

Justice for Tyre Nichols! Abolish the police!

WW STATEMENT

Tyre Nichols, a 29-year-old Black man and FedEx driver in Memphis, Tennessee, was brutally beaten by Memphis police. Pulled over two minutes away from his house on Jan. 7, he was beaten so severely that he succumbed to his injuries three days later.

A week in advance of the body camera and street camera footage being released by Memphis police, the five officers responsible for the killing were fired, and their names and photos were released to the public. The day before the footage was released, all officers were charged with the second-degree murder of Tyre Nichols as well as other charges like aggravated assault.

This response from the state was uncharacteristic compared to the standard response to a police murder. The five officers fired and charged are all Black, and they were not afforded the same legal impunity that white officers who murder Black people have been given. There are countless examples of police departments, so-called “police unions” and courts, bending over backwards to protect white cops for racist lynchings.

The fact that the five officers who killed Tyre Nichols are



Tyre Nichols murdered by Memphis police.

Black does not make this crime any less brutal or any less of an issue of racism. The Memphis Police Department, like every police department across the U.S., is an insti-

tution of white-supremacist violence and capitalist-class rule. Whether the perpetrators of this violence were Black or white officers, the result is that yet another Black person is slain, and white supremacy is maintained.

We must not see racism merely as a manifestation of personal prejudices and hate by white people toward Black people, but rather racism is a system of structural oppression — bigger than any set of individuals involved. We must understand that racism is inseparable from the capitalist socioeconomic system. Merely requiring sensitivity training for police or hiring more Black police officers will not end the violence, as is evident by this killing of Tyre Nichols.

Fighting racism must go hand in hand with fighting the capitalist system that perpetuates it. The racist violence of the capitalist system permeates our society from police violence in our local communities, to the for-profit mass-incarceration system, to the genocidal military-industrial complex. Workers World Party is in solidarity with all those in the streets fighting against white supremacy, police terror and state violence.

Justice for Tyre Nichols! Abolish the police! Smash white supremacy! □

Protest condemns massacres by Israel

Hundreds of people came out in the Bay Ridge community in Brooklyn, New York,

Jan. 29, to demonstrate against the genocidal Zionist murders of Palestinian people in Jenin and all of Palestine and to honor these people as martyrs of the Palestinian struggle.

This demonstration was called by Within Our Lifetime (WOL), Samidoun Palestinian Prisoner Solidarity Network and several other organizations. Since the beginning of 2023, 32 Palestinians have been

killed. During the protest, organizers announced that nine more people had been killed.

When Neerdeen Kiswani, the chairperson of WOL, asked for people to raise their hands if they had family who had been killed or wounded in Palestine, many hands went up. Although the imperialist media always gives constant coverage of the killings of Israelis, they never give voice to the many Palestinian young people who are defending their homes. Many families from the Bay Ridge community came out

with young children carrying the Palestinian flag. Displaying this flag in the Occupied Territories has now been legally banned by the fascist Israeli regime.

There have been actions in many other cities in the U.S., England, France and other countries in solidarity with Palestine, including the one in Bay Ridge.

— Report and photos
by Toni Arenstein



WW PHOTO: ALEX MAJUMDAR



Read on workers.org/category/prisons :

TEAR DOWN THE WALLS

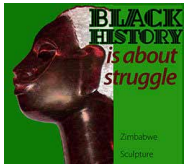


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Coast-to-coast protests call for justice for Tyre Nichols

Raleigh: Several hundred people marched through the streets of downtown Raleigh, North Carolina, on Jan. 28, to protest the police murders of Tyre Nichols and Darryl Williams. Williams was killed by the Raleigh Police Department on Jan. 17 after being shot multiple times with a taser. The protest snaked through downtown for several hours, stopping at the Governor’s Mansion, the Justice Department, Raleigh City Council and other locations to raise demands for justice for Darryl Williams and Tyre Nichols and for an end to police violence against Black and working-class communities.

Speakers at the demonstration and stops along the march emphasized the connection between police murders and broader attacks on the working class in the U.S., as well as the fight against U.S. imperialism and solidarity with liberation struggles abroad.



Raleigh, North Carolina, Jan. 28, 2023. WW PHOTO: BEN CARROLL

Cleveland: An evening vigil held in downtown Cleveland, Jan. 28, drew hundreds of outraged residents. A rally featured mothers, fathers and other family members of Black people murdered by police. Progressive organizations, including Black Lives Matter Cleveland, Black Spring Cleveland, Cuyahoga County Jail Coalition,

InterReligious Task Force on Central America and Colombia, and Clevelanders Against Federal Policing, united to build this powerful action.

