and its distribution planned to satisfy and guarantee basic human needs.

Since 1939, Workers World Party has been out in the streets defending the workers and oppressed here and worldwide. If you’re interested in Marxism, socialism and fighting for a socialist future, please contact a WW branch near you. (Continued on page 3)

If you are interested in joining Workers World Party contact: 212.627.2994

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Vol. 64, No. 2 • Jan. 13, 2022
Closing date: Jan. 12, 2022

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Workers World (ISSN-1070-4205) is published monthly by WW Publishers, 147 W. 24th St., New York, NY 10011. Phone: 212.627.2994.

Subscriptions: One year: $36; institutions: $50.

Letters to the editor may be condensed and edited.

Articles can be freely reprinted, with credit to Workers World, 147 W. 24th St., 2nd fl., New York, NY 10011. Back issues and individual articles are available on microfilm and/or photocopy from NA Publishing, Inc., P.O. Box 098, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-0998. A searchable archive is available on the Web at www.workers.org.

A headline digest is available via e-mail subscription. Subscription information is at workers.org.

Periodicals postage paid at New York, N.Y. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Workers World, 147 W. 24th St. 2nd fl., New York, NY 10011.
Sidney Poitier: A Brilliant ‘force of nature’ on, off the screen

By Monica Moorehead

After the heartbreaking news of Sidney Poitier’s death at 94 on Jan. 6, unparal- leled adjectives have been used—from the most famous to ordinary film loves—to describe his legacy and talent as trailblazing, regal, inspiring, noble and more. His career as an actor and director spanned 70 years.

Poitier was presented an honorary Academy Award in 2002 “for his extror- dinary performances and unique presence on screen and off.” Poitier’s work is a cornerstone of the movie picture industry with dignity,style and intelligence throughout the world.

Black actors like Oscar winners Denzel Washington, Halle Berry, Morgan Freeman and Louis Gossett Jr. and lesser known actors have said they might not have become the actors they are today if not for Sidney Poitier paving the way.

Poitier once stated, “I made films when the only other Black on the lot was the shoeshine boy— as was the case at Metro [Goldwyn Mayer]. I was the lone guy in town.” (hollywoodreporter.com, Jan. 7)

When Black director Spike Lee paid homage to Sidney Poitier on CNN con- mentator Don Lemon’s Jan. 7 show, he described the actor’s impact on U.S. soci- ety as comparable to Jackie Robinson and Joe Louis.

What were the parallels between this actor and these two athletes? Jackie Robinson and Joe Louis were the first Black major league baseball players—po- dgers, was the first Black player to break the color barrier in the then all- white Major League Baseball in 1947 and was instrumental in the precursor to the Civil Rights Movement.

Joe Louis, aka the “Brown Bomber,” while not the first Black heavyweight champion—that was Jack Johnson from 1908-1915 — gained worldwide popular- ity, especially in the Black community, when he retained his heavyweight crown in 1938 after knocking out a German boxer, Max Schmeling, who symbolized the rise of Nazism before World War II.

So while Poitier was not historically the first African American actor, female or male, in Hollywood, he was the first major Black actor to consistently play characters that were not racially insensi- tive or stereotypical. These were the only roles offered by predominantly white stu- dios before Poitier’s major breakout role in the 1950 film, “No Way Out,” where he played a doctor terrorized by a white racist, played by Richard Widmark. Even the cast and crew was fearful Poitier might play some stereotypical movie roles during the 1950s.

When Poitier was accused by some Black actors of playing sanitized charac- ters like doctors, teachers and other professionals which were acceptable to the tastes of white audiences, he replied he felt it was important to remain true to himself and to bring dignity to any character he decided to play, being con- scious of the racist degradations faced Black people, including actors, in previ- ous eras.

In a New York Times interview, Poitier said of his acceptance of certain roles: “It’s a choice, a clear choice. If the fabric of the society were different, I would do others. I would criticize certain villains and to deal with different images of Negro life that would be more dimen- sional. But I’ll be damned if I do, the at this stage of the game.” (Washington Post, Jan. 7)

In fact, in his autobiography, Malcolm X praised Poitier for his positive screen image.

Career parallel with Civil Rights struggle

Sidney Poitier was lucky to be alive, since he was born three months prematurely tooma- to-farming Bahamian parents while they were visiting Miami. He grew up on a farm in the Bahamas, but he returned to Miami as a teenager. He then traveled to New York City, hop- ing to become an actor.

At the time, in the mid-1940s, he could barely read a script until a Jewish worker assisted him with reading from a newspa- per every night while Poitier worked as a dishwasher. He joined the American Negro Theater after leaving the Army in 1947. There he met young legendary actors and future activists, Ruby Dee, Ossie Davis and lifelong friend, Harry Belafonte.

During the dawn of the Civil Rights Movement, Poitier became the first Black actor nominated for a best actor Oscar for the 1958 film, “The Defiant Ones.”

He started on Broadway in Black play- ers, ‘Raissin in the Sun,” in 1961 and reprised his Tony-nominated role in the movie made of the play. Both take ac- tion against poverty and police brutal- ity. Poitier demanded that what has been known as “the slap heard around the world” remain in the script, or he would not do the scene at all.

Jewsaid about the scene, “As the film echoed the power of that moment around the world, I think Sidney rep- resented the conflict between people in America.” (Hollywood Reporter)

In reaction to actor Rod Steiger’s char- acter, a racist sheriff, calling Poitier’s character a racist slur, Poitier replies forcefully, “They call me Mister Tibbs.”

