

The Washington Socialist
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[Welcome to the April 2016 edition of the Washington Socialist](#)

Wednesday, April 6th, 2016



Welcome to the April 2016 issue of the *Washington Socialist*, the free monthly email newsletter of the Metro DC local of Democratic Socialists of America.

SUPPORTING METRO DC DSA... In the national capital, we are engaged deeply in the Bernie Sanders campaign and in many activities that support or promote progressive issues and movements, explicitly socialist or not. In a pre-Star Trek TNG capitalist environment, this takes money. Join us or support us with a donation at our Paypal link over there in the right-hand column.

THE COMPILER'S OPENING RANT: The pace and fast-shifting focus of the presidential primary season has made it hard to take advantage of the opening for democratic socialism that Bernie Sanders's campaign has brought – hard for him, hard for us.

The peripatetic attention of the voters, and the equally kaleidoscopic methods of the media, have shattered the discourse into many, many issues and increasingly blurred the connections among them. And that's also blurring our unique socialist message – that all these apparently separate political and social issues are the well-meshed moving parts of capitalist political economy, a nicely forged set of fetters for workers well up into the middle class, blending into the tools of domination and subordination wielded by an (often only half-witting) ruling class. It's all connected, we understand – but not in the lens of the day to day campaign.

It gets worse. Like this writer, many of our readers probably get emails or snail mail with surveys asking them to rank various issues in order of importance to them. This is irritating because it helps in the disaggregation of the issues that emerge from this near-seamless hegemonic structure, as we prefer to view it.

Core meta-issues of ours like better jobs *in a clean-energy, sustainable economy*, emancipation from the unfree workplace *that is fettered by anti-worker regulations*, publicly supported households *from which children can go to well-run public schools* and so forth do not fit well into the “rank the issues” framework, of course. It’s counterproductive to isolate and rank issues when badly done governance, in a bundle of boss-bought rules, leads to toxic outcomes for individuals, their families and their communities in a self-reproducing bundle. But it keeps happening, because it keeps everyone’s eyes off The Man behind the curtain.

The corollary irritant here is that progressive organizations, our allies, find it necessary to issue these invitations to rank the troubles under capitalism, giving the impression that only raising the minimum wage or only rebuilding the union movement through a better NLRB will be the magic bullet that makes everything else fall into place for a post-capitalist existence.

We understand why this is done – because most progressive organizations, like ours, have to prioritize their very limited resources and focus on a limited group of issues. So they want to know the ones that will gain them the most support. We at DSA, we have to admit, do the same, dutifully prioritizing by choosing one or two issues to front-burner for the year to come. Our intentions are good, our execution generally terrible because along come the issues of the moment like bowling balls to scatter our careful prioritizing. And we round out our carefully planned year by responding to *all* the issues, or at least most of them.

We wouldn’t be surprised to find that other progressive organizations, having gathered those survey results, and prioritized what their members and supporters find most important, find the issues of the real world busting down the door and shredding their pretty priority list, as well. There’s no question that DSA, like the other organizations, has to match its capacity to its goals, even as it tries to build capacity through such providential stimulants as the Sanders campaign. But it distracts our attention, and that of others, from what is both our glory and our bane – the recognition that the elements of capitalism are so hard to dislodge because they all lean on and interlock with one another, and the grudging understanding that tackling those elements individually brings only a game of Whack-a-Mole, because the highly adaptable lizard brain of capitalism will recover and renew its strength and dominance via some other element while we are working on the one in front of us. It hampers the message of the Sanders campaign too, contributing to our possibly unfair cavil that he’s a social democrat. In this media environment, it’s hard **not** to look like that.

This message problem is not that new, we find. Michael J. Lewis, in a [recent book review](#), grumped that most people skip the dialogue-form preamble about the troubles of English society that opens Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516) and move right along to his account of the “perfected” society out there in Utopia. That’s a mistake, he says,

In the end, More's real accomplishment was less the far-fetched society he imagined than his recognition of the seamless unity that links economics, crime, health and even architecture — and its *corollary that reforms addressing social problems in isolation were doomed to fail*. [italics added] ... Jane Jacobs [later] drew the deeper lesson of “Utopia,” which is that one must approach the organic interconnectedness of society with humility and deference.

More, of course, has run the spectrum of cred today, from the martyred hero of religious liberty in Robert Bolt's 1960s play *A Man for All Seasons* to his role as a narrow-minded religious bigot, justly snuffed, in *Wolf Hall*. As Ellen Meiksins Wood (in *Liberty and Property*) points out, he was a landed-gentry sort who did some enclosing, like his peers. But Lewis has put a finger on why he continues to be read – even incompletely. The society More saw every day, in which communal ownership of the “commons” was being ravaged by big landowners who enclosed such areas for the burgeoning sheep-and-wool trade, was showing many of the early markers of capitalist destruction, including desperate lawlessness and the rural unemployment that would drive folk to huddle, near-destitute, in the cities and be fodder for the beginnings of capitalist exploitation throughout the next two centuries.

More, it appears, resisted prioritizing the ills of his society because of their deep connections – even in advance of capitalism per se. The problem persists for us, surveys or not. It's important to keep our ideal society in our sights – one that retains the lively give-and-take of getting, making and spending without being grounded on the ooze of property-based exchange – as we work against the interlocked obstacles to that ideal community, fighting their tendency to fly apart under our gaze.

Bogdan Denitch, DSA Honorary Chair and Co-Founder, Dies – Author, activist and educator Bogdan Denitch, who was a co-founder of both Democratic Socialists of America and its predecessor organization, the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee, died on March 28 at the age of 85. At the time of his death he was an honorary chair of DSA. Denitch, who was of Serbian origin, spent his early years in Yugoslavia and wrote several books on the breakup of that country and the turmoil that followed. He was a longtime socialist activist and a close associate of the late DSA and DSOC founding chair Michael Harrington. At press time the national DSA office was working on an obituary; details of his life and work are available on [Wikipedia](#).

– *Bill Mosley*

Late Developments in the Maryland General Assembly – important new measures on criminal justice reform, paid sick leave and other issues are still being hammered out as the 2016 legislative session enters its last two weeks (adjournment on or about the Ides of April). Criminal justice measures include one that will make a big [cut in the number incarcerated](#) (bogged down in squabbling about how much money the state will save by reducing the number of prisoners, apparently a big selling point with some in the Assembly). In [police accountability](#), a big package that features civilian members of the trial boards that assess cops' abuse of force and racist behavior has survived a House grinder and is looking medium OK in the Senate. After

three years, the fourth try on getting earned, [paid sick leave](#) for 700,000 uncovered low-income workers – many in food service – has finally gotten past the House Economic Matters Committee (though quite roughed up) and will go to the House floor. It still needs to move in the Senate. A highly progressive bill to expand the scope of the state's **Earned Income Tax Credit** got encrusted with tax breaks for the wealthy on the Senate side and there's a scuffle in the House over whether to strip it clean again or not. The state's new primary schedule has put amazing pressure on activists who also want to advocate on state legislation, but the occasional pivot to lobbying one's own delegates and senator is encouraged... — *Woody Woodruff*

Endorsements by METRO DC DSA

Metro DC DSA's Steering Committee has endorsed in three races in Maryland... the open seats in Congressional District 4 (Prince George's/Anne Arundel) and Congressional District 8 (Montgomery). Both are open because CD 8 Rep. Chris Van Hollen and CD 4 Rep. Donna Edwards are opponents for the open Senate seat being vacated by Sen. Barbara Mikulski. Metro DC DSA is endorsing [Edwards](#) for the Senate seat, State Del. [Joseline Pena-Melnyk](#) for the CD 4 seat and State Sen. [Jamie Raskin](#) for the CD 8 seat. None of them are shoo-ins. Pena-Melnyk has received the *Washington Post's* endorsement but faces two establishment candidates. She has, however, received a late-March cascade of endorsements and money from Emily's List and similar benefactors. Raskin ("too left-wing") and Edwards ("not enough constituent service" is the *WaPo* attack line) have had their opponents get the local daily's nod and favorable treatment, and been unfavorably treated themselves by the um, objective *WaPo*. Maryland readers of the *Washington Socialist* who have not already steeped themselves in these contentious and entertaining races are urged to do so, and actively support our endorsees if they have appeal.

ON THE CALENDAR

Bernie Stuff ...Maryland readers note that April 5 is the last day to register – or to change your party registration if needed to participate in this unusually interesting Democratic primary. [Early voting](#) runs from April 14 to April 21 in selected locations. For advocacy, Marylanders can check *MoCo4Bernie's April events [calendar](#)*, which gets updated.

DSA's participation in Democracy Spring: The D.C. Angle from DD

Dear friends,

We have a profound opportunity this April. Almost 3,000 people have signed up to risk arrest and sit-in to save our democracy in what will be [the largest civil disobedience action of the century](#).

This Democracy Spring is a mass mobilization backed by over 100 organizations, including the [Democratic Socialists of America](#), [Young Democratic Socialists](#), Working Families Party,

the AFL-CIO, Avaaz, 99Rise, United Students Against Sweatshops and the United States Student Association. Millions of members from across the movement are coming together for a breakthrough moment for our country — the time we take back our democracy.

[Take the Pledge: Let Democracy Spring Know You'll Be There](#)

Democracy Spring launches on April 2nd with a 10-day, 140-mile march from Philadelphia to Washington, D.C. Marchers will meet with their fellow citizens, talk to the media, and create a firestorm of anticipation by laying out a simple choice to Congress: either pass bills to make the 2016 elections free and fair for all people, or send thousands of Americans to jail simply for demanding an equal voice.

To make this march a success, Democracy Spring needs your support. There are already 100+ marchers pledged to participate in the full march, and hundreds more joining somewhere along the route. While the support provided to marchers will be nothing fancy, basic needs must be covered. Here's what we need:

- Are you a member of place of worship along the march route that'd be willing to host marchers? Are you willing to open your home for a few folks?
- Marchers need energy. And our energy comes from food. Donate non-perishables or volunteer to lead meal prep at a march stop!
- *[And see the April 9 Greenbelt event for Democracy Spring below]*

If you are able and excited to support Democracy Spring, please contact the Logistics Coordinator at democracyspringlogistics@gmail.com. **If you want to meet up with DSA members in Washington, DC, too, contact info@dsausa.org and/or fill out [this form](#).** Lastly, the most simple way for you to support the marchers is through a donation. Any funds donated towards the march will be used to purchase food, medical supplies, and equipment for our rallies. [Donate now to support the 100+ people who will march from Philadelphia to Washington, D.C. to take back our democracy.](#)

When marchers arrive at the Capitol on April 11th, they'll be joined by thousands of their fellow citizens to sit-in in for at least a week in a disciplined, dignified, and massive nonviolent protest that will shake the foundations of the corrupt status quo. Opportunities like this don't come around often. With the American public and the national media focusing on the elections, the issue of our broken political system is being raised up like never before.