Oakland: Hundreds of protesters marched through downtown Oakland, California, Jan. 29, demanding “Justice for Tyre Nichols.” Organized by the Anti Police-Terror Project, the demonstration ended in the streets in front of the Oakland Police Department with chants of

“If OPD (Oakland Police Department) don’t get it, shut it down!” In this photo Uncle Bobby, Cephus Johnson, uncle of Oscar Grant, assassinated by BART police in 2009, addresses the rally.

Contributors to these summaries are Ben Carroll, Judy Greenspan and Martha Grevatt.



Cleveland, Jan. 29, 2023. WW PHOTO: MARTHA GREVATT



Oakland, California, Jan. 29, 2023. WW PHOTO: JUDY GREENSPAN

Join us in the fight for socialism!

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 and imperialism threaten the peoples of the world and the planet itself in the neverending quest for ever-greater profits.

Capitalism means war and austerity, racism and repression, attacks on im/migrants, misogyny, LGBTQ2S+ oppression and mistreatment of people with disabilities. It means joblessness, 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 gunned down by cops and bigots on a regular basis.

The ruthless ruling class today seeks to wipe out decades of gains and benefits won by hard-fought struggles by people’s movements. The super-rich and their political representatives have intensified their attacks on the multinational, multigender and multigenerational working class. It is time to point the blame at — and challenge — the capitalist system.

WWP 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 1959, 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 WWP branch near you. □

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Harlem resists gentrification, environmental racism

By **Richie Merino**
Harlem, New York

Harlem families and grassroots community groups gathered Jan. 28 on West 145th Street and Lenox Avenue in Harlem to protest the operations of a truck stop, which they say was opened in retaliation for their rejection of a gentrification project known as “One45.”

Several rally speakers condemned the luxury real estate developer and former aide to Rudy Giuliani, Bruce Teitelbaum, for poisoning the community and worsening existing environmental issues, causing high rates of asthma and respiratory issues in children.

The battle between the predominantly poor and working-class Black community and Teitelbaum began last year, when he proposed “One45,” a \$700-million luxury high-rise residential complex that included only a small percentage of so-called “affordable” apartments.

These units required a minimum annual household income of \$112,000 to rent, whereas the median household income for the immediate area where One45 was slated to be built is only \$36,804.

Furthermore, most of the units were set to be studio and one-bedroom apartments, which signals that this luxury apartment complex was designed to attract new, young, high-income singles or couples, while excluding the large, poor families who are already living there. The proposed characteristics of Teitelbaum’s One45 indicate it is a gentrification and displacement project; it was never intended to address the community’s dire need for low-income, 2- and 3-bedroom apartments.

Lucky Rivera, the Black and Puerto Rican Coalition director, said the original project was “not affordable for the majority, for 90% of the people that live in Harlem, it’s not affordable for them. We have to stop

this; they are just pushing us out economically. That’s wrong. It’s not right.”

Don Curtis, president of United Black Caucus, which organized people living in the neighborhood to fight the development, said: “Nobody talks about poor people. We want at least 60% of the apartments to be affordable to those who already live in Harlem. We want union jobs for this project to go to those who already live in the community. We want a community recreation center for our youth. We want small businesses here that will hire our people.”

Black community wins concession

The protests placed enough pressure on the developer, who eventually withdrew the plans for One45; but he then dumped a toxic truck depot where the housing project would have been. Saturday’s protest demanded that the idling truck stop be shut down and that Teitelbaum meet with community activists to discuss building housing that better fits their needs.

“Comrade Don” Curtis, as he is known in Harlem, says Teitelbaum “retaliated” against the community for standing up for themselves and demanding housing with levels of affordability that match Harlem’s current mean income and need for larger family-size units.

“We came together and defeated One45,” he said. “This truck stop is Bruce’s retaliation. He wants to poison our community and subject us to a slow death. He wants to expose our elders to diesel fumes and other toxic gasses by putting the truck stop here.” Across the country, truck stops are generally located at city limits or on the interstate highways, not in neighborhoods.

The Chief of Staff for local Councilwoman Kristin Richardson Jordan, Giselle Hearne, was present at the rally and spoke out against mainstream, corporate media

outlets for portraying this community-wide struggle as a personal spat between Teitelbaum and Richardson Jordan.