Poitier’s character, Virgil Tibbs, a former Negro Soldier, played by Larry Gates.

Poitier’s death at 94 on Jan. 6, unparal- leled adjectives have been used—from the most famous to ordinary film loves—to describe his legacy and talent as trailblazing, regal, inspiring, noble and more. His career as an actor and director spanned 70 years.

Sidney Poitier received an honorary Oscar in 2002.

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Starbucks workers walk out, demand safer conditions during COVID

By Arjes Red
Buffalo, New York

Starbucks workers at the Elmwood Avenue location here, the first corporate-owned Starbucks in the U.S. to unionize, walked off the job Jan. 5 in protest over unsafe working conditions and understaffing.

COVID-19 is tearing through Starbucks stores, and while many workers have raised concerns over safety measures, the corporation has consistently ignored them. Starbucks has ignored requests to provide N-95 masks and at times has not allowed workers to enforce state mask mandates.

Multiple stores in Buffalo have had outbreaks causing many workers to become infected. Some workers, who were exposed but not experiencing symptoms, preferred to remain isolated until they could be tested, but they felt forced to work anyway, because they would not be paid to isolate.

Starbucks could pay all workers who are exposed to stay home, as they did in March 2020. But as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines loosened, Starbucks’ own protocol followed in kind. Rather than living up to their stated principles and providing a safe work environment and allowing all workers who were exposed, regardless of vaccination status, to take paid time off to isolate, Starbucks continues to operate at a bare minimum as is required by law.

Starbucks’ policies, as well as current CDC standards, essentially force workers to choose between safety and paying their rent.

Starbucks claims their policy is not unique and that they are simply following the guidelines set by the government. However, based on the over 830,000 people who died from COVID-19 in the United States, the CDC guidelines and state COVID-19 policies were clearly insufficient, and many of those deaths were in fact preventable.

To contrast, China has less than 5,000 dead with a population of nearly a billion and a half people.

This highlights the root cause of the issue — rampant capitalism is unable to handle crises like a pandemic as adequately as a predominantly socialist, planned economy can.

We know that huge corporations like Starbucks have a hand in shaping the policy around COVID-19. One example is how Delta Airlines requested the CDC shorten the isolation period from 10 days to five, just days before the CDC announced the change.

When corporations are allowed to shape health standards for the whole country, profits are always put before safety, and workers are treated as disposable.

The author is a contributor to Workers World newspaper and a union committee organizer with Starbucks Workers United in Buffalo.

U.S. working class
On the edge of historic unionization drive?

By John Catalinotto

This article was written for an international end-of-year collection and published in French and Spanish translations on laphama.net and atxavala-int.blogspot.com.

Workers at three Amazon locations in the U.S. alone. Workers at two Starbucks cafes in Buffalo, New York, have won union representation in a vote.

Amazon and pro-union supporters held protests in the U.S., Western Europe and Bangladesh on Nov. 26—so-called Black Friday — at Amazon warehouses to demand workers’ rights and union rights. The actions focused on logistics workers in the U.S. and Europe and textile production workers in Bangladesh.

Other actions are planned for Jan. 12, birthday of the centrist liberal top boss of Amazon, Jeff Bezos, and for the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. holiday. (supportamazonworkers.org/jan12/)

This can impact the workers’ struggle and the unions.

Still, it has already raised the hopes of millions of workers in the U.S. and thousands of union activists that something big is underway. It has raised the hopes of worker organizers of reversing the decline in union membership over the past 68 years.

Some voices, among communists and unionists, and among observers in the corporate media, have referenced the upsurge of the CIO industrial union in the 1930s. They are asking if a new wave might be coming.

The New York Times and The Boston Globe, for example, have run feature articles on the Starbucks and Amazon organizing drives with big headlines and mentioned the 1930s. The Times normally confines labor news to the business section with big headlines and articles on the Starbucks and Amazon organizing drives with big headlines and mentioned the 1930s. The Times normally confines labor news to the business section.

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The author is a contributor to Workers World newspaper and a union committee organizer with Starbucks Workers United in Buffalo.
Student workers win big on both coasts

By Martha Grevatt

After 10 weeks on the picket line, student workers at Columbia University are celebrating victory. The members of Student Workers of Columbia-United Auto Workers Local 2110 voted Jan. 3 to end their strike. They will spend the next two weeks negotiating a new contract with the university, before they vote on whether to accept it. 2110 voted to end their strike. They will spend the next two weeks negotiating a new contract with the university, before they vote on whether to accept it.

The lawsuit targets the U.S. Department of Labor, Labor Secretary Marty Walsh and OSHA’s Assistant Secretary of Labor Douglas L. Parker. It took strike action to win dental union recognition across the University of California system, academic workers have joined and won in the union upsurge that began with “Striketober.”

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Continued from page 1

In many cases across the most incarcer- ated country in the world, the United States, this means imprisoned people are counted as part of the popula- tion wherever they are locked up, rather than in their communities of origin. But they are still unable to vote because of their convictions. In Huntsville, Texas, there are seven prison units run by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. The population of that town, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, is 45,941. According to TDCJ’s unit directory these prisons — the Byrd Unit, the Ellis Unit, the Estelle Unit, the Goree Unit, the Holiday Unit, the Huntsville Unit and the Wynne Unit — have a combined total population of 13,719 human beings; 13,719 in 29.9% of 45,941. (tinyurl.com/TDCJunitdirectory) Imagine up to 30% of a population being counted in a census that determines how many resources are allocated to a town for its elected representatives to spend. But that 30% is unable to have any say in who gets to spend that money or how. In many cases, these people are not from the towns they are imprisoned in — they have been ripped from their own communities and denied a voice in the so-called “democracy” where they live.