Democracy Spring will be the spark that lights the conscience of our country on fire. Our chance is here. We just need to reach out and seize it — join us.

Together, we are poised to make history.

See you in Washington,
David Duhalde, DSA Deputy Director

<http://www.dsausa.org/>

Other, mostly Maryland events

Thursday, April 7: Progressive Cheverly Forum: Prince George's County

Housing: Equity or Inequity. Speakers to be announced. 7:00 – 9:00 p.m.

Judith P. Hoyer Early Childhood Center Cafeteria, 2300 Belleview Ave. (Belleview and Tuxedo). Light refreshments served.

Saturday, April 9 Greenbelt Rally for Election Reform via *Democracy Spring*, 7 to 9 PM

Greenbelt Community Center Room 114. *Democracy Spring* aims to end big money in politics and to ensure free and fair elections where every American has an equal voice. It will stage a march beginning April 2 at the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia and ending April 10 in Washington.

Welcome some of the Democracy Spring marchers as they arrive in our area. For further information about the walk and events culminating in Washington, DC consult:

<http://www.democracyspring.org/demawakening>

Saturday, April 9 – Maryland United for Peace and Justice hosts a free SKILLS

WORKSHOP for your organization to learn how to increase members, volunteers and how to attract other resources. Adelphi Friends Meeting, 2303 Metzert Road, Adelphi,

Maryland 20783, from 2-5 p.m. “**The 5 E’s of Attracting Resources to Your Cause**,” led by Mark C. Titi , who is a [consultant to small nonprofit organizations](#).

In This Issue:

Joslyn Williams, for decades the progressive face of DC labor, is stepping down as the DC Central Labor Council’s leader. Kurt Stand outlines Williams’s storied career and role in turning DC labor in progressive directions from a less-promising start. [Read complete article](#)

The stunning reversal that saw the DC Public Service Commission buy into the Exelon purchase of local electric utility Pepco has more than one root cause, Andy Feeney finds. What tipped the balance? [Read complete article](#)

Our Metrorail system has gone from being the national model for clean and great-looking public transit in the ’80s to a near-laughingstock today, with deferred maintenance problems bringing national attention. Bill Mosley traces the persistent lack of accountability and responsibility on the part of the jurisdictions – and socioeconomic classes – that benefit most from the system.

[Read complete article](#)

Will the Sanders campaign create a stronger and enduring socialist left presence in US politics, recovering from the Cold War stigma? Harold Meyerson, at a DSA event focusing on that, made a convincing case that it’s already under way. Woody Woodruff reports. [Read complete article](#)

How many Republican presidential candidates does it take to completely ignore D.C. statehood and rights of representation? There was only one holdout – Donald Trump – and his final place in the pantheon of last-colony enthusiasts gets settled in Bill Mosley’s brief account. [Read complete article](#)

The complicated intersection of public access to (and support of) reproductive health services, cultural changes needed for both women and men to temper lingering patriarchy, and activism were traced in a Socialist Salon on reproductive justice, Kurt Stand relates. [Read complete article](#)

President Obama’s nomination for the Supreme Court seat vacated by Antonin Scalia’s death appears designed to be difficult for Senate Republicans to ignore. Bill Mosley argues that Merrick Garland is, instead, “the wrong nominee for the times.” [Read complete article](#)

In a look at a classic history of the 20th Century, Andy Feeney traces the career and influence of Eric Hobsbawm, whose *The Age of Extremes* continues to be a (mostly) useful guide to the puzzles of the Soviet Union’s role in that “short” century. [Read complete article](#)

Good Reads for Socialists has plenty of surprises – the US six-party system, underwater Shakespeare, Trump’s appeal on trade and much more. [Read complete article](#)

[A Corporate Tammany Hall on the Potomac: The Scandal of the Exelon Deal, and How PEPCO’s Influence Peddling Made It Possible](#)

Thursday, March 31st, 2016

***The Washington Socialist* <> April 2016**

By Andy Feeney

On March 23, the DC Public Service Commission betrayed the DC public interest. By a 2-1 vote, with PSC chair Betty Ann Kane dissenting, the commission at last approved the enormously controversial offer by the Chicago-based nuclear utility giant Exelon to buy control over our local electricity utility PEPCO.

As the *Washington Socialist* reported last year, local consumer advocates and renewable energy activists have been warning the PSC and the media for two years or more that this merger will harm the average PEPCO ratepayer in a host of interesting ways while likely frustrating the DC

Government's alleged interest in promoting solar rooftop and windmill-generated electricity in the District, thus setting back the city's efforts to develop a more sustainable energy base.

This makes the PSC's ruling difficult to explain, especially since the Commission had issued a unanimous rejection of a previous Exelon offer only last August. Moreover, DC's Mayor Muriel Bowser, who also had opposed the original Exelon offer, only to reverse course later in the fall when Exelon and PEPCO submitted an alternative plan that included some \$78 million in rather short-term benefits for residential ratepayers, by March 23 had changed course once again. By the time the Commission finally announced its approval of Exelon's third and latest offer, the Bowser administration was urging its rejection.

Despite its own initial ruling of last August, despite its rejection of Exelon's second takeover proposal early this year, and despite the renewed opposition of the Mayor, the DC Office of People's Counsel and the DC Attorney General's Office, the PSC on March 23 surprised many local observers and chose to accept one of Exelon's three newest takeover options.

As a result, attorneys for Exelon and PEPCO have already merged the management structures of the two companies, and most observers think the long-delayed takeover is now an accomplished fact. True: at press time, a local renewable energy activist group called Grid 2.0 had submitted a new objection to the takeover, but most critics think it will become final by the end of May.

Why did the PSC finally change its mind? Given its unanimous rejection of the original Exelon offer and its 2-1 rejection of the second offer submitted last fall, why did the Commission reverse itself last week, and accept a very similar plan to the original one, especially when even the Mayor had come out against it?

Local utility industry watcher and environmental analyst Marchant Wentworth, in an interview with the *Socialist* just before press time, said the shifting stance of the Apartment and Office Building Association of Greater Washington (AOBA) was one operative factor in the PSC's flip-flop.

For some years now, Wentworth noted, apartment building owners and certain other local businesses, who have a low elasticity of demand for electricity, have been required to pay higher electricity prices in order to provide somewhat lower prices for residential customers. The commercial building owners naturally resented this subsidy to residential ratepayers, and they were not pleased when Exelon, in order to sweeten its original merger proposal, agreed to make \$78 million available to the Mayor's Office for redistribution to such ratepayers to buffer them against the next few years of rate increases, while providing little or no such protection to the apartment industry.

However, when the PSC rejected the second Exelon proposal with the \$78 million sweetener, and when Exelon responded by then submitting a list of three possible alternatives to it, one of the three new options called for the PSC rather than the Mayor's Office to control the \$78 million buffer fund. This opens the possibility that the commercial owners may see some of the subsidy money, instead of all it going to residential power users. Given an AOBA press release from last fall, it also appears that the PSC may now be considering changing its rate structures over

a series of rate cases unfolding in time, to provide relief to commercial building owners – at the likely expense of other customers, it appears.

The apartment building owners therefore reversed their opposition to the deal and declared in favor of the option that the PSC ultimately approved. Of course the PSC, too, had reason to like the idea of getting to hold the \$78 million instead of the Mayor controlling it. On the other hand, the Mayor's Office lost a bit of turf under the deal, and this may be why Mayor Bowser, the Office of People's Counsel and Attorney General Karl Racine all opposed what the Commission ended up accepting.

Yet the biggest winners from the apparently completed merger, Wentworth said, are PEPCO's shareholders, who collectively will gain "billions of dollars" from Exelon buying up their PEPCO stock at a premium price well above its market value. PEPCO shareholders and executives thus have the greatest interest in what the PSC approved, and that's why PEPCO's wide-ranging web of political influence in the District is likely a key important factor in the outcome.

As local and national media have noted, PEPCO in recent years has donated some \$1.6 million annually in contributions to a wide range of local charities and civic organizations. Through its hiring practices and apprenticeship programs, the company also can offer attractive career opportunities to an admittedly rather limited circle of minority youth in need of such opportunities. PEPCO also has been relatively progressive in racial matters over the past several decades, hiring and promoting black executives to relatively high positions.

Accordingly, when Exelon and PEPCO first proposed to merge a few years ago, PEPCO, its shareholders and its executives already had established a formidable web of local political contacts who would support the proposed deal, regardless of what common sense and hundreds of pages of expert testimony might say against it.

For example, as the trade publication *RTO Insider* reported back in October, and as the *Post* has reported as well, a former senior vice president and special advisor to the CEO of PEPCO Holdings, Inc., (PHI), Beverly Perry, has recently served as a senior adviser to Mayor Bowser. For his part, DC Attorney General Karl Racine is a lawyer who in his former corporate practice did work for PEPCO, and Phil Mendelsohn, the generally respected chair of the DC Council, owns enough PEPCO stock that he has been officially required to report it. DC Council member Vincent Orange is a former regional vice president of PHI.

Within the local corporate and nonprofit world, meanwhile, the CEO of PEPCO Energy Services, John Huffman, as of last fall sat of the board of the Capital Area Food Bank; a retired PEPCO executive, Linda Jo Smith, is listed as board chair of the DC anti-hunger group So Others Might Eat, or SOME.

A little web research indicates that yet another PEPCO vice president, Marc Battle, sits on the board of the local art and music group Step Afrika! David Velasquez, former executive vice president of PHI and now the head of PEPCO operations under Exelon, appears to be serving on

the boards of the Smithsonian Institution's National Zoo, the Greater Washington Board of Trade and the Trust for the National Mall, among other entities.

The retiring CEO of PHI, Joseph Rigby, who is stepping down following the merger, has until recently been a board member of the Federal City Council, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the Greater Washington Board of Trade and the Greater Washington Sports Alliance. And according to PEPCO's own web site, the company in 2013 was "partners" with, and evidently a contributor to, dozens of DC, Maryland and national nonprofit groups, including:

- The Children's Defense Fund
- The Congressional Black Caucus
- The Cystic Fibrosis Association
- The D.C. Boys Choir
- C. Central Kitchen
- The D.C. Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy
- Emmaus Council for the Aging
- The Jewish Council for the Aging
- The Latin American Youth Center
- The Glover Park Citizens Association
- The Greater Washington Hispanic Chamber of Commerce
- Holy Cross Hospital Foundation
- The House of Ruth, a D.C. shelter for battered women and children escaping from domestic violence
- Mission of Love Charities, Inc.
- The National NAACP and the NAACP of Montgomery County
- The Spina Bifida Association
- Teach for America – DC Region
- Society for Ecological Restoration
- Special Olympics – District of Columbia
- The Nature Conservancy – Maryland/DC
- Washington Nationals Youth Baseball
- Studio Theater
- The Phillips Collection
- University of the District of Columbia
- George Washington University

The anti-hunger and anti-homelessness organization Thrive DC, and numerous other local and national organizations.