Hearne also condemned media outlets for reprinting lies and distortions told by Teitelbaum without doing fact-checking. While Teitelbaum claims Jordan is refusing to meet with him, it is actually Teitelbaum who refuses to hold meetings with community members.

“We had several meetings with him, where we showed him what Harlem wanted. We put our demands on the table, and he refused to come back. Ultimately, this truck stop is just retaliation, because we said ‘no’ to the original plan. There was even a meeting set up for him by the Mayor and HPD [New York City’s Department of Housing Preservation and Development], and he didn’t even show up to that. We decided to make emails public to prove that we invited this man to work with us to construct a plan for actually affordable housing that meets our community’s needs.”

Gentrification is like modern-day settler colonialism

Gentrification, settler colonialism, white supremacy and police brutality are inextricably linked and exported globally by the imperialist U.S. government. From Los Angeles to Harlem to Palestine, Black, Brown and Indigenous people are systematically pushed out of their homes, forced to live on the margins of society and their existence criminalized.

When luxury developments such as One45 are built in poor and oppressed communities like Harlem, the rents and property values in the surrounding buildings skyrocket, causing longtime residents to be pushed out of the communities where they have lived for generations.

Newer, white, wealthier residents move in, and with that comes increased phone



WW PHOTO: RICHIE MERINO

Harlem rally, Jan. 28, 2023.

calls to the police, who harass and commit violence against Black youth. What was once the “Black Mecca” of the world is slowly transforming into yet another neighborhood catering to the rich and elite. The legacy of settler colonialism is ongoing, and gentrification has become like its latest manifestation.

Bruce Teitelbaum’s decision to open a toxic truck depot as a response to the people’s demands for actual affordable family housing is white supremacy in action. The developer’s vengeful plan was to add nothing of value to Harlem, instead it will increase inequality and blight.

Harlem has been given the same false choice given to many other working-class, Black, Brown and Indigenous communities in U.S. cities: Either capitulate to gentrification or suffer the consequences and be forced out. But the people of Harlem have a radical history of struggle against imperialist, capitalist and white-supremacist forces and will undoubtedly prevail with class solidarity.

Housing is for people, not for profit! Harlem is not for sale! □

A sign of capitalist decline

Pink slips hit tech workers hard

By **Otis Grotewohl**

In a vulgar display of capitalist greed, indicative of the system’s state of decay, high tech companies have laid off more than 58,000 workers since the start of the new year. These figures include the latest announcements from Google parent company Alphabet to slash 12,000 jobs and Microsoft’s recent 10,000-person reduction. (crunchbase.com)

These new layoffs in the tech industry are a continuation of major cuts over the last year. According to the tech-job tracker layoffs.fyi, there have been more than 200,000 tech jobs eliminated since the start of 2022. They include 18,000 layoffs at Amazon in recent months and 11,000 at Facebook parent company Meta in November.

To add insult to injury, many of the Google workers only discovered they were terminated when their key fobs didn’t work after they arrived at work. Google notified the workers through an email, rather than through personal contact. Meanwhile, corporate spokespeople and human resources representatives of the tech giants can be heard condescendingly telling laid-off workers to “build their resumes.” With mass layoffs at such a high rate, it is difficult for the displaced workers to be optimistic about future job opportunities.

Oppressed and international workers suffer most

All the workers who have been criminally laid off by the tech bosses are now scrambling to find a new source of income. Black and Brown tech workers, especially immigrant workers, are suffering the most. Tech workers from other countries, whose citizenship is dependent upon work visas, are suddenly facing threats of deportation.

According to the financial news website Mint, a number of “industry insiders” estimate that between 30% and 40% of affected employees on temporary work status are from

India. (mashable.com, 1/24/23) Many tech workers from India, as well as China and other countries, depend on an H-1B visa. The H-1B visa is one that allows U.S. companies to employ workers from around the world for specific occupations that require theoretical or technical expertise.

The laid-off H-1B holders need to find an H-1B sponsoring job within 60 days or leave the U.S. within 10 days after losing status. Many of the tech workers residing in the U.S. under the H-1B visas had invited their families to live with them, assuming they were safe, but now their lives are filled with uncertainty.

Consequences of capitalist greed

Under capitalism, bosses constantly seek to expand their profits. Capitalist owners have been using automation and technology to their advantage for decades. Their insatiable drive for superprofits has led to the annihilation of millions and millions of jobs around the world.