Black voters criminalized, disenfranchised

This voting disenfranchisement disproportionately affects Black, Latinx and indigenous people as they are incarcerated at rates much higher than their share of the population. In Texas this has been true historically. A group of my family members refuges the Texas Department of Corrections, as well as earlier under the system of convict lease- ing — often described as worse than slav- ery. (workers.org/2019/10/145907/)

Huntsville is also where the state of Texas has executed 373 people since 1982 — more than the next six states in the U.S. combined — and is a case study in why the racist, anti-poor and ableist death penalty needs to be abolished. (deathpeninfo.org)

A 2019 study from Villanova University found that in Pennsylvania, where 40,000 people are currently incarcerated in state prisons, “[i]f prisoners were counted in their home districts during legisla- tive redistricting, the average Black Pennsylvania would gain 353 new vot- ers in their district; the average white per- son would lose 59, and an additional eight districts would be eliminated due to being either too big or too small.”

In that state, activists and reform advo- cates were able to force a major concen- tration in 2021 when the Pennsylvania State Senate voted to end prison gerry- mander. Instead state prisoners now re- count as residents of the counties they lived in prior to incarceration. However, the state’s Legislative Reapportionment Commission later backtracked and said that this decision would not apply to those serving life sentences or sentenced to remain in prison until the next census — in 2030. That means that roughly one in four Pennsylvania prisoners still will not be counted as part of their home district. (WHYY, Sept. 21, 2021)

New York state Democrats put forward a similar initiative to prevent prison gerrymandering as a ballot proposal in November 2021. I was defeated in that effort with other reforms including same-day voter registration and expanding absen- tee ballot access.

Injustice in county jails

While persons convicted of a crime are typically housed in prisons and are legally ineligible to vote, as in Texas, most of the people in county jails are locked up await- ing trial and are eligible to vote — but have means to pay the poll taxes.

Harris County Jail in Houston, Texas, is the third largest jail in the country. Like many jails around the country, upwards of 70% of the people inside are being detained pretrial and have not been convicted of anything. (Prison Policy Initiative, March 24, 2020, tinyurl.com/PretrialDetentionInJails)

Harris County Jail piloted a program to allow people arrested on or after Oct. 22, 2021, to vote in the November 2021 elections from a polling site located inside jail. Volunteers from Project Orange, a group that helps register incarcerated voters, worked within the jail to help people- prison before that date to register for absentee ballots. Harris County Jail was the first jail in Texas to allow this to hap- pen. The program was modeled somewhat on a pilot effort at Cook County Jail in Chicago in 2020.

These programs are rare, and while it is a leap forward to give incarcerated people access to their right to vote, it is still a fundamental injustice that many of them find themselves trapped in jail due to their inability to pay bail while awaiting trial.

Beyond the vote — abolition!

More radical and deeper measures are needed. The Exception, part of a movement to change the Thirteenth Amendment language, says: “In the last three years, three states have abolished slavery in their state constitutions. In 2019, Colorado became the first state since Rhode Island — the only state to have fully abolished slavery prior to the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment — to end the exception and abolish slavery. Following in its footsteps, Utah and Nebraska also led successful campaigns to abolish slavery in 2020. In all three states, the ballot initiatives were the result of unanimous, bipartisan legislative votes.”

Abolition of the afterlife of enslavement is the goal, and we need no mem- ber of our collective class — the working class — behind. — Ted Kelly, co-editor

Letters from incarcerated readers

‘A glimpse into my struggle’

Dear Workers World,

I ran across an ad you all wrote about Russell Maroon Shoatz, and I became interested in finding out more about your organization and the things you all do. Please put me on your mailing list and send me any publications and resources you have for prisoners.

Thanks in advance,

Laderic M., Charleston, Missouri

Dear Workers World,

I have recently been introduced to the Workers World newspaper by a couple of inmates here, and I really love reading the columns and cover stories in your paper. I hope to someday be able to join Workers World Party and add to some of the sto- ries/columns in your paper with some of my experiences from behind these walls. I do not have much money at this time to be able to afford a subscription of the Workers World newspaper, but I would love to know if you could please donate a subscription to me at this time until I am able to afford to purchase one from your organization. Please continue your great work, and I thank you for your time and consideration in this matter.

Respectfully addressed,

Ronnard J., Rockville, Pennsylvania

Greetings and blessings! I’ve heard superb things about your publication, but my eyes have yet to have the opportunity to devour your food for thought. Please let me know how I can go about receiving this “food.” I recently soaked up Vol. 46, No. 11 issue of the San Francisco Bay View, and this issue featured an article about Russell Maroon Shoatz. They referred to you as the original author of the article. Powerful stuff.