When Exelon and PEPCO brought their case for the takeover before the PSC, the Mayor's Office and the local print and broadcast media, therefore, they had the backing of many local business groups that get financial benefits from doing business with PEPCO, as well as the Board of Trade and the Federal City Council, now headed by former DC Mayor Anthony Williams. They also boasted of having the endorsement of nearly four dozen nonprofit groups, whose

representatives in some cases testified before the PSC that the proposed merger was clearly in the public interest – even though the ratepayers of Baltimore, where Exelon recently took control of the former local utility Baltimore Gas & Electric, have endured five rate hikes in two years since that merger was consummated.

No one can say for sure just how much sway PEPCO’s “partners” – or more properly speaking, its charitable clients – had in persuading two of the PSC’s initially skeptical commissioners to change their minds on the merger. But it’s a fairly safe bet that the clamor from PEPCO-beholden nonprofits, along with pressure from the Board of Trade and the Apartment Building Owners Association, didn’t do any damage to PEPCO’s cause.

Obviously, the use of money to buy political influence has become all too common in our society, but there’s one aspect of PEPCO’s political strategy in the takeover proceedings that seems unusually outrageous, even by ordinary American standards.

PEPCO – to the extent it still exists as an organization – is a regulated utility because it’s a natural monopoly, and therefore enjoys a special status under law. It controls all or virtually all distribution of electricity in the District and other parts of its service area, encompassing an estimated 2 million customers here and in certain parts of Maryland, Delaware and New Jersey, because of the physical absurdity of having rival power companies attempt to string competing networks of power line wires and electrical transformers over the area.

As a legally tolerated and regulated monopoly, PEPCO can essentially force almost everyone in its service area to pay for its electricity distribution, whether we choose to or not. And by using a small fraction of the enormous revenues it receives from us to buy influence with dozens, if not hundreds of local businesses and charitable and civic organizations, PEPCO has devised a way to use a fraction of the money we pay to it to thwart the voices of genuine consumer advocates before the PSC, not to mention in the commercial media. Most outrageously, PEPCO seems to be using its contributions to perpetually underfunded and needy anti-hunger and anti-poverty organizations and churches in order to get them to support a bad merger that’s likely to impose additional economic burdens on their clients.

From one angle, PEPCO’s use of its remarkable influence web illustrates what Marxist economics says about the effects of “alienation” in the capitalist workplace and marketplace, where corporations can earn profits by overcharging their customers and exploiting their workers, then employ those profits to build larger economic and political structures to make these customers and workers even more powerless than we found ourselves originally.

In terms of mainstream American political thinking, though, it’s probably better to reflect on the ways that PEPCO’s influence buying in today’s Washington resembles the mechanisms that big city political machines like New York City’s notorious Tammany Hall used to profit from their political influence during the Gilded Age of the late nineteenth century. Under the rule of Tammany Hall in particular, and under the dominion of many similar urban political machines of its era, relatively poor and powerless city residents – in the case of Tammany’s New York, poor Irish immigrants only recently arrived from the Old Country – could obtain very real and important short-term benefits from machine rule.

If a poor Irish family in New York was too broke to afford a decent Christmas dinner, say, or if a son or nephew in the family was jobless and needed paid work with the police force or the city water department or some other city agency, they could often call on the local Tammany precinct worker or “ward heeler” for aid. The precinct worker by working through the machine might then provide the needed Christmas dinner, or arrange for the necessary job with the city, or contribute to the family’s welfare in some other important fashion – but at a price.

The price was the promise of the recipients of Tammany largesse to support the machine’s favored candidates in the next election. And by using its influence with the poor and powerless to elect reliably corrupt politicians to office, the Tammany machine could ensure that various corrupt contracts and other deals would end up generating revenues for the organization – at the cost, of course, of the taxpayers and the general public. So long as you supported the machine, you probably could count on being able to afford a goose for Christmas dinner, but at the cost of having a corrupt police force, paying higher taxes to pay for streets and buildings that cost more than necessary, or that fell apart quickly after being constructed, or paying higher prices for streetcar service than you should have.

The analogy obviously isn’t perfect, but it looks as if PEPCO, through its employment policies, its connections to the boards of locally important business and charitable organizations, and its seemingly generous contributions to local organizations that are genuinely doing good work, and genuinely need the money – organizations like the House of Ruth, or SOME, or the Cystic Fibrosis Organization or the NAACP, even – is doing what it can to build its own corporate equivalent of Tammany Hall here in the District.

Clearly recipient organizations like the House of Ruth and Greater Washington United Way really do need the money; the same is no doubt true for the Nature Conservancy and Emmaus Council on Aging. But the price of PEPCO’s supposed generosity to these groups is that DC ratepayers and consumer advocates have apparently lost what little influence we might once have had over the decisions of the PSC, and that we’re likely to be confronted soon with sharply rising electricity prices because of it. Worse yet, PEPCO’s regionally based patronage machine will now be supplanted by the larger, multi-state patronage machine of Exelon, which should prove even harder for the PSC to regulate than PEPCO has been.

Back in 1903, muckraking journalist Lincoln Steffens labeled this sort of corrupt machine politics *The Shame of the Cities*. In 2016, it looks as if Steffens was right.

[A Great Marxist Historian Surveys The Rise & Collapse of Communism](#)

Thursday, March 31st, 2016

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By Andy Feeney

Book Review of Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914-1991*, Pantheon Press/Random House (New York: 1994), 585 pages (627 pages including references and index).

For socialists of all varieties, the nature and ultimate fate of the 1917 Russian Revolution are topics that appear to be inescapable. Even today, 25 years following the collapse of the Soviet Union, democratic socialists are still likely to confront conservative [critics who claim](#) that “socialism” at heart is no different from Russian-style Communism, which was almost complete evil from the conservative perspective. To the left of DSA, meanwhile, we’re still likely to encounter campus-trained Marxists, some with doctorate degrees, who claim to see the Bolshevik Revolution – properly interpreted, of course – as a template for what all “real” socialists should be doing in the twenty-first century.

For democratic socialists who haven’t immersed themselves in this history of Soviet-inspired Communism and what became of it, and who thus find themselves caught in the debates between the right and the left with no clear position on Bolshevik-style Communism, *The Age of Extremes*, by the late British Marxist Eric Hobsbawm, offers a sweeping account of Communist history that’s well worth reading.

It’s an old book, admittedly, published just three years after the Soviet Union dissolved, leading much of the global Communist movement to dissolve along with it. By today’s political standards, there are some obvious gaps in Hobsbawm’s analysis, which says much too little about feminism, the politics of race or the problems of gender, and gets some of what it does say wrong.

But Hobsbawm during his lifetime was one of the world’s leading Marxist historians, and his often provocative yet balanced account of what international Communism meant in its day is enormously impressive, and has been portrayed as such even by certain conservative reviewers. I think this book therefore is one that could be valuable for many younger DSA members, as well as for older socialists who know they like Hobsbawm, but haven’t yet gotten around to reading this volume.

From the perspective of many Americans, Hobsbawm (1917-2012) may seem a paradoxical figure. For much of the late twentieth century, Hobsbawm enjoyed a reputation as a leading British historian. He was accepted as a fellow of the British Academy in 1978; in 1998 he was appointed to the exclusive “Order of the Companions of Honor” for the Commonwealth countries (where his fellow members included several lords of the realm, Dame Judi Dench and the Queen). From 2002 through 2012 he served as president of Birbeck College at the University of London, and in 2002 the generally rightwing British journal *Spectator* hailed him as “arguably our greatest living historian – not only Britain’s, but the world’s.”

Yet for most of his life, from his decision to join the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1936 through his leaving it in 1991, shortly before the CPGB dissolved, Hobsbawm was a loyal Communist, albeit a scholarly one. As a Jewish teenager who had been born in Egypt, but who resided in Berlin in 1931, Hobsbawm was first attracted to a Communist Party youth group at the age of 14 and went on to join the British Communist Party at the age of 19, in 1936. His loyalty to Communism, which originally attracted him as an alternative to fascism, apparently never wavered afterwards.

He remained in the Party despite the Hitler-Stalin Pact of 1939, Nikita Khrushchev's famous denunciations of Stalin at the 20th Party Congress in 1955, the Soviet crushing of the Hungarian Revolution in 1956, and the 1968 Russian invasion that ended the "Prague Spring" of Communist reformer Alexander Dubcek in Czechoslovakia.

Hobsbawm's open membership in the Communist Party over the course of his career, and his contributions to the Party's journal *Marxism Today*, did not destroy his reputation in the UK, as they might have in the US in the 1950s. They did attract some criticism, naturally.

When Hobsbawm published *The Age of Extremes* in 1994, following the collapse of Soviet Communism in 1991, the financial historian Niall Ferguson, writing in the UK's generally conservative *Sunday Telegraph*, hailed him as the only living historian "of whatever political affiliation" with the knowledge and talent to complete such a sweeping history. Kenneth Prewitt of the Rockefeller Foundation wrote that "Hobsbawm's magisterial treatment of the short twentieth century will be the definitive *fin-de-siecle* work." On the other hand, a number of vocal anti-Communist writers, including historian Robert Conquest and the Polish ex-Communist Leszek Kolakowski, publicly attacked *Age of Extremes* for allegedly soft-peddalling the crimes of such Bolshevik leaders as Lenin and Stalin.

For some readers today, it may seem from the tone of Hobsbawm's rather non-judgmental prose that the anti-Communist critics of 1994 had a point. *Age of Extremes* contains few lengthy passages expressing moral outrage over Stalin's crimes – or for that matter, Hitler's authorization of the Holocaust. There are few if any anguished descriptions of what European capitalism meant for European working people during the 1930s Depression, either, or what British imperialism meant for India and South Africa. Nor does Hobsbawm devote more than a few paragraphs to the violent Chinese convulsions that resulted from Mao's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in the 1960s.

What Hobsbawm does in *Age of Extremes*, however, is offer an essentially Marxist critique, albeit at a high level of abstraction, of what he saw as the inevitable shortcomings of Russian Bolshevism following the October Revolution of 1917. He also concludes his work with an essentially Marxist repudiation of Soviet-style Communism – "the original ideal of a single, centrally controlled and state-planned economy based on a completely collectivized state" — as a workable model for future socialists.