Many occupations of workers, who were once considered irreplaceable, are seemingly becoming obsolete. Communities and neighborhoods, urban and rural alike, which were once thriving with jobs, are now devastated because of capitalist automation. Since many former industrial jobs have been replaced by tech jobs over the years, many people working in the tech industry thought their jobs were more secure than other jobs. That was a lie they were often told.

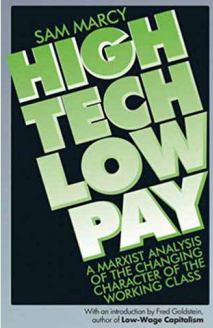
Several corporations have started replacing managerial staff with electronic devices. Many companies are now collecting data and even evaluating employees through the use of algorithms. Some people are calling this practice, along with other technological schemes, “uberization,” highlighting the toxic combination of union-busting privatization and job-killing machinery. Such uberization of any workplace is done to help company owners and investors rake in profits by reducing costs.

In “High Tech, Low Pay,” Workers World Party chairperson and founder, Sam Marcy explained how the use of high technology under capitalism is detrimental to the working class and oppressed.

Marcy wrote, “High technology, especially in the era of computers and electronics, continues to take quantum jumps. A plant, which just recently may have had 10 years to go, can now become obsolete as a result of the constant revolution of the means of production. The development of not only products and devices but of whole new technologies makes what otherwise would be a well-functioning, long-lasting plant with a stable workforce obsolete, but only in comparison to the new technologies.”

On the flipside, technology can be useful under socialism. When technology is used for human need and not for corporate greed, it can be applied to advance humanity’s well-being. Socialist countries aim for full employment to allow, which allows people to have more leisure time. The Soviet Union and China were able to industrialize on a massive scale, in a short period of time, precisely because they utilized technology to help people, rather than to enrich a wealthy few.

It is past time that working and oppressed people give capitalism a layoff notice! □



High Tech, Low Pay

A Marxist Analysis of the Changing Character of the Working Class

By **Sam Marcy** with an updated introduction by Fred Goldstein, author of *Low Wage Capitalism*.

Read it online at workers.org/books/#marcy

States escalate coordinated attack on transgender workers with bar ban

By Elise Kehle

After last year’s campaign to ban adolescents from accessing gender-affirming health care, several Christian right-dominated state legislatures are now turning their efforts toward the disenfranchisement of transgender adults.

Oklahoma’s legislature is leading the pack with Senate Bill 129, a ban on gender-affirming treatment, extending up to the age of 26. The bill would strip the medical license from any professional who participates in treatment or referral for treatment that acknowledges the gender of transgender people under 26.

Bills that attack the medical field’s professional ethics and standards in order to endanger trans health are not new. The American Medical Association has called such bills a “dangerous intrusion,” noting that access to supportive medical treatment is often a vital resource for preventing trans people from killing themselves in response to persecution.

Bans such as this are especially dangerous to trans women, for whom medical transition’s efficacy is much greater before the age of 24. Trans women who do not medically transition as young adults or adolescents will generally have a much harder time being seen as women, which elevates risk in many ways. While not all trans people are interested in appearing cisgender, for many the ability to do so makes the difference in avoiding or experiencing a violent attack.

Banning trans performers, patrons

Missouri Senate Bill 429 takes a different tack. While other bills seek to limit access to health care or to permit businesses to discriminate, SB 429 could force many private businesses to bar transgender performers and patrons. Similar bills, although currently less draconian, are pending before the U.S. House of Representatives and the state legislatures of Tennessee, Arkansas, Arizona and Texas.

Often, when identical legislation is simultaneously introduced in multiple states, it has been written by a nonelected lobbying group, such as the American

Legislative Exchange Council. It is not yet publicly known which of the many religious extremist organizations has drafted these laws.

SB 429 is a two-sentence resolution with 17 pages of attached definitions. Sponsored by State Senator Jill Carter (R-Jasper), it would force any business that hosts trans artists to follow the restrictive laws governing “Sexually Oriented Businesses” (SOBs), like strip clubs.

By regulating drag shows and defining virtually anything a transgender person does within view of two or more people as a drag show, this bill could enforce the SOB code on any establishment that does not bar transgender performers or patrons, excluding those whose acts are not at all sexually themed. This evokes past laws which banned eateries and bars from serving gay patrons. In fact, some of the Stonewall veterans were arrested for the crime of “being a homosexual in a bar.”