On another note, I just wanted to take out a few more moments of your time to give you a glimpse into my struggle. My name is Troy and I am a 37-year-old Black man (going to turn 38 on Dec. 15) who has spent years in captivity for crimes that I’m actually innocent of. To add to my misfortune, I have been isolated in solitary confinement for the past 16 years that I’m actually innocent of. To add to my misfortune, I have been isolated in solitary confinement for the past 16 years — they have been ripped from my family and I have been periodically receiving your...
40 years unjustly incarcerated

Mumia petitions for new trial

By Betsyte Piotte
Philadelphia

Attorneys for imprisoned journalist and veteran Black Panther Mumia Abu-Jamal filed a petition Jan. 4 for a Post-Conviction Relief Appeal (PCRA), based on evidence found in six case file boxes they were first able to review in January 2019. The boxes were discovered in a remote storage room in the Philadelphia District Attorney’s office in late December 2018.

The uncovered evidence reveals a pattern of prosecutorial misconduct and abuse of authority, including bribing of the state’s key witnesses — a violation of Brady v. Maryland, and racist exclusion in jury selection — a violation of the landmark Supreme Court ruling Batson v. Kentucky.

Abu-Jamal was arrested and charged with the murder of Philadelphia police officer Robert十个Che 1982. The prosecution’s star witness during Abu-Jamal’s 1982 trial was taxi driver Robert Chobert, on probation for arson and driving with a suspended chauffeur’s license.

Chobert claimed he pulled up behind Faulkner’s police car and witnessed the killing. Pictures of the crime scene taken by press photographer Peter Polakoff, 10 minutes after the shooting, showed an empty space where Chobert alleged he parked his cab.

Coerced state witnesses

Testifying again in Abu-Jamal’s initial 1995 PCRA hearing, Chobert admitted he was offered a deal by the District Attorney to reinstate his suspended license. He told the court he never knew that evidence found in the boxes shows he was offered more.

Abu-Jamal was convicted July 3, 1982. In a letter postmarked Aug. 6, 1982, Chobert wrote Joseph McGill, the sole trial prosecutor, stating: “I have been calling you to find out about the money owed (sic) to me. So here is a letter finding out about the money.” He wrote, “Do you need me to sign anything? How long will it take to get it?”

The prosecution’s other principal witness was Cynthia White, who had 38 prior arrests and five open cases pending at the time of the trial. White was the remaining cases were dismissed for “lack of prosecution.”

Racism in jury selection

The files disclosed in January 2019 contained powerful, new evidence that McGill tracked Black jurors by prominently placing the letter “B” next to their names. McGill had used most of his 20 peremptory challenges to eliminate Black and younger jurors — those most likely to oppose the death penalty.

Abu-Jamal’s attorneys called for the court to vacate his conviction and order a new trial or, in the alternative, provide an opportunity for discovery and schedule an evidentiary hearing based on the evidence disclosed in January 2019.

Justice delayed is justice denied

Abu-Jamal’s current appellate case, first filed in August 2016 and heard in a courtroom April 24, 2017, was based on the 2016 U.S. Supreme Court ruling, Williams v. Pennsylvania. This case found due process was violated when witnesses were summarily intervened to direct and monitor the outstanding charges against White, whose

Letters from incarcerated readers

“A glimpse into my struggle”

Continued from page 6

Only 41% of guards and staff are vaccinated at SCI Forest. But we’re told to get vaccinated, or we’ll be locked down on a block that the unvaccinated would be placed with restrictions such as you can’t go to school programs, parole hearings, no visits and no phone time. But there is no restriction on guards or staff! And going to programs, we’re subjected to sitting in a room with unvaccinated staff members who are running programs. When I asked guards, they stated, “I’d quit before being vaccinated!”

My question is this: Why do other employees in other professions and workplaces have a mandate that they have to be vaccinated by a certain date, but correction officers in Pennsylvania are not required to be vaccinated? Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Wolf should have placed a mandate on the PA DOC employees to be vaccinated or lose their jobs. Why hasn’t that been done?

Prisoners’ lives matter too! Miley Fletcher, Bennner Township, Pennsylvania

Workers World isn’t our newspaper.
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We believe in and support the Black Lives Matter Movement.

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We are the only newspaper published by and for the world’s prisoners.
Queer people and the U.S. communist movement, 1969-1979

By Princess Harmony

In 1966, one of the first transgender-led rebellions occurred in the Tenderloin neighborhood of San Francisco. The Trans-可谓hampton’s Cafeteria Riot served as the prelude to the founding of the modern queer movement. Three years later, on June 28, 1969, there was another rebellion in New York City’s Stonewall Inn.

The New York Police Department’s morals squad hadn’t gotten its customary bribe to lay off of this gathering place for LGBTQ+ people and raided the bar. Cops forced patrons into a street brawl by attacking everyone they saw. Gay, lesbian, transgender person (then sometimes called “transvestite”) and cisgender heterosexual leftist radicals were in the bar and surrounding area and fought with the less aggressive police apparatus. (For a detailed account of the rebellion, see Leslie Feinberg, “Lavender and Red,” parts 63-71, workers.org/books/2016/)

The rebellions displayed a bravery not expected by the straight world of the time and, over the course of that night, more and more people came to fight the cops, some taking direct blows from club-wielding cops, yet never surrendering.

Two transgender women, Black trans woman Marsha P. Johnson — she said she fought for “Pay It No Mind” — and Latinx trans woman Sylvia Rivera were among the leading comrades in the rebellion, whose leadership was primarily people of color. (For more: “Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries: Survive, Revolt and Queer Antagonist Struggle,” tinyurl.com/jwbtux99)

The police, overconfident in their abilities to terrorize queer and oppressed people, were pushed back! Not just by the people in the bar, but by people who gathered from the streets to fight back. Radical chic società allies came out to run support. Homeless people, some straight, came to support also.