The Soviet system that Lenin and the Bolsheviks established after the revolution of 1917, Hobsbawm writes,

“was designed not as a global alternative to capitalism, but as a specific set of responses to the particular situation of a vast and spectacularly backward country at a particular and unrepeatable historical conjuncture. The failure of revolution elsewhere [which Lenin and other Bolsheviks hoped would occur in response to the Bolshevik seizure of power] left the USSR committed to build socialism alone, in a country in which, by the universal consensus of Marxists in 1917, including the Russian ones, the conditions for doing so were simply not present.”

The attempt to make the Bolshevik version of socialism succeed in the old Russian empire, Hobsbawm acknowledges, produced “remarkable achievements – not least the ability to defeat Germany in the Second World War,” particularly considering that Tsarist Russia had been unable to defeat the Germans in World War I. The fact that Stalin’s USSR, despite its history of drastic political purges and mass starvation among the peasantry, managed to beat Hitler’s armies in the 1940s while the Tsar’s Russian empire had been unable to beat the Kaiser’s military forces before 1917 showed that Communist Party rule had produced real benefits.

But in Hobsbawm’s view, Russian Communism’s achievements came “at quite enormous and intolerable human cost.” and “at the cost of what proved eventually to be a dead-end economy and a political system for which there was nothing to be said.” The “really existing socialism” of Eastern European societies under Soviet oversight during the Cold War operated under “the same disadvantages, although to a lesser extent,” as that of the USSR, Hobsbawm observes. The book therefore concludes that “a revival or rebirth of this pattern of socialism is neither possible, desirable, nor – even assuming conditions were to favour it – necessary” – a remarkable statement, given Hobsbawm’s own political history.

Most democratic socialists have long agreed the Soviet-style Communism offers no socialist answers for the future. But for those of us with only a limited familiarity with Communist history, it is worth reading through this long and multifaceted book, although selectively, to understand how Hobsbawm’s Marxist analysis differs from that of the anti-Communist conservatives.

In a nutshell, Hobsbawm agrees with Marxist scholars who have written that Tsarist Russia, in 1917, was ripe for revolution and yet drastically unsuited for the development of socialism according to Marx’s theories about the historical stages of economic development. Russia in 1917 was largely a peasant society, with a small although politically active industrial proletariat. As a multi-ethnic empire it was proverbial for cultural backwardness and superstition, with a low literacy rate and a largely feudal government. Marx and Engels had originally predicted socialist revolution only in much more economically advanced capitalist societies.

As Hobsbawm notes, then, virtually all Marxists before 1917 agreed that it would be impossible to build socialism in Russia – unless, that is, the Russian Revolution quickly inspired successful socialist revolutions in more advanced European societies, such as Germany, that had been enduring enormous suffering thanks to the First World War.

Gambling on the likelihood of their example inspiring socialist revolutions in war-torn European countries, the Bolsheviks seized power almost bloodlessly in October of 1917 and, after first

trying to govern in alliance with anarchists in the left wing of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, soon found themselves forced to govern as a single party during an extremely brutal civil war. At the end of the civil war in 1920 they found themselves in control of a huge, still backward land in which the revolutionary wing of the working class had largely been killed off and an already limited industrial economy had been devastated.

For a few optimistic years it looked as if the European socialist revolutions the Bolsheviks had hoped for would occur, but by the early 1920s all these revolutions had failed, leaving the surviving Bolsheviks with the challenge of trying to build socialism – or at least a decent society – in a situation where Marxist theory said success was almost impossible.

By 1921 Lenin himself realized that the Bolsheviks represented almost no one but themselves, Hobsbawm writes, and to rebuild the economy they adopted a New Economic Policy (NEP) that essentially allowed the reemergence of small-scale capitalism, which peasants who had seized the estates of Tsarist nobles in 1917 took to enthusiastically. But the chances of building socialism on a basis of peasant capitalism were slim; there were potential conflicts looming between the agricultural peasant economy and the urban industrial workers, and eventually, following Lenin's death and Stalin's rise to power, the Communist-led government chose to push ahead for rapid industrial growth and the collectivization of agriculture.

Under even enlightened leadership this course of action would have meant forcing the vast majority of the peasants, and many industrial workers, too, to make immediate sacrifices in living standards that most Russians disliked, Hobsbawm indicates: "Any policy of rapid modernization in the USSR, under the circumstances of the time, was bound to be ruthless and, because imposed against the bulk of the people and imposing serious sacrifices on them, to some extent coercive."

Even without Stalin, too, the increasingly hierarchical structure the Communist Party had developed during and after the civil war meant that there was a risk of Communist rule in the USSR developing into dictatorship. Stalin, however, exercised a unique degree of "ferocity, ruthlessness and lack of scruple" in consolidating his rule, Hobsbawm reports.

Partly because he lacked the charisma and self-confidence that Hitler could deploy to inspire members of the Nazi Party in Germany, "Stalin ruled his party, as everything else within reach of his personal power, by terror and fear." Among other things, he purged the Party itself and the officials of the government of several million people between 1934 and 1939, and he had upwards of 400,000 of them executed. His authority as an autocrat, therefore, came to be nearly absolute. Meanwhile, Stalin's economic policy of rapid industrial growth did enjoy some positive results, although at great social cost. The collectivization imposed on the peasants, however, was a disaster and caused a major famine in 1932-33.

"It will probably never be possible to calculate the human cost of Russia's iron decades adequately," Hobsbawm writes of the Stalin years, but "the number of direct and indirect victims must be measured in eight rather than seven digits." Whether the total number was closer to 10 million or 20 million victims, it was "shameful and beyond palliation, let alone justification."

Yet largely because it suffered from a virtual economic blockade imposed by the West, Stalin's USSR continued growing economically in the 1930s even as the leading capitalist countries were wracked by depression, giving a real cachet to Communism in the Stalinist mode. Then during World War II, following Hitler's unbelievably ill-judged invasion of the USSR, the stubborn resistance of the Russian people to German sieges and military occupation broke the Nazi advance, and was soon followed by the Red Army pushing the Germans back to Berlin – a military feat crucial to winning the war, and one that added to the international allure of Communism.

The result, Hobsbawm argues, was that an improvised Communist economy cobbled together to bring about industrialism in less-developed societies that were unready for socialism ironically became the model for revolutionary socialists nearly everywhere. A Communist Party that had developed dictatorial or at least authoritarian features quite out of keeping with what most Marxist socialists had envisioned before 1917 became the backbone of a global revolutionary force of remarkable discipline and tenacity, while also inspiring the formation of similar elite-led, authoritarian parties in many Third World societies undergoing anti-colonialist revolutions.

And yet by the late 1980s in Eastern Europe and in the USSR itself, socialist central economic planning as the USSR had first developed it found itself unable to compete effectively against the capitalist West, in part because Communist Eastern Europe and the USSR itself were now far more economically integrated with the West than Russia had been in the 1930s. The Russian people in the 1980s actually were living more comfortably than they had been in decades, Hobsbawm writes, but their economy was vulnerable to the global economic recession then plaguing the Western liberal democracies, and it was clear to Soviet leaders that their economy was in trouble, partly because it was less efficient in adopting new capitalist technologies.

Meanwhile vanguardist Communist parties based on Leninist principles, but increasingly staffed by careerists with selfish motives, were failing to inspire most working people in the Communist world with any real zeal for either socialism or Marxism. This was partly because the Communist Party itself was committed in theory to being a revolutionary elite, standing above the mass of people rather than reflecting their ideas and desires. And when a Communist Party boss with a genuine interest in returning to a more democratic and egalitarian form of socialism, Mikhail Gorbachev, attempted to reform “actually existing socialism,” all he succeeded in doing was destroying it.

This is a gross over-simplification of what Hobsbawm writes in *The Age of Extremes*, which also surveys how the international Communist movement influenced revolutions and reform movements in a number of other societies, notably including China, Southeast Asia, Cuba and Latin America. But this is the essence of what Hobsbawm thinks went wrong with Communism. Besides outlining the history of Soviet Communism itself, however, Hobsbawm with considerable literary skill, and an almost novelistic talent for words at times, also uses this work to outline a variety of intellectual connections between Soviet-style Communism and other important developments in what he calls the Short Twentieth Century.

Politically and economically, these developments include the two world wars of the 1917-1945 period, the deep depression of the 1930s and the fascist and Nazi movements that emerged from

it, the unusual cooperation between Soviet Russia and the western capitalist powers that defeated fascism in World War II, the global Cold War that resumed between the Communist bloc and Western capitalism from the end of the war through 1991, and the era of anticolonial, generally anti-European revolutions that already were underway in the 1920s and that continued until nearly 1980.

Hobsbawm also explores the capitalist “Golden Age” of 1945-1970 and how both the lessons of the Depression years and the challenge of Communist-inspired revolutions during the Cold War affected it, partly by inspiring capitalist governments to adopt social safety nets of various kinds as a political safeguard against domestic radicalism.

The Age of Extremes likewise examines the emergence of “modernist” avant-garde developments in art, music and literature before 1914, and their further development through the 1930s; the era of “postmodernist” art and literature after 1970 that led to the repudiation of modernist thinking in several artistic fields and European philosophy; and (to a limited degree) the new feminist movement that emerged in western capitalist societies after 1960. This accompanied a general cultural revolution in prosperous capitalist societies in the 1960s that Hobsbawm – rightly or wrongly – essentially identifies as individualistic, and either anti-social or at least asocial.

On the other hand, Hobsbawm in this book seems shockingly indifferent to, and ignorant of, developments in black political activism and thought in the capitalist West and the USA since the 1950s. Thus his index contains no entries for W.E.B. DuBois, who had famously argued that “the problem of the Twentieth Century will be the problem of the color line,” nor for Malcolm X, nor for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., nor for the Pan-Africanist Marxist writer C.L.R. James, nor for Franz Fanon.

Showing a similar set of intellectual and political limitations, Hobsbawm’s text labels gay cultural pioneers as “homosexual” and spends virtually no time discussing them, much less the gay political activism that followed the 1969 Stonewall riot in the United States or the radical activism of Act Up protesters addressing the AIDS crisis in the 1980s. In these ways he appears oblivious to the socialist politics of intersectionality, although he must have had at least some exposure to the ideas of Stuart Hall, a British contemporary of Hobsbawm’s and a cofounder of *New Left Review*, concerning the intersection of race, class and gender in leftwing British politics.