Among the regulations SOBs must follow: They are forbidden from most advertising and are required to be located over two city blocks from any residence, church, public park, library, post office, school or medical facility.

‘I am disgusted’

Carter’s bill defines “drag performances,” as “[any] performance in which a performer exhibits a gender that is different from the performer’s biological sex as assigned at birth, using clothing, makeup or other physical markers and sings, lip-synchs, dances or otherwise performs before an audience for entertainment.” This definition is expansive, going beyond the traditional nightclub drag show, and could apply to any karaoke bar or any coffee shop hosting an open-mic night that does not bar transgender patrons and to any library hosting a drag story hour.

Reading the bill’s provided definitions, it could even extend legal consequences and misdemeanor charges to “Shakespeare in the Park” companies daring to perform “As You Like It” or “Antony and Cleopatra” or other classics! These productions would legally have to be “Shakespeare 1,000 feet from the Park, Church and Nearest

Residence” to comply!

“I performed at many poetry shows in St. Louis last year; and if we had this rule, I would have shut down almost all of the venues that hosted me,” Jesse Eikmann told Workers World. “I’m not surprised that Missouri would consider bleaching their cities of trans art like this, but I am disgusted. And by the way, I’m not a drag king. I’m a transgender man reading poems. Calling all trans artists drag performers is insulting to our identities.”

The bill defines trans people, people with a gender different than that assigned to them at birth, as the same as drag performers — people who dress as a different gender for entertainment. It actually poses a set of restrictions on cisgender people too. Since SB 429 defines drag performances as performing while exhibiting a different gender while singing, lip-synching or otherwise performing, there will need to be a legal definition of which articles of clothing are permitted for men and which for women.

Would a man singing a song on stage be considered a drag performer if he wears a pink shirt? What about a scarf? What about a woman wearing pants? What sort of rule will businesses have to enforce to keep their liquor licenses?

Even business leaders worry that they will be unable to attract and retain workers. “There is a group of employees who won’t come here, because they think Missouri is a backwards and bigoted state,” said Shannon Cooper with the Kansas City Chamber of Commerce. (ksdk.com)

Bills rooted in bigoted stereotypes

It should be obvious that this bill will result in inconsistent, arbitrary enforcement. In order to comply, every karaoke bar in the state will have to approve every performer’s wardrobe and do a blood test before allowing them on stage. Few establishments have the resources and inclination to do this, but the knowledge that merely allowing participation by

transgender patrons could cost them their livelihood will make businesses think seriously about banning trans people altogether — which is clearly the point of this legislation.

Taking this bill at face value, should it be enacted, a whole range of performances will be classified as “drag shows” and therefore illegal for most venues to host.

“Under the language of the bill, it seems like there could be no place for a trans person ... to be allowed to perform in any way — karaoke, poetry readings, church choir, school plays, Pride events, the Miss Gay America pageant and other forms of artistic and free expression that are protected by the First Amendment,” said Holly Dickson of the Arkansas ACLU. (tinyurl.com/5eyyuk8z)

These bills are based on the recurrent charge that LGBTQ+ people are inherently sick and predatory — the idea that even seeing queer people exist is equivalent to being sexually assaulted. Far-right governments around the world, from Italy to Indiana, from Hungary to Florida, are banning public acknowledgment of — or now providing service to — persons who are or may be perceived as LGBTQ+. They claim this is to stop LGBTQ+ people from attacking children, a claim that always has been and always will be baseless.

LGBTQ2S+ workers pose no special threat to anyone else; but, selecting religious scriptures that are used to demand our execution, far-right lawmakers continue finding new ways to persecute the LGBTQ2S+ community. Now, businesses that dare to not ensure all-straight, all-cis entertainment could lose their ability to operate in Missouri and beyond.

The next step in attempting the social extermination of the LGBTQ2S+ community has arrived. But a united working-class effort can stop it. □



New York City, June 28, 2017.

WWW PHOTO: NEW YORK CITY BUREAU

School board targets queer youth

By Princess Harmony

Queer youth need support and love, but this was denied by Pennsylvania’s Central Bucks School District when it passed Policy 321, banning Pride flags and other symbols of solidarity of and with LGBTQ+ youth.

Officially, this policy is to maintain “neutrality” when it comes to “social issues.” In reality, it was intended to silence and stifle queer youth, denying them what they need to thrive. After a legal review, the district had to alter the policy from specifically targeting Pride symbols to targeting any “social issue.”