Queer people celebrated the defeat of the police, as Stonewall served as the first Pride event. Unfortunately, the Mattachine Society — which had once been a radical left-wing group — defended its status quo, actually joining police efforts to stop the protests. (“Lavender and Red,” part 70)

The most oppressed people continued to protest for days, while more privileged queers downplayed the fightback of Stonewall and looked down upon the rebellion.

Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries

In 1970, the radical group STAR — Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries — was born out of an occupation at New York University. From the statement marking STAR’s founding came its key principle: “If you want gay power, then you’re going to have to fight for it. And you’re going to have to fight until you win.” (“Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries,” page 18)

STAR was not specifically a Marxist group, but it’s accurate to say it was a radical socialist and revolution- ary group — along with the left group that could tell the story of drag queens and transgender people as having existed even before capital- ism took hold. He defended queer members of Workers World Party and the Young Lords Party, two Marxist-Leninist groups tied to Black and Puerto Rican liberation. (“Lavender and Red,” part 71)

In fact, Black Panther Huey P. Newton spoke of the need of queer people’s liberation. He said, “We know that homosexsuality is a fact that exists, and we must under- stand it in its purest form: that is, a person should have the freedom to use his body in whatever way he wants.” (tinyurl.com/237yvbca)

Newton went on to say in his analysis: Queer people need freedom, and queer liberation must be part of other forms of liberation.

Workers World Party leads

Huey P. Newton was not the only Marxist-Leninist to see the necessity of queer liberation. One of the founders of Workers World Party, chief theoretician and chairperson Sam Marcy took up the defense of drag queens and transgender people as having existed even before capital- ism took hold. He defended queer members of Workers World, when others mocked them. He truly cared for the queer members of the proletariat.

WWP’s youth wing during the Vietnam War — Youth Against War and Fascism — also took up the question of queer people. YAWF had a gay and lesbian caucus founded in 1971 that would eventually evolve and become the LGBTQ+ caucus of the WWP. (“Lavender and Red,” part 71)

Marcy himself, always on the cutting edge, here using the language of the earlier era, said: “Our party, which bases itself on Marxism-Leninism, looks to the early model of the Soviet Union as the embodiment of what our own political position should be in relation to the struggle of gay people. Our first, most elementary and fundamental duty, as well as objective on this question, is to completely eliminate and abolish all forms of per- secution and oppression of gay people. It must also fight against all ideological, political and social manifestations of gay oppression, which may be reflected in our own ranks.” (“Lavender and Red,” part 80)

In the U.S. communist movement, only Workers World Party — from its time as a tendency within the Socialist Workers Party to its formation as an independ- ent Marxist-Leninist party in 1959 — fully embraced queerness and gender expression.

Unfortunately, the pro-queer stance of Workers World Party was not the norm in the decade after the Stonewall Rebellion within the U.S. communist movement. Left tendencies were still adhering to the Stalinist deviation from Leninism of treating queerness as a form of bour- geois decadence in the age of decaying capitalism, like the backward 1974 pronouncement on LGBTQ+ identity and life as “… an individual response to the invalidation of the contradictions brought about by decaying imperial- ism … a response to the contradiction between men and women which is rooted in male-sexual institutions and male-chauvinist ideology.” (tinyurl.com/4hc3kedh)

The attitude of much of the U.S. communist move- ment in the decade after the Stonewall Rebellion could be summed up in this reactionary statement: “Homosexuality is a form of social sickness, a form of social perversion. It is a form of bourgeois ideology, which appeals especially to the petty bourgeoisie and male-chauvinism. (“Our Party, which bases itself on Marxism-Leninism…”)” (Workers Viewpoint Organization, tinyurl.com/3f6v876)

To combat this theoretical and oppressive error within U.S. communist currents, a Workers World Party com- rade, Bob McCubbin, worked with founding members Vince Copeland, Dorothy Ballan and other members to formulate a Marxist analysis of what was then called the “gay question.” After collective research and discussion of the history and present oppression of queer people, this work resulted in the 1976 book “The Gay Question: A Marxist Approach,” later reissued as “The Roots of Gay and Lesbian Oppression: A Marxist View.”

From 1966-1979 and beyond, Workers World Party’s stance on queer people has been the same: We are mem- bers of the proletariat; we are oppressed; and we are revolutionary.

In Cuba, how La Güinera made room for more gender

This lightly edited excerpt is from part 105 of Leslie Feinberg’s “Lavender and Red” on the intersections between LGBTQ+ lives and socialism. The 120-part series appeared in Workers World from 2000 to 2018, and is available in “Rainbow Solidarity in Defense of Cuban Women,” available in free PDF download at workers.org/book.

By Leslie Feinberg

“Beyond the Scaffolding” (“Mariposas en el andamio”), a 1996 documentary, offered a profoundly thoughtful and moving account of how in the 1970s, Cuban women construction workers literally made room for cross-dressing performance art in the workers’ cafeterias in their neigh- borhood. The footage was filmed in the outskirts of Havana, called La Güinera.