One of Hobsbawm’s strengths in *Age of Extremes*, on the other hand, is his section on revolutions in science that contributed to sweeping changes in capitalist societies, and that through technological change probably contributed to the collapse of Communist societies, in the period leading to 1991.

Noting that in both the Communist world and the capitalist West, the end of the “Golden Age” in the late 1970s ushered in a new period of crisis – across the heavily indebted societies of the Third World, Hobsbawm observes, the 1980s were a decade of economic catastrophe – Hobsbawm concludes *Age of Extremes* on a note, not of political despair, but of extreme political and economic uncertainty.

Although he did not, by the early 1990s, foresee the growing popularity of rightwing fundamentalist religious movements or the anti-terrorist battles of the new century, Hobsbawm in this book portrays his Short Twentieth Century as uniquely marked by increasingly brutal forms of war, by ambiguous and often dysfunctional forms of revolution, and by a general breakdown of traditional social and religious mores and structures of cooperation, thanks largely to the advance of consumer capitalism and capitalist individualism.

He also, toward the end of the book, remarks on the evident incompatibility between capitalism – especially the neoliberal or “free market” form of capitalism that Reaganite USA and Thatcherite Britain adopted during the 1980s – with the preservation of the natural environment.

Hobsbawm in this book completely rejects “zero growth” environmentalism, noting that around the world, large and growing populations of poor people, many facing unemployment, wanted more economic development in the early 1990s, not less. And yet, he concludes in *Age of Extremes*, supporters of environmentally sustainable economic policies are correct: “In the long run, a balance [will] have to be struck between humanity, the (renewable) resources it consume[s], and the effect of its activities on the environment.” No one in 1994 knew just how such a balance can be established, Hobsbawm writes, but

One thing ... was undeniable. It would be incompatible with a world economy based on the unlimited pursuit of profit by economic enterprises dedicated, by definition, to this object and competing with each other in a global free market. From the environmental point of view, if humanity was to have a future, the capitalism of the Crisis Decades [e.g. the neoliberalism of the post-Reagan and post-Thatcher years] could have none.”

In the last section of *Age of Extremes*, Hobsbawm therefore provides the reader with a series of seemingly overwhelming challenges, writing in his chapter *Towards the Millennium* that the short twentieth century had ended “in a global disorder whose nature was unclear, and without an obvious mechanism for either ending it or keeping it under control,” with the added proviso: “The reason for this impotence lay not only in the genuine profundity and complexity of the world’s crisis, but also in the apparent failure of all programmes, old and new, for managing or improving the affairs of the human race.”

The collapse of the Soviet Union and its form of Communism in 1991 had cast doubt on all forms of revolutionary socialism by the early 1990s, Hobsbawm concludes; the experience of Thatcherite Britain by the 1990s had shown pure free market capitalism to be dysfunctional as well. More worrisome were the flaws and weaknesses of social democratic mixed economies in Europe during the crisis years that followed the Golden Age, and most worrisome of all were the challenges posed by rapid world population growth, climate change and other forms of environmental crisis, as well as the ongoing breakdown of the nation state as a mode of governance in much of the world.

Economic globalization and the transfer of industrial jobs from high-wage Western economies to low-wage Third World economies posed another set of unsolved problems, Hobsbawm noted in 1994, and the logic of capitalist labor-saving efforts indicated that the ongoing automation of work was likely to create added problems with unemployment.

In the last few pages of *Age of Extremes*, accordingly, Hobsbawm states that “What I have written cannot tell us whether and how humanity can solve problems it faces at the end of the millennium.” Yet it is clear, he concludes, that “behind the opaque cloud of our ignorance and the uncertainty of detailed outcomes, the historical forces that shaped the century [are] continuing to operate. We live in a world captured, uprooted and transformed by the titanic economic and techno-scientific process of the development of capitalism, which has dominated the past two or three centuries.”

There is good reason to think that this essentially capitalist process cannot continue indefinitely, *The Age of Extremes* adds, since “the forces generated by the techno-scientific economy are now great enough to destroy the environment, that is to say, the material foundations of human life,” while likewise threatening the “some of the social foundations of the capitalist economy.”

In later books published before his death, such as *How to Change the World*, (a series of essays on the merits and limits of Marxism), Hobsbawm went on to suggest that the problems with the line of development inspired by the Bolshevik Revolution do not have to doom all future hopes for socialist change. He also makes a few hopeful asides to this effect in *Age of Extremes*. But to Hobsbawm in 1994, both Soviet-style central economic planning and Western capitalism on the “free market” model had proved their bankruptcy, and the global history of the Short Twentieth Century had shown itself to be far more complicated than most capitalists and most socialists of his age were willing to acknowledge. In *Age of Extremes*, Hobsbawm fails to provide simple answers to the century’s violence, economic turbulence, environmental distress and scientific upheaval; his attempt to grapple with its complexity, though, is something socialists should be able to learn from.

[Abortion Rights and Reproductive Justice: Continuing the Discussion](#)

Thursday, March 31st, 2016

***The Washington Socialist* <> April 2016**

By Kurt Stand

Abortion rights, if they are to be meaningful for all women, need to be linked to other rights women are too often denied. Genuine reproductive justice therefore entails access to services and multiple other important legal and social protections. Explaining how existing rights can be protected while also expanding services within the context of current political realities were the themes of presentations given at Metro DSA’s March 17 Socialist Salon by Michelle Woods, public and legislative affairs manager, Planned Parenthood Metropolitan of Washington and Tucker O’Donnell, PPMW’s director of education. A wide-ranging discussion amongst the more than 20 attendees followed.

Lisa Stand introduced the meeting by referring to a demonstration held in front of the Supreme Court two weeks earlier as the Court was considering *Whole Woman's Health v. Hellerstedt*, a case that challenges the constitutionality of a Texas law that has led to closure of more than half the abortion clinics in the state. The rally called attention to how such laws undermine the formal legality of abortion by creating obstacles such that many women – poor and working class, young or abused, single or unsupported and, overwhelming black and Latina – are unable to obtain one.

The sudden death of Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia in mid-February means that the Court is unlikely to allow the Texas law to be used as a precedent elsewhere in the country. But the 4-4 divide on the Court means that it is also unlikely to strike the law down, and thus legislation causing abortion clinics to close or forcing them to turn away potential patients, will remain in place. The solution to this situation, therefore, must be political. Politics which were made visible at the rally, a multiracial, multigenerational gathering putting forward positive demands that spoke to full reproductive rights – and therefore social rights – for all women, embodying therefore the principles of reproductive justice.

O'Donnell opened by describing her work helping high school students to develop and strengthen an understanding of healthy relationships and consent, both fundamental to any personal understanding of the social meaning of reproductive justice. This also brings home the limitation of many current discussions, which isolates individual circumstances from any broader context. For example, when defenders of abortion rights argue that it should at least be available for victims of rape, they often fail to ask why so many women are so victimized, to raise the reality that assaults on women's bodies by laws which restrict choice is the flip side of assault in the form of violence against women, of violence against women, of domestic abuse. Regarding teenagers, O'Donnell added the critical importance of men being part of the conversation, otherwise all the pressure is on women.

Woods talked about that broader context. She noted that the phrase "reproductive justice," gets us away from "choice," which is individual, too narrow and not strong enough to convey the full meaning of what is at stake. By contrast, bringing justice into the equation can demonstrate how choice is integral to women's physical, mental, spiritual, social and economic rights. This is the terrain of current struggles which in Virginia is to stop bad legislation and practices, in Maryland is to continue to develop positive programs and in DC is to promote best practices as well as end congressional interference with District government initiatives (her discussion on this reinforced the description of local challenges/possibilities put forward by representatives of NARAL at DSA's February membership meeting).

Both O'Donnell and Woods noted how many of the successful attacks on abortion current stem from the 1989 Supreme Court decision *Casey v. PA*, which gave states power to make their own laws as long as these don't constitute an "undue burden" for women. That decision weakened the abortion rights protections guaranteed by the Court's 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision, they said. The full implications of that weakening have been made especially clear since 2011 when Tea Party candidates made enormous gains in gubernatorial and state legislative elections, as Republican-dominated states have placed increasingly onerous restrictions on women's access to

abortion through the passage of Trap Laws (Targeted Regulation of Abortion Providers) that have forced the closure of numerous clinics.

These laws put forward unnecessary licensing provisions that cause many clinics to close, require medical practitioners to give patients false or misleading information about the medical risk of abortion, and impose waiting periods that are both financially and emotionally onerous. This is precisely what is at issue in Texas, as well as in Mississippi, Louisiana and other states. Trap laws put an undue burden on poor women who are economically disenfranchised – women who are primarily black and Latino. A recent documentary film [Trapped](#) gives viewers insight on the impact of this on those who are already vulnerable.

At the same time – and contrary to the implication of abortion opponents argument that is an isolated phenomena – abortion is common in the United States. According to statistics cited at the meeting, about 1/3 of women in the U.S. will have one during their fertile years, the majority when they are in their 20s (and the majority of whom are already mothers). Unsurprisingly, the number of abortions goes down when women have more sound information about reproductive health.

Questions that followed kept coming back to what we can do to do better, such as how to better organize locally and nationally. This discussion was, therefore, not the end of the discussion, but part of a continual process that we have to return to again and again. As reproductive rights historian Linda Gordon puts it, laws to limit abortion and to reinforce gender inequality are both a form of oppression in their own right and – in their appeal to sexism “entice poor, working-, and middle-class citizens to vote against their economic interests.” ([False Protection, Real Oppression: Opposing Anti-abortion Legislation by Linda Gordon, Democratic Left](#), Spring 2016).

The links below provide background information that can also help further stimulate discussion on the reproductive justice issues discussed at the Salon:

Background

- **The Hyde Amendment** bars federal dollars for Medicaid to cover abortion. Congressional interference with DC governance makes matters even worse for women on Medicaid here. <http://dcabortionfund.org/2015/06/whats-the-hyde-amendment-anyway/>
- **SisterSong**, women of color organizing for justice in the South, defines “Reproductive Justice as the human right to have children, not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and healthy environments. Over the years, we have expanded RJ to include the human right to bodily autonomy from any form of reproductive oppression.” <http://sistersong.net/reproductive-justice/>

- **Echoing Ida**— you just have to visit their site. Here’s an article on how women’s reproductive choices are depicted in tv and film. <http://echoingida.org/?work=nine-times-when-tv-and-film-characters-got-an-abortion-and-their-friends-supported-them>
- **Women at risk for and living with HIV** have unique needs for reproductive health, while also needing protection from stigma and criminalization. <https://pwnusa.wordpress.com/policy-agenda/reproductive-justice/>

[BUILDING A PERMANENT, STRONG LEFT PARALLEL TO SANDERS’S CAMPAIGN: HAROLD MEYERSON LEADS A CONVERSATION](#)

Thursday, March 31st, 2016

***The Washington Socialist* <> April 2016**

By Woody Woodruff

“Why are there socialists in America?” asked political reporter Harold Meyerson. The obvious relish with which he turned [Werner Sombart](#)’s “Why is there no socialism in America?” on its head set the tone for a well-attended conclave March 12 on how to turn the Bernie Sanders campaign – win or lose – into a permanent left movement, “Continuing the Political Revolution.”