How was Policy 321 conceived? It was spawned after complaints against the school district were filed by the American Civil Liberties Union of Pennsylvania, alleging that trans and queer youth were being harassed relentlessly by their classmates and silenced by upper administrators and the school board. But the board then banned Pride flags, refused to punish bullies and even went so far as to ban the use of preferred names and pronouns, unless students had parental consent.

The complaints had involved interviews with LGBTQ+ youth, their parents, their

teachers and others, who saw firsthand the trauma and pain the students have experienced. Reports included a tragic story of a trans student who attempted suicide in 2019. Seven specific students were represented by the ACLU-Pennsylvania in their complaint to the U.S. Department of Education, the department responsible for investigating Title IX complaints.

Now, instead of gaining relief, students in the entire school district will have to experience bullying for being queer — for being who they are.

This is not the only attack in Bucks County on queer and trans youth. Former gubernatorial candidate and State Senator Doug Mastriano is attempting to legally define drag shows as “adults-only,” which would put them under the same rules as strip clubs and adult book and sex toy stores. He took this step after learning of a queer prom — a prom held by and for queer students who did not get to participate in their own proms — that had a drag performer as entertainment.

Mastriano claimed that drag shows held for minors — which are not, in any way, adult-oriented — should not be tolerated in “any functioning society.” The queer

prom — held by the Planned Parenthood-sponsored Rainbow Room, a queer youth community center that has come under frequent attack by reactionary conservatives — gives youth the chance to experience the magic of a prom without the threat of bullying.

Coordinated attacks in multiple states

These two attacks on queer youth in Pennsylvania cannot be separated from the fact that there are increasing attacks on queer and trans people and their visible existences, nationally.

Texas, for example, has engaged in open warfare against transgender youth and the care they need. State legislators tried to make taking children to drag shows a Class A misdemeanor on par with vehicular robbery; they gathered data on trans residents who have changed the sex on their identification cards or drivers’ licenses. And they are attempting to limit or ban trans-affirming health care for youth — causing an exodus of trans youth and their families from the state of Texas.

In Utah, a moratorium on trans-affirming health care for youth — access

to puberty blockers, hormones and surgeries — has been voted in and signed by Utah’s governor.

Trans youth in public schools are not the only ones being attacked. The state of Oklahoma’s “Millstone Act,” named after a verse from the Christian Bible, would ban people under the age of 26 from getting trans-affirming health care covered by Medicaid.

These attacks on LGBTQ2S+ people are worsening, and we must come together to fight these acts. We need to support the creation of transgender “buyers’ clubs,” shaped after the HIV/AIDS buyers’ clubs of the 1980s and ’90s, which could provide trans people anywhere access to their needed hormones.

Revolutionary Marxist-Leninist thought, as developed by Workers World Party’s founding Chairperson Sam Marcy, holds that LGBTQ2S+ people are worthy of dignity, respect, love and care. We must do everything we can to support queer youth and adults. □

Du Bois’ ‘Black Reconstruction’ and the lessons for today

By Leilani Dowell

Based on a talk given at a Workers World Party conference on Feb. 16, 2017.

W.E.B. Du Bois’ “Black Reconstruction” is part of the effort that Black History Month engages in—the attempt to rectify the erasure and maligning of the lives and struggle of enslaved, formerly enslaved and immigrant Black people in the U.S. from the very founding of this country on stolen land.

Du Bois was born in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, in 1868. He studied at Fisk University, Humboldt University in Berlin and Harvard, where he was the first African American to earn a doctorate. He became a professor of history, sociology and economics at Atlanta University in 1897. In 1931, he began the research and writing of “Black Reconstruction.”

The book showcases a turn to Marxist analysis. Du Bois had visited the Soviet Union in 1928, and while he had some critiques, he was also impressed by the emphasis on workers there.

With “Black Reconstruction,” Du Bois was correcting the historical record. Almost all histories produced at that time either negated the Black role in the Civil War and Reconstruction or defended the overthrow of Reconstruction as the fault of Black people.

Du Bois’ book is also a plea for labor unity on the eve of the 1930s Great Depression. He uses a specifically Marxist analysis to serve as an admonition. He writes: “The rebuilding, whether it comes now or a century later, will and must go back to the basic principles of Reconstruction ... Land, Light and Leading for slaves black, brown, yellow and white, under a dictatorship of the proletariat.”

Black workers, poor whites, planters

So Du Bois begins his book with a chapter entitled “The Black Worker.” And with this title and this placement as the first chapter, Du Bois is laying the stakes. He wants his readers to know the importance of Black labor to the developing system of capitalism on a global scale.