The word “butterfly” (“mariposa”) refers to the word “butterfly” and is either a part or the whole of their gender expression. The word “butterflies on the Scaffold” (“Mariposas en el andamio”) refers to the language of the earlier era, said: “Our party, which bases itself on Marxism-Leninism, looks to the early model of the Soviet Union as the embodiment of what our own political position should be in relation to the struggle of gay people. Our first, most elementary and fundamental duty, as well as objective on this question, is to completely eliminate and abolish all forms of persecution and oppression of gay people. It must also fight against all ideological, political and social manifestations of gay oppression, which may be reflected in our own ranks.” (“Lavender and Red,” part 80)

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Continued on page 9

In Cuba, how La Güinera made room for more gender

But in these struggles, in the Civil Rights movement, in the war move-
The inferno industry and PG&E

By Danny O'Brien

Jan. 8 — In the first week of 2022, California fire officials finally placed the blame for the massive Dixie Fire that raged in northern California from the end of last June through the end of October. The fire, larger than Rhode Island, burned over 500,000 acres across five counties, wiping out the towns of Greenville and Canyondam, killed one firefighter and spread poisonous air as far as Colorado.

The only fault: A faulty Pacific Gas & Electric (PG&E) power line. At the present moment, more than 30,000 PG&E customers of Sierra, Placer and El Dorado Counties in California have been without power since Dec. 27 following a winter storm. People are not expected to have power fully restored until Jan. 11 — a full two weeks without power. For those without access to another form of adequate heat and alternative food storage methods, this presents grave and dangerous circumstances.

To add to the list of PG&E’s harmful actions to people, a lawsuit against the company was filed in recent weeks by Emanuel Lankford, a Black employee, alleging discriminatory and retaliatory practices against his job mobility and security.

Lankford, who has worked as a PG&E substation supervisor for more than 15 years, said in a Jan. 5 interview, “It’s been one thing after another: being overlooked for promotions, being retaliated against for speaking up. … I interviewed for the management position, it was not awarded to me. It instead went to a white female who has no substation experience.”

Another Black PG&E employee, Cynthia Farr, filed a lawsuit for discrimination in October 2021. Farr was fired in retaliation for making discrimination claims against the company, and she was disciplined for reaching out to an electrical industry union regarding her treatment. The racist discrimination against Farr, documented as far back as 2017, hit an extreme in 2018, when Farr was ordered to remain in the open while the rest of the staff was sent to hide behind bulletproof glass during the threat of an active shooter.

Capitalist crimes

Corporate misconduct is not news, and PG&E is no stranger to being unmasked for such misconduct. But the scope of its misconduct is absolutely monumental.

This misconduct carries adverse effects plaguing all of northern California and putting much of the rest of the West Coast at risk. We must continually make the link that it is corporations driving climate disasters forward.

Plenty can be said in theory about the evils that corporations exact by way of exploitation and expansion. But looking at such a company as this California behemoth, concrete evil can be seen in more tangible ways, like the large-scale destruction of land in massive acreages — and of lives in the hundreds.

This new streak of transgressions from the utility giant represents momentum carried forward from its past. PG&E’s highlights of the last decade are nothing short of pure horror. In San Bruno, California, in 2010, a company gas pipeline exploded, killing eight and injuring dozens more. The Butte Fire of September 2015, starting in Amador County, California, was caused by one of its power lines, and killed two people.

The company was blamed for the electrical malfunction that caused the Oakland Ghost Ship warehouse fire in December 2016, which killed 36 people. PG&E’s power lines were again at fault for 13 of the fires in northern California in October 2017, when 295 fires killed 44 people.

The recent catastrophic Dixie Fire — which PG&E was found culpable for — was the second largest in California’s history. The utility company was also guilty of the state’s worst: The 2018 Camp Fire, California’s deadliest and most destructive fire, killed 85 people and displaced 90% of the population of the town of Paradise, nearly completely destroying it and three other towns — Concow, Magalia and Butte Creek Canyon.

The cause? Again, a faulty PG&E power line.

After all these atrocities, in recent weeks PG&E has announced it is raising its utility rates by over 9%. The company was blamed for the deaths and injuries caused by the Dixie Fire and the 2021 Dixie Fire in the Indian Falls, California, neighborhood, July 24, 2021.

Corporate misconduct is not news, and PG&E is no stranger to being unmasked for such misconduct. But the scope of its misconduct is absolutely monumental.

In Cuba, how La Güinera made room for more gender

Continued from page 8

went, we saw the group, the show, and we liked it.”

One drag artist spoke from his home, the site of performance. “We used sheets of fabric, no requisites, nothing. The dressing room was in the bedroom, and we acted here. When she moved to the workers’ cafeteria, she used this as our dressing room. The public brought their own chairs. Mariela even brought a sofa! In the short time we worked in my backyard, this company said, ‘no, this cannot be.’”

The local security chief, on camera with his young daughter, expressed a backward view: “Personally, I don’t think these things should increase. On the contrary, I think they should diminish. Children go there and see who is a person in normal life, not as a man. Some people have told us that they see him dressed as a woman. That child will want to experiment, and that’s not what I want to see.”

“Several times you were admitted for the parties they gave at home.” In fact, noted one party participant, the funds at one event were collected for the troops of the women’s militia — for the defense of Cuba.

The security police chief called off the drag show. But in a workers’ state, that’s not the end of the story!

In a workers’ state, a place is created

Mariela explained, “After the police stopped the parties, there was no place for them to perform. In solidarity I began to collect protest letters and petitions. The only option was Fifi. To bring them here so everyone could see them. I was convinced they were good.”