The one-day conference at the Communication Workers of America international headquarters in downtown DC was put on by the Metro DC Democratic Socialists of America.

Meyerson suggested that the question of why socialists, why now was a useful angle into the creation of an ongoing movement. Polling shows, he said, that acceptance of not only the idea of socialism but the personal identification as a socialist was wider even than the considerable electoral success of the Sanders campaign, which has taken the Democratic Party establishment (and maybe even some longtime socialists) by surprise.

DSA founder Michael Harrington, Meyerson said, saw an “invisible social democracy” within the Democratic Party and it is now becoming visible via Sanders. He said socialism actually began to emerge around 2011-2012 from the perennial low acceptance in the US that was a residue of the Cold War era.

Why? “It’s not clear people know that much about socialism,” Meyerson conceded. But they know that “capitalism isn’t working” (except for the one percent) and that leads them to be more open to alternatives.

Meyerson attended a debate between Sanders and Hillary Clinton in New Hampshire and found a useful analytic device in the different noisemakers used by supporters of the two candidates. Clinton's supporters used a "Jedi wand" that made a distinctive sound – one that was quite audible during Sanders's speech when he hit his signature themes like single-payer health care, free college and a major infrastructure effort. "There is something happening at the base of the [Democratic] Party," he said "... not only has Clinton been moved left by the Sanders campaign, but "Bernie didn't find young people [a major supporting cohort] – young people found Bernie. Michigan found Bernie."

"We may be having a political realignment... beyond our comprehension," he said later during a lengthy and fertile question-and-answer session.

Part of the political realignment is the broadening of political expression and action. Brooks Sunkett, vice president for public employees of the hosting Communication Workers of America, introduced Meyerson with an account of the union's endorsement process – which chose Sanders.

Sunkett compared Sanders's positions and past work to those of his opponent, Clinton, saying the union's rank and file discerned the difference on issues of trade, race relations ("admirable") and other campaign staples such as the ones that Clinton supporters had applauded in New Hampshire. Unions, he said, were aware they were under attack in the courts and from employers. "When the 401K was introduced, it was supposed to be a *supplement* to a [defined benefit] pension. Now, it's a *pension*."

The Sanders campaign, he said is "a revolution that [CWA] needs to be a part of."

Few international unions besides CWA have endorsed Sanders; many have endorsed Clinton (though some of their locals have broken away for Sanders). Meyerson observed that although most internationals were not asking their members whom they should endorse, it was an improvement over the first campaign in which he worked, in which the AFL-CIO endorsement and that of all its member unions came from the ultimate top down. "It came from [Lane] Kirkland," the then-president of the AFL-CIO, he was told. "That was it."

Under pressure from members and local unions, the AFL-CIO has stayed neutral so far in the Democratic primaries.

Meyerson spoke before voters went to the polls in big Midwestern states and in Florida, but he accurately said Sanders would "do well" in Illinois and Ohio. Though he won no states in that round he was competitive in many (Missouri was too close to call for several days) and, because the delegates were awarded proportionally, he came away with a good haul of them. Meyerson said Sanders would go to the Democratic Convention in July with solid backing and the juice to affect the platform positively on issues of trade policy, health care policy and campaign finance.

The parallel organizing activity for radical policies that could travel and grow with the Sanders campaign's visibility and popularity was the other piece of the puzzle for this conference. Meyerson said DSA would have a role in a coalition that could advance the broader left agenda,

within and without the Democratic Party, with “strength on the ground” coming from organizations like the [Working Families Party](#) and [National People’s Action](#) (both of which have Maryland state-level affiliates).

Managing the establishment of a stronger, more permanent left in the US is complicated because “the left has a unity problem,” Meyerson said, but the solution is “too important not to figure out.” He suggested that the terrain of struggle with most benefit is between states and their cities. “Cities have never been more liberal and states have never been more controlled by the right,” he said, and the fights, for example, for the \$15/hour minimum wage had huge vitality in cities and set even red-state cities like Birmingham, Ala. against their state governments.

In an extended, productive question period Meyerson suggested that Sanders, as a candidate, was pinned down by his own emphasis on class politics, a “class-oriented mindset” – more so than would be true of many members of DSA – and that has limited his ability to appeal to identity-based tendencies like Black Lives Matter or more generally the intersectional issues of race and inequality.

The evident Wall Street power within the corporate wing of Democrats – which dogs Clinton and gives Sanders grist for his critique – gained strength as the Republicans “morphed” into a social-issues monolith, Meyerson said. But he has hope that “something is happening at the base of the Democratic Party” – perhaps represented by the [endorsement](#) of Sanders by Sen. Paul Pinsky of Prince George’s County. Pinsky is a reliable labor-left voice in the centrist Democratic blue state, and more recently (March 29) announced as one of Sanders’s 15-member [Maryland steering committee](#). But his statement set the Sanders effort in a wider context: “The outpouring of support for Sen. Sanders clearly represents a desire to build a strong, clear, progressive wing within the Democratic Party — in selecting a nominee for president and *beyond* the election. **He has clearly articulated the problem of the concentration of wealth in the hands of a very few** and how this concentrated wealth has come to assert its will in politics, elections and Congress.” [emphasis in original].

Asked how DSA members could recapture the socialist perspective that all Sanders’s popular proposals are connected in a broad contest with capitalist practices, Meyerson suggested that “the banks” – the financialization of capital and its erosion of even the palliative Fordism that tempered capitalism until the late ‘70s – were the right image to use in establishing the connections among those issues that brought the sound of Jedi wands from the Hillary Clinton cohort in New Hampshire.

Clinton’s incremental leftward policy moves – such as on trade policy – apparently in the face of Sanders’s challenge, actually denoted the Democratic Party’s leftward move at the base, Meyerson said – Bernie is not the only factor. “That’s what gives me some hope... there really is something happening at the base of the Democratic Party.”

Hillary, he said, “knows she can’t go back to the ‘90s.”

Pizza (which vanished quickly before the overflow crowd of 70-plus) and breakout sessions followed Meyerson’s well-received remarks, with six working groups tackling questions of both

granular strategy for a stronger left, and galvanizing many new to socialism through the Sanders effort.

Merrill Miller, a co-chair of Metro DC DSA's work for Sanders through national DSA's independent expenditure effort, "We Need Bernie," observed:

"The breakout groups contained individuals from many backgrounds, from those who had long been familiar with DSA but were finally interested in becoming more active to those who had been unfamiliar with the term "democratic socialism" until Bernie Sanders' campaign. Similarly, the breakout groups contained individuals with extensive organizing and activist experience, as well as those who longed to become more politically active but until this event had no idea how to do so. This wide range of experience allowed seasoned activists to teach new activists, while also revealing the ways in which the Bernie Sanders campaign has brought new people to democratic socialism and inspired passion for Leftist causes."

This cross-fertilization effect was reinforced by comments from Metro DC DSA activist Jessie Mannisto, who like Miller led one of the groups:

"Our breakout group contained a good mix of perspectives. We had Boomers and Millennials; DSA members and Bernie campaign volunteers who aren't part of DSA; people who were wary of the S-word and people who were ready to see it revitalized for the American mainstream. The highlight of our discussion was the need to think of new ways to mobilize Bernie voters — including young people who are excited about Bernie but have never voted, and people who don't vote in local and state level elections — both in the primary and beyond."

From DSA member and group leader Sammy Almashat: "We were about six people and from different backgrounds, ranging from Marxist to progressive democrat. One person spoke at length of their experience in and disillusionment with the Democratic Party, a sentiment most of us shared. There was palpable enthusiasm about campaigning for Bernie and everyone was curious to know more about what DSA was doing on that (and other) fronts. Overall, a very amiable conversation and hopefully not the last."

[Carrying a Legacy Forward: Joslyn Williams and the Metro DC Labor Movement](#)

Thursday, March 31st, 2016

***The Washington Socialist* <> April 2016**

By Kurt Stand

After nearly 30 years, Joslyn Williams is stepping down as president of Metro Washington Council, AFL-CIO. He is succeeded by two people – Jackie Jeter, president of Amalgamated

Transit Workers Local 689, will serve as Council President (the first woman elected to that position), and Carlos Jimenez, most recently field organizer for Jobs with Justice, will take on the new position of Executive Director. Each embraces the social unionism – unionism that connects workplace rights to workers’ democratic and civic rights – Williams espoused.

In order to fully appreciate the meaning of this moment when the torch is being passed to a new generation of leaders, it is worthwhile to look back upon the tradition of struggle within which Williams played such an important role.

Labor Council History

Or perhaps we should say pre-history. Unions in Washington DC and nearby Maryland and Virginia have a much richer, albeit deeply conflicted, past than is often recalled. By the late 19th century, craft unions developed real strength at a time when light industry and small manufacturing were a central part of the local economy. Later, during the New Deal years, federal workers and other public employees unions experienced a surge of growth, coinciding with the growth of the federal workforce. Those unions had a left perspective and with that a focus on racial justice – twin concerns that led to McCarthy-era purges and blacklisting that undermined their strength and progressive perspective.

As to the more traditional craft unions, most in the Washington DC area accepted (and reinforced) the segregation which was fixed in the local economy of DC as well as throughout Virginia and Maryland. Thus by the mid-1960s local labor was particularly conservative in outlook and – apart from pockets of strengths in skilled trades – weak in its bargaining power. The sea change brought about by the civil rights movement’s challenge to racism built into law, custom, industry and government, was to have a profound impact on our region, bringing to the fore people who saw the connection between the need to build labor the labor movement by changing the labor movement and thereby participate in changing our political environment. And this brings us to Joslyn Williams.

Born in Jamaica, he moved to Washington DC when he was 16 and later studied at Howard University. After graduation and working a variety of jobs such as a taxi cab driver (common in an era when most professional doors were closed to blacks no matter what their educational credentials), Williams gained employment at the Library of Congress. Like many federal agencies at the time, it was an institution which suffered from control by a federal government that even in the era of Kennedy and Johnson still acceded to the power of Dixiecrats in Congress (i.e. white southern Democratic representatives in the House and Senate who were unapologetic in their advocacy of racism as public policy).