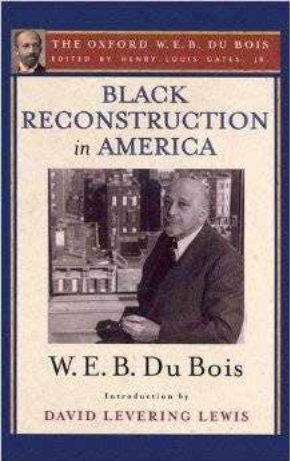
He writes: “Cotton grew so swiftly that ... with this increase, walked economic revolution in a dozen different lines. ... Black labor became the foundation stone not only of the Southern social structure but of Northern manufacture and commerce, of the English factory system, of European commerce, of buying and selling on a worldwide scale; new cities were built on the results of black labor.”

But if Black labor was foundational to the system, it is foundational to the resistance as well. Du Bois states that “of all human development, ancient and modern, not the least singular and significant is the philosophy of life and action, which slavery bred in the souls of black folk.”

Next, Du Bois discusses the poor white of the South, whom he says was used as a “special police force” to create “an armed and commissioned camp to keep Negroes in slavery and to kill the black rebel.” How and why were poor whites able to be used this way?

Well, Du Bois notes that “the new labor that came to the United States ... was not

willing, after it reached America, to regard itself as a permanent laboring class. ... The more energetic and thrifty among the immigrants caught the prevalent [U.S.] American idea that here labor could become emancipated from the necessity of continuous toil and that an increasing proportion could join the class of exploiters.”



It’s what Du Bois calls the “American” assumption, and what we might think of in today’s terms as the “American Dream.” In pursuit of the “American Dream,” these poor white workers in the South allied with the planter in the hopes of ultimately becoming one.

In contrast, Du Bois notes that “the black worker was the ultimate exploited ... had neither wish nor power to escape

from the labor status, in order to directly exploit other laborers or, indirectly, by alliance with capital, to share in their exploitation.”

These divisions resulted in, according to Du Bois, two labor movements—one seeking the abolition of slavery, the other focused on bettering the condition of white workers. And each, Du Bois notes, either ignored or was unsympathetic to the other.

The third of the cast of characters in the South is the planter. For the planter, slavery represented not just profits but political power via the “three-fifths” compromise, which was “used not only to degrade Negroes in theory but in practice to disenfranchise the white South.”

Planters were desperately holding on to an outdated mode of production. Du Bois says that “slavery was the economic lag of the 16th century carried over into the 19th century and bringing, by contrast and by friction, moral lapses and political differences.”

Harpers Ferry, cotton and war

This all came to a head in 1860, when the cotton crop reached an all-time high in production. A year previous, John Brown had led the raid at Harpers Ferry, and the threat of further social upheaval, coupled with the greed of the planters, forced a crisis. Beginning with South Carolina, Southern states began seceding. The Civil War had begun.

Du Bois quotes Frederick Douglass, who said the war was begun “in the interests of slavery on both sides. The South was fighting to take slavery out of the Union, and the North fighting to keep it in the Union; the South fighting to get it beyond the limits of the United States Constitution, and the North fighting for the old guarantees — both despising the Negro, both insulting the Negro.”

Today, Lincoln is celebrated as the president who “freed the slaves.” But Lincoln was, in the beginning, intent on making clear that the war was not one of liberation for the millions of enslaved people. Lincoln even ordered Union troops to return enslaved people to their “owners.” His motivation for war was to support the burgeoning Northern industrial system of capitalism, which needed a large geographical market and did not want to compete with seceded Southern states for international markets.

But in what Du Bois calls “a general strike,” droves of enslaved Black people

began leaving the plantations and arriving at the Union encampments. The South, it was believed, had the advantage in the war because its white laborers were freed up to fight, since enslaved labor would supply food and supplies to the troops.

The enslaved, however, made excellent spies and saboteurs for the Union side. And once they had turned the war into a war of liberation, they would fight until the very end, even while enduring the racism and discrimination of the Northern troops.

It wasn’t until the enslaved forced upon Lincoln the consciousness that this was, in fact, a war against slavery, and that, in fact, it would not be won by the Union unless the Union emancipated them, that Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation.