Mariela was referring to the lead organizer of La Güinera’s construction brigade effort — Josefina Bocourt Díaz, affectionately known as “Fifi.”

The woman whose co-workers and neighbors call her “Fifi” is a Cuban of African descent. As a child before the revolution, she had to start work at the age of 9. She explained, “I was one of the 70,000 maids that Cuba had before 1959. I couldn’t enjoy much of my childhood. Now I’ve had the opportunity to work on the development of La Güinera, and I feel like a new woman.”

She narrated her consciousness about transgender and homosexuality changed qualitatively, while in a position of social leadership.

Fifi remembered, “Mariela and the others came to see me. We want them in the cabaret. If you haven’t seen them, you can’t object.”

“At first I rebelled,” Fifi said, recalling her arguments: “I’m an older woman. I wasn’t accustomed to running around with this ‘class of people.’ I said, ‘No, keep them away. I don’t want to hear about people who run around with a double façade.’” She said, “No, please, I can’t be around you guys. I wouldn’t be doing my duty to society. I’m too old for this stuff. I’ve never been involved in these things.”

But Mariela persisted. She said, “Fifi, I saw a show. Fifi, they should start at once here in the workers’ cafeterias.”

One drag performer said of Fifi, “She opened a cabaret in the workers’ cafeterias and brought us into it. She made us face the ‘herds of public’ who were afraid to face them. She said, ‘Do it; face them; you’ll see. Nothing will happen.’”

Another performer added, “Fifi should be honored by us. She’ll always be close to our hearts in the wonderful way she treated us.”

Rainbow Solidarity in DEFENSE of CUBA

By Leslie Feinberg, author of Stone Butch Blues

This ground-breaking book is a compilation of 25 articles about same-sex love and sex/gender variance in Cuba’s pre- and post-revolutionary history.

Available, along with complete Lavender & Red series, as free download at workers.org/books
On the ground with workers in Nicaragua

By Arjae Red

I have arrived here safely in Nicaragua, with my comrade Carlos Splitter, as part of a U.S. delegation to observe the inauguration of President Daniel Ortega. We are here to support the struggle of the workers in Nicaragua to defend the gains of the Sandanista Revolution and to counter the imperialist narrative that the FSLN government is an “authoritarian regime.”

On our first day, Jan. 8, we were welcomed with open arms by the Asociación de Trabajadores del Campo (ATC Nicaragua), and we had the opportunity to connect with union organizers and learn about the ongoing constant process of education amongst the people. We learned how the unions have had a major impact amongst agricultural workers and about the role they’ve played in raising the standards of living and improving working conditions. This meeting highlighted the importance of workers to defend not only their own working conditions and race, pay, but for control and ownership over their workplaces.

Nicaragua has achieved nearly complete self-sufficiency in feeding its people, with around 95% of the food being grown here and only around 5% imported. This is something I am particularly excited about, because all the food they’ve fed me so far has been delicious and so fresh!

Just days before urgent talks between Russia and the United States in Geneva this past weekend, began Jan. 10, a widespread outbreak of fighting in the Central Asian country of Kazakhstan—including burning the presidential palace—resulted in Russia sending troops to that country to guard strategic gencic buildings. The Jan. 10 talks involve Ukraine and Russia’s demand that the West help them with their aggressive empire-building mission, while Liz Cheney types are demonized as traitors for clinging to what was once “mainstream” conservatism.

The Proud Boys, a fascist ultraright organization, are in a state of flux — but for control and ownership over their workplaces. This is a fundamental truth, even under a capitalist government.
The following are edited excerpts from an interview with an official spokesperson of the Sudanese Communist Party, Dr. Fathal al-Fadl, published in January in the International (English-language) section of the Turkish e-zine Kaldıraç (The Levee). Al-Fadl discusses current preparations for launching a general strike.

A movement in spring 2019 in Sudan, located south of Egypt in north-east Africa, defeated the 30-year military dictatorship of General Omar al-Bashir, but was unable to permanently oust the military. (workers.org/en/454505)

Kaldıraç: What forces are behind the Oct. 25 coup? Why?
Dr. Fathal al-Fadl: The security committee of the previous regime, which was established by an agreement reached in June 2019 by the Joint Revolutionary Council (SC). The Oct. 25 coup aimed to block the path of the growing resistance to the regime’s economic policies. It took place against the backdrop of the bankruptcy of the SC, which was an elected council.

Kaldıraç: How would you describe the current stage of the resistance? How is it progressing?
Dr. Fathal al-Fadl: As far back as 2013, the SCP decided to try to organize the masses in a different form, taking into consideration that the Muslim Brotherhood has taken steps to dissolve trade unions, break the main public sector, destroy through privatization all productive industries, liquidate the railways and other major public transport companies and crack down on trade unions, peasants and all progressive forces, including the SCP. The new SCP tactic was based on organizing the masses at the workplace, residential areas and institutions of learning into Resistance Committees. These committees were supposed to play the basic role in creating a network between the different sectors of the society. The SCP and its communist activists in the residential areas helped to develop this work. Accordingly, the communists, who took on the most difficult challenges, have developed branches on the ground levels. I can say that the process is producing tangible results.