Thus black workers could not advance, no matter what their credentials, no matter what degrees they earned, no matter what their seniority – a situation that the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) had accepted. Williams did not, serving first as a shop steward and, from 1970, as president of the local, he led a militant workplace campaign to push for institutional change at the Library of Congress.

Social Justice Unionism

The change in the air stimulated by 1960s activism led to other upheavals in unions, including a challenge to the particularly conservative leadership of the local labor council. Robert Peterson of the Typographical Union (printing having been an important industry in the DC area) organized that challenge helping to bring more militant and progressive views to the Council when he was elected as president in 1975. Williams was later elected as his assistant, and then in 1982 as Council President in his own right – the first time an African American was elected to that post, though blacks have formed the majority of the city’s population (and certainly the majority of the working class) of DC and the broader metropolitan area since the AFL had first chartered a Council in 1896.

But this is a story of change – the old guard leadership that opposed the civil rights movement came from ATU Local 689, Jeter’s union and today one of the most militant and progressive locals on the Council. Subsequent to Williams’s election, UFCW Local 400 and HERE Local 25 used disputes over small policy issues as a reason to disaffiliate, though such disputes had not led locals to disaffiliate in previous years, when Council officers were all white.

Both Locals eventually reaffiliated and played an important role in organizing campaigns and in supporting the direction Labor Council policy was to take thereafter. And showing the complexity of the process, construction unions in the region, though often a bulwark of labor conservatism in other cities, and sometimes disagreeing with Williams’ progressive initiatives, remained affiliated and supported the revival of unionism that was taking place under his leadership. As testament to the path of internal unity, today nearly 200 locals with a combined membership of over 150,000 — the vast majority of eligible locals — are affiliates.

Growth like that was possible only because of the policies adopted: Quickly after assuming office, Williams took initiatives in support of the fight for pay equity for women workers, to improve workers health and safety conditions, reduce health costs and maintain rent control. Deeply engaged in the political process, the Council supported pro-labor, progressive candidates for local office. Yet that support was never unconditional; Williams was always ready to criticize those in public office when they narrowed their vision or compromised their commitment to working people. And by that, he meant all working people. As, for example in 1991, street fighting erupted in Mt. Pleasant after a Latino was shot by a policewoman.

In this complex moment in DC’s history, Williams issued a statement calling on city leaders to address the underlying conditions that led to the violence and chiding those city leaders who condemned the violence while forgetting the causes by reminding them of their own roots in the social movements of a then still very recent past. That past included the call for DC statehood, a call and a goal which Williams always supported, unlike others with jurisdictions that included parts of Maryland and Virginia as well as our nation’s capital.

In a sense this is what social justice unionism is all about. The Council has (to name just several of many instances) supported organizing drives for parking lot attendants and taxi cab drivers, supported local unions negotiating campaigns at hotels, warehouses and grocery stores, supported municipal, state and federal workers whenever their rights have been threatened. Affiliates and activists also mobilized under the Council’s banner in solidarity for workers engaged in local labor disputes that took on a national character as when pilots, flight

attendants, and baggage handlers struck at Eastern Airlines in 1989; National Airport – the union-busting which took place there perhaps the only reason later renaming it for Reagan is apt – being one of the focal points of the struggle. So too, solidarity was simultaneously built on behalf of miners during the Pittston strike in southern Virginia and West Virginia.

Workers' struggles, however, extend beyond those that can be resolved by bargaining, as evidenced by the Council's engagement in the successful fight for a minimum wage hike indexed to inflation in DC in 2015, and to similar campaigns for a living wage in Maryland's Prince George's and Montgomery Counties and for paid sick leave and just hours across our region. These campaigns all speak to Williams' willingness to connect issues, equally reflected in his role in the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, Jobs with Justice, Labor Campaign for Single Payer Health Care, Alliance for Retired Americans. His engagement with these and other such bodies expresses in practice his commitment to an expansive solidarity. This means supporting the struggles and needs of non-union as well as unionized workers, premised on the understanding that the mutuality at the heart of labor is about giving as well as receiving support – and it is about meeting workers needs off the job as well as well as on it.

No institution built up under Williams' leadership embodies that as much as the Community Services Agency – which has established a pre-apprenticeship program to help young people gain the reading, math and other skills they need for full apprenticeship opportunities. CSA also helps families deal with job loss, health crisis, substance abuse, sudden unemployment. The importance of the Agency's work stems from the Council's recognition that the role of the labor movement is to be there for working people 24 hours a day – whether on a picket line, participating in an election, or taking part in a charitable drive.

With this framework, Williams was already acting in the spirit of Union Cities, initiated when John Sweeney was elected AFL-CIO president in 1995. It was a program to breathe new life in the labor movement by rebuilding central labor councils as vibrant organizations that speak to labor's entire program – on and off the job, building union unity within while building union-unity with community, civic, political, and faith-based organizations that engage in social justice advocacy.

Many labor councils failed to act on the possibilities this created, but it fit within the vision and initiatives long a part of Metro DC unionism. One further aspect of this commitment to labor touching all aspects of workers' lives has been the Labor Film Fest, which has developed into LaborFest – bringing music, film, poetry, art that address union heritage, contemporary issues and possibilities of the future to working people in venues across the metropolitan area. All this speaks to a broader understanding of what trade unionism can be at its best. And it validates Williams dual perspective – not only do unions need to change to better defend the rights of all workers, they are capable of changing and a commitment to that process, is a necessary component of all struggles for democracy, civic rights and economic justice.

Peace and Global Solidarity

This often means navigating among differing and conflicting points of view. Metropolitan labor councils, organs of the AFL-CIO, and responsible to the parent federation. As membership

organizations, they are responsible to affiliates who elect leadership and pay dues. And they also stand apart as the most recognizable local voice of unionism to the public and to politicians within their jurisdiction. Such multiple layers of responsibility can be paralyzing, but they also create opportunities for leadership to lead by providing linkages across lines of division. But such a possibility can only succeed if premised on the view of the long haul implicit in the concept of changing within and without that guided Williams throughout his tenure – including when looking out upon the world.

As noted, when Williams began his tenure at the Library of Congress, he was a member of AFGE. Through the years, AFGE had evolved into a union that fights for its members and so while defending the necessary role of federal programs and federal workers in maintaining the quality of our collective life, it has been vocal when needed in criticizing its employer – that same federal government. But that wasn't always the case, for in its early history AFGE was weak and insecure and so particularly unwilling to challenge its employer – the Executive Branch – on non-workplace issues. And therefore, its leadership in the 1960s-early 70s was adamant in its support of the war in Vietnam (as was the then-leadership of the AFL-CIO). AFGE's leadership, at that time, put in trusteeship and expelled locals that passed anti-war resolutions – including the one at the Library of Congress. Williams, however, among those opposed to that war, protected his Local's assets and played a key role in the ability of those federal worker locals to remain intact by joining AFSCME – whose president Jerry Wurf spoke out early against the carnage being launched from our shores. So when Williams was elected Council President he was Executive Director of its local council of federal workers (AFSCME Council 26).

Williams' opposition to war abroad and commitment to global solidarity have continued through to the present. One manifestation of this was the space and support he gave to the Central American Labor solidarity movement – a movement which brought together locals opposed to US policy in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua during the civil wars in those countries in the 1980's notwithstanding official AFL-CIO policy at the time that supported Reagan's foreign policy even while being punished by his domestic policy (with AFGE by then a leader of the peace movement nationally alongside the Machinists, and the Clothing Workers – one of the predecessor unions of UNITE-HERE). He also opposed US invasions of Iraq, gave support to ousted Haitian president Jean-Bernard Aristede and stood as a supporter of Michael Manley, the socialist head of state in his native Jamaica.

Most outstanding, however, was Williams's deep engagement in the movement to end South African apartheid, taking steps far in advance of the AFL-CIO. In fact, he was one of the first AFL-CIO leaders to call for freedom for Nelson Mandela, doing so at a public rally in the early 1980s at a time when the Federation's national leadership was too willing to accept the State Department's definition of the ANC as a "terrorist" and a "communist" organization. Thereafter, Williams worked closely with the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists in the creation of local union anti-apartheid committees, led the Council to give support for the Auto Workers campaign to free imprisoned unionist Moses Mayekiso and committed major resources on behalf of the Mine Workers campaign to boycott Shell because of its support for the racist South African government. This solidarity escaped the sight and memory of many in US union circles, but not the South Africans. When Mandela gained his freedom and did a triumphal tour through the

United States, it was Jos Williams who was the AFL-CIO leader who introduced him to the thousands who came to celebrate at the Convention Center.

In the years since, Williams has worked to oppose all those free trade deals that rob workers here and abroad in the name of global capital, and has worked with the Solidarity Center in support of workers fighting for justice in all corners of the world. This is the arena in which he plans to continue to engage in the future. As he told a reporter from the *Washington Informer*:

“Workers of the world are not separated anymore by boundaries or by sea ... There are companies with employees in third world countries where they go to find cheap labor and our survival in this country depends on what we do to those businesses who flee to seek cheaper markets.

“By doing that, those companies have driven down the quality of life in our own country so we’ve got to follow them. We’ve got to organize our brothers and sisters elsewhere to make sure that their quality of life is raised ... [and] stop the exploitation of workers by pitting workers here against workers abroad.”

Moving Forward

This is the legacy left to the Metropolitan Labor Council’s new leadership. Jeter’s work as ATU Local 689 president and leadership in the fight for the rights of their members and the safety of passengers, testifies to her ability to build upon the linkages made under William’s leadership as well as to forge new ones. So too Jimenez’ experiences at Jobs with Justice will serve him well in building coalitions and connecting issues that are essential to labor’s ability to continually renew itself as new challenges are posed.

As a parting thought it is well to recall Williams’s introduction of Mandela on that day in DC now more than 20 years ago. He recited the lines of *Solidarity Forever*, giving new meaning to an old song, by paying tribute to the worldwide struggle for freedom that is the true meaning of trade unionism:

When the Union’s Inspiration through the workers’ blood shall run,

There can be no power greater anywhere beneath the sun.

Yet what force on earth is weaker than the feeble strength of one?

But the Union makes us strong.

...

They have taken untold millions that they never toiled to earn,

But without our brain and muscle not a single wheel can turn.

We can break their haughty power gain our freedom when we learn
That the Union makes us strong.

...

In our hands is placed a power greater than their hoarded gold;
Greater than the might of armies magnified a thousand-fold.
We can bring to birth a new world from the ashes of the old.
For the Union makes us strong.

Solidarity forever!

Sources:

D.C. Labor's Struggle: Solidarity Still Seems Like a Remote Dream by Suzanne Crowell,
Democratic Socialist, September 1986.