And so the period of Reconstruction begins, and Du Bois once again highlights the centrality of the Black struggle. In an article that was the precursor to “Black Reconstruction” entitled “Reconstruction and Its Benefits,” Du Bois writes: “How to train and treat these ex-slaves easily became a central problem of Reconstruction. ... Three agencies undertook the solution of this problem ... (a) the Negro church, (b) the Negro school and (c) the Freedmen’s Bureau.”

Here, Du Bois highlights Black leadership and organization. A whole chapter in “Black Reconstruction” is dedicated to the founding of the public school in the South, which he attributes directly to the desire of Black people to learn and develop intellectually. But in addition, he notes the importance of the federal Freedman’s Bureau, which he calls “an attempt to establish a government guardianship over the Negroes and insure their economic and civil rights.”

Its eventual rejection, and the eventual overthrow of Reconstruction as a whole, was, as Du Bois states: “chiefly because the new industry, the money-making financiers and organizers of a vast economic empire, hesitated at a government guardianship of labor and control of industry on a scale that might embarrass future freedom of exploitation.”

Northern and Southern capital shook hands, and the federal government pulled its troops out of the South, leaving Black people defenseless, particularly in the face of Ku Klux Klan terror and violence.

The Trump era

I’ve been trying hard to consider what “Black Reconstruction” means in the Trump era. Certainly the connection

between the overthrow of Reconstruction and the need for the Black Lives Matter movement to challenge the continued legal and extralegal murders of Black people is obvious.

Perhaps the “general strike” is one of the greatest lessons we can take. It is clear that voting the Lincoln/Johnson ticket did not result in the end of slavery. What ended it was the mass of enslaved people taking to the streets and withholding their labor.

I’ve also been thinking about the retreat of the Northern army. And in some ways, I think we can see this election as the beginning of a retreat of the government on the issue of democratic rights. I don’t think it’s overblown to say that anything is up for grabs right now unless we resist.

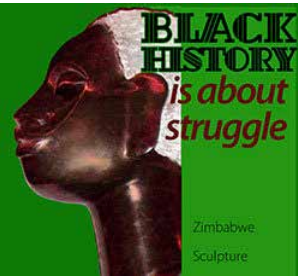
And I think that, rather than dismissing Trump and his crew as “evil,” “wrong” or “stupid,” Du Bois’ careful delineation of the motives of both sides of capital in the Reconstruction struggle encourages us to think about what this political moment says about the dead-end crisis of capitalism as a whole. Like then, the politicians of the two-party system, with different tactics, have one goal in mind — the preservation of the system of capitalism.

There is also, of course, a lesson about working-class unity. Du Bois notes that it was precisely the failure of Black-white unity that led to the overthrow of Reconstruction. Class unity “failed to work,” according to Du Bois, “because the theory of race was supplemented by a carefully planned and slowly evolved method, which drove ... a wedge between the black and white workers.”

Du Bois recognized that working-class unity could have resulted in a real dictatorship of labor in the U.S., that there was serious revolutionary potential that was thwarted at the time by the machinations of the Southern planters and the Northern industrialists.

We must continue struggling for unity, and we must realize that the capitalist ruling class inculcates and promotes the racism of whites to foment divisions that are custom-made to preserve capitalism and imperialism. And we must organize ourselves for the general strikes of the future, with a clearheaded understanding of the maneuverings, opportunism and outright lies used to preserve capitalism.

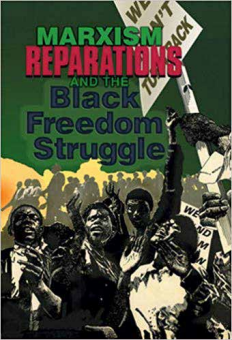
We must study and we must fight. And we must continue the struggle for Black liberation and for workers’ liberation, that was waged by Black folk and their collaborators during the Civil War and Reconstruction. □



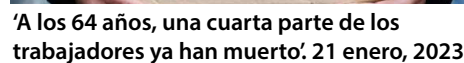
Marxism, Reparations & the Black Freedom Struggle

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Como Marx y Engels escribieron en el párrafo final del Manifiesto: “Que tiemblen las clases dominantes”. □

Además, este año deben renegociarse varios contratos multimillonarios de compañías de extracción de gas y se debe actualizar el Tratado de Libre Comercio con China. Para ello, Dina Boluarte deberá resistir en el cargo y cumplir con las expectativas que la embajada de EE.UU. y el “canciller” estadounidense Blinken pusieron en ella. Obviamente, a ellos no les interesa si para eso haya que masacrar un pueblo. □