Kaldıraç: How do you define your political parties? What is their role? Since the beginning of the current uprising, that is after the Oct. 25 coup, 33 people were shot dead, and over 2,300 wounded, some in critical condition. Another 10 died later under huge pressure. But the main reasons we have is the intensification of the mass peaceful protest actions. These include marches in the streets, strikes, sit-ins, protest meetings, petitions, etc. and build up barricades to impede and stop the movements of the security thugs.

Kaldıraç: What line of action do you propose with the political strike? Dr. Fathal al-Fadl: It is in the streets, factories, offices, schools and countryside, all actions aim to prepare for launching the general strike. The mass protest movement, while united in its actions, is underway to establish the unified central leadership of the whole, large and broad front. A revolutionary council is being built, composed of the representatives of the coordinating committees of the RC, the Professional Alliance and representatives of the workers and peasants. The SCP, through its presence in the different groups, plays its role.

Kaldıraç: At what stage do you think the Sudanese Revolution is? Dr. Fathal al-Fadl: At the moment, talks are proceeding for reaching the Broad Front leadership, which may include women’s and other civil society organizations and political parties. The leadership of this body will facilitate the complete defeat of the present regime and the seizing of power by the hands of the people. We have behind us the rich experience of toppling two dictatorial regimes in 1956 and 1969. On that, our people devising their tactics are making use of the positives and trying to avoid the negatives of the past.

Al-Fadl asked the Turkish movement for international solidarity, a request which we assume also holds for anti-imperialist forces in the United States.

¿Al borde de un nuevo empujón sindical?

Continúa de la página 12
El legado del Dr. King: ‘Todo trabajo tiene dignidad’

El 17 de enero será el día festivo oficial en honor al nacimiento del reverendo Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., cuyo 93º cumpleaños fue el 15 de diciembre de 1929. Desde finales de los años treinta hasta el 28 de marzo de 1968, el Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. en una marcha con los trabajadores sanitarios de Memphis en huelga, el 28 de marzo de 1968.

Por John Catalinotto

Traducido del inglés al español por Sinfo Fernández y publicado por lamuna.net y lxaudio-int.org.

Los trabajadores de tres centros de distribución de Amazon han iniciado una campaña para formar un sindicato en esta gigantesca corporación que emplea, solo en USA, a más de un millón de trabajadores. Los puntos de la marcha en el tiempo de la huelga, el 28 de marzo de 1968, en la plaza de Washington de 1963, en la que participaron 250.000 personas. En esa Marcha sobre Washington de 1963, en la que participaron miles de trabajadores, el Dr. King declaró: “Ustedes están demostrando algo de verdad. Sin embargo, su legado fue mucho más, especialmente de que se invierta el descenso de la afiliación sindical. La desindustrialización se aceleró tras la crisis de la segunda guerra mundial. Los salarios medios disminuyeron al igual que la afiliación sindical. La desindustrialización tiene lugar cuando la cuarta ola de la economía usamericana acero, carbón, fabricación de automóviles, desde finales de los años treinta hasta el 28 de marzo de 1968, en la plaza de Washington de 1963, en la que participaron 250.000 personas. En esa Marcha sobre Washington de 1963, en la que participaron miles de trabajadores, el Dr. King declaró: “Ustedes están demostrando algo de verdad. Sin embargo, su legado fue mucho más, especialmente de que se invierta el descenso de la afiliación sindical. La desindustrialización se aceleró tras la crisis de la segunda guerra mundial. Los salarios medios disminuyeron al igual que la afiliación sindical. La desindustrialización tiene lugar cuando la cuarta ola de la economía usamericana acero, carbón, fabricación de automóviles, desde finales de los años treinta hasta el 28 de marzo de 1968, en la plaza de Washington de 1963, en la que participaron 250.000 personas. En esa Marcha sobre Washington de 1963, en la que participaron miles de trabajadores, el Dr. King declaró: “Ustedes están demostrando algo de verdad. Sin embargo, su legado fue mucho más, especialmente de que se invierta el descenso de la afiliación sindical. La desindustrialización se aceleró tras la crisis de la segunda guerra mundial. Los salarios medios disminuyeron al igual que la afiliación sindical. La desindustrialización tiene lugar cuando la cuarta ola de la economía usamericana acero, carbón, fabricación de automóviles, desde finales de los años treinta hasta el 28 de marzo de 1968, en la plaza de Washington de 1963, en la que participaron 250.000 personas. En esa Marcha sobre Washington de 1963, en la que participaron miles de trabajadores, el Dr. King declaró: “Ustedes están demostrando algo de verdad. Sin embargo, su legado fue mucho más, especialmente de que se invierta el descenso de la afiliación sindical. La desindustrialización se aceleró tras la crisis de la segunda guerra mundial. Los salarios medios disminuyeron al igual que la afiliación sindical. La desindustrialización tiene lugar cuando la cuarta ola de la economía usamericana acero, carbón, fabricación de automóviles, desde finales de los años treinta hasta el 28 de marzo de 1968, en la plaza de Washington de 1963, en la que participaron 250.000 personas. En esa Marcha sobre Washington de 1963, en la que participaron miles de trabajadores, el Dr. King declaró: “Ustedes están demostrando algo de verdad. Sin embargo, su legado fue mucho más, especialmente de que se invierta el descenso de la afiliación sindical. La desindustrialización se aceleró tras la crisis de la segunda guerra mundial. Los salarios medios disminuyeron al igual que la afiliación sindical. La desindustrialización tiene lugar cuando la cuarta ola de la economía usamericana