Joslyn Williams Passing Baton to New Leadership; After 34 Years at Labor Council Helm –
Union City, 1/20/16.

Longtime Union President Steps Aside by Stacy M. Brown, *The Washington Informer*, 2/24/16.

My own memories.

Thursday, March 31st, 2016

***The Washington Socialist* <> April 2016**

NOTE: An increasingly important source of our “Good Reads” is the absolutely essential left aggregator [Portside](#). Much, though certainly not all, of our proffered material appears there too, and if you find yourself chafing (and we are sure you do) at the long wait between monthly episodes of “Good Reads” you can emulate the Charles Dickens fans of 1840s New York, whose thirst for the latest episodes of such cliffhangers as “The Old Curiosity Shop” led Gotham’s dailies to charter fast packets to go out and meet the ships from the Old World. They would rush back bearing those latest chapters in magazines like Dickens’s own *All the Year Round* to his [rioting fans](#) on the docks, intent on knowing whether Little Nell really dies. Such fervor is less often seen for the great texts of the Left that are published every week or so somewhere. But if you subscribe directly to Portside (free, and basically run by volunteers) you can get email notifications of fresh new stuff daily or weekly from a variety of sources. After you have paid your DSA dues and donated to the Sanders campaign you should donate to *Portside*, as well.

>>A thorough historical overview of how the Left has tackled the question of technological advance – its oppressive potential when owned or controlled by capitalists, as well as its emancipatory potential when owned or controlled by a democratic polity. It’s by Paul Heideman in *Jacobin*’s Spring 2015 technology issue; a year old now but worth a read.

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/04/braverman-gramsci-marx-technology/>

>>The Congressional Progressive Caucus has issued its 2017 People’s Budget, keeping the faith with an array of programs and projects to boost employment and empower communities. Here’s a link to their summary, which in turn leads to the full bill documents: <http://cpc-grijalva.house.gov/the-peoples-budget-prosperity-not-austerity-invest-in-america/> And here’s a brief account and promo from the Campaign for America’s Future:

<https://ourfuture.org/20160310/why-we-need-the-peoples-budgets-1-trillion-infrastructure-plan>

>>Tom Frank has analyzed speeches by Donald Trump and argues that dissatisfaction over trade policy outweighs racism as the likely reason Trump has gained working-class support.

http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/mar/07/donald-trump-why-americans-support?CMP=share_btn_fb

>>As socialists we purport to know more about the entanglement of race and class at the intersection than the average person. Check out this nuts and bolts test bench from Standing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ), a white allies organization, and think anew about what we still have to learn.

http://www.showingupforracialjustice.org/cross_class_capacity_tool

>>Carl Davidson has updated his thought-provoking thesis about the US six-party system to adapt to the current disorderly political landscape.

<http://carldavidson.tumblr.com/post/141210444802/leaders-of-the-gops-three-parties-trump-of-the>

>>Jack Metzgar, in *In These Times*, argues that a stereotype of the white working class “demographic” is growing within mainstream media and the distortions are bending the narrative of the presidential race. First seen in *Portside*.

http://inthesetimes.com/working/entry/18977/whos_actually_voting_for_trump_time_to_stop_blaaming_only_the_white_working

>>**Reversing Inequality, as Seen by *Foreign Affairs* and *The Nation*.**

Not only the reliably liberal editors of *The Nation*, but also those of *Foreign Affairs*, which some leftists consider a prop of American empire, have lately weighed in on the problem of growing inequality under today’s capitalism. Democratic socialists with a tolerance for reformism might want to glance at how each magazine addresses the topic.

The cover of the March 7, 2016 *Nation* bears the title “Game Changers: How we can unrig the rules and reverse runaway Inequality,” and alerts readers to a special section inside outlining eight specific plans to create greater economic equality in the U.S. economy. These include, among other things, helping black workers to fight for union rights and the protection of public-sector jobs, imposing a small financial transaction tax on Wall Street to fund needed social spending, tackling metastasizing levels of student loan debt, and imposing new taxes on luxury consumption (like jet airline travel, for example) involving high levels of fossil fuel use.

The December 15 issue of *Foreign Affairs* features a somewhat more theoretical cover story by Pierre Rosenvallon called “How to Create a Society of Equals: Overcoming Today’s Crisis of Inequality.” Rosenvallon states that the relatively greater levels of income equality in capitalist societies during the middle part of the 20th century were primarily due to three factors: a fear of socialist/communist revolution that inspired even rightwing autocrats – similar to Bismarck in the late 19th century — to support social welfare legislation, a growing sense of national community that drew together several societies out of necessity during the two world wars, and a sense among intellectuals that poverty does not reflect individual character failings, but the operation of social institutions. All three factors are largely lacking in contemporary societies, Rosenvallon concludes, and “Only a more robust vision of democratic equality—based on the singularity of individuals, reciprocal relations among them, and a social commonality—can provide the foundation for broadly accepted public policies that can attack the trends toward inequality that are hollowing out contemporary economies and polities.” Democratic socialists might not welcome every detail in Rosenvallon’s description of how to achieve this, though.

Foreign Affairs has a pay wall, but non-subscribers who register may access one free article a month. Rosenvallon’s article can be found at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2015-12-14/how-create-society-equals>. To read the *Nation* March 7 issue, you may need to go to the library, or you can subscribe online for less than \$10. See <http://www.thenation.com/archive/>.
— *Andy Feeney*

>>Astra Taylor, author of *The People's Platform*, shifts from Internet culture to the new culture of universities, commodified to attract wealthier students because support for public universities has fallen so drastically. Another from *Portside*, originally in *The Nation*...

<http://www.thenation.com/article/universities-are-becoming-billion-dollar-hedge-funds-with-schools-attached/>

>>Shakespeare & Global Warming: A “Midsummer Night’s Dream” Set Under Water

It will probably never win over the coal industry, but the Miami City Ballet has just issued its own unique artistic statement on climate change. The set design and costumes for the Ballet’s current performance of a George Ballanchine version of the Shakespeare comedy “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” as many dance reviewers have noted, are supposed to make the action seem to take place underwater. Thus the comic character Bottom, who in Shakespeare’s script magically acquires the head of a donkey, in this production acquires the head of a Florida manatee instead. The set, as described by *The Miami Herald*, includes a back wall and transparent scrim at stage front on which shifting images of “enormous, ethereal sea plants and creatures” are projected, while the costumes combine “silvery, shimmery unitards, feathery seaweed skirts [and] swooping coral headdresses” to make the dancers seem like darting fish. According to an interview in a Miami-based email newsletter called *The New Tropic*, the set and costume designer Michele Oka Doner, daughter of a former Miami Beach mayor, wanted the production both to reflect the natural beauty of the ocean front in South Florida and to evoke the risks of it all being wrecked by ongoing environmental change. Florida governor Rick Scott has forbidden state employees to even speak the words “climate change,” Doner noted, and “Placing the ballet underwater ... was a call to look at and celebrate what we have before we lose it.” For texts of what various reviewers have written about the production (including a bemused piece by *New York Times* dance critic Alasdair Macaulay, who found Doner’s sets and costumes nonsensical but “agreeably harmless”) see the Miami City Ballet’s web site at <http://www.miamicityballet.org/>. –Andy Feeney

>>Even though the Democratic Primary continues to be tight, there’s already a back-and-forth on the general topic of “Bernie or bust,” a sentiment that suggests that if Bernie is not on the ballot in November then progressives might as well stay home. This has brought reaction, of course. Here is the advice of Sam Smith, who once published a progressive periodical best remembered as *the Progressive Review* on paper in DC. He now publishes an online daily aggregator/blog from Maine, *Undernews*. http://prorevnews.blogspot.com/2016/03/some-notes-for-bernie-backers.html?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+prorevfeed+%28UNDERNEWS%29

>>Some Big Banks Stop Financing Coal-Burning Power Plants in the US

In a partial victory for activists fighting to curb global climate change, several enormous U.S. banks have announced they will no longer finance the construction of new coal-burning power

plants in this country, Michael Corkery reports in the March 21, 2016 *New York Times*. The list now includes JPMorgan Chase, Bank of America, Citigroup and Morgan Stanley. Deutsche Bank also is backing away from the financing of mountain-top-removal coal mining, although not from coal-based energy production in general. Corkery quotes a resource analyst with Standard & Poor's rating agency who contends that "what is happening in coal is a downward shift that is permanent," although he also quotes coal industry officials who say that their industry's current economic woes, which partly reflect market competition from cheap and plentiful natural gas, will prove reversible. Corkery also cautions that the banks' apparent disinterest in new US coal-based power generation, which may reflect activist campaigns by groups like the Rainforest Action Network, doesn't mean they are cutting off all funding to the industry completely. JP Morgan Chase, for example, says it will still consider lending to coal-burning power plants overseas, "so long as they employ environmentally sound technologies." For Corkery's article in the *Times*, go to <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/21/business/dealbook/as-coals-future-grows-murkier-banks-pull-financing.html> . – *Andy Feeney*

METRO SHUTDOWN SHOWS NEED FOR INVESTMENT IN THE SYSTEM

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By Bill Mosley

The one-day shutdown of the entire Metrorail system on March 16 for safety checks was unprecedented for our local rapid-rail system. Whether it was necessary has been a lively topic of debate; but new General Manager Paul Wiedefeld obviously felt, with safety meltdowns coming in rapid succession, that it was time to go big on safety or go home. The 2009 Fort Totten crash that killed nine and last year's electrical arcing incident that caused the death of one passenger from smoke inhalation and sent dozens of others to the hospital were only the ugliest symptoms of a system in crisis. And last month's closure might be only the beginning: [Metro now is considering shutting down entire lines for repairs for months at a time.](#)

The current state of Metrorail represents a long, sad decline from the palmy days of the 1970s and 1980s when the system was spanking new and a rebuke to the dirty, often unreliable and sometimes unsafe systems in older U.S. cities. In the early days Metro prided itself on being as unlike New York's crime-ridden, rat-infested, graffiti-scarred subway system as it could be – with clean, airy stations, graffiti-free cars and smooth and efficient service. Today, a ride on the New York subway shows that Metro could learn a lesson or two from its big sister on how to turn around an aging urban rail network.

A lot of media coverage and political sniping has cast blame on Metro management for the deterioration of the system. But no management, regardless of how brilliant or dedicated it was,

could succeed in the face of decades of underinvestment in Metro by the local jurisdictions as well as the federal government. The lack of a dedicated local source of revenue has been a festering wound that has left Metro short of reliable funding since its beginnings. This was an issue that the local chapter of Democratic Socialists of America helped bring to light when it spearheaded the creation of the Coalition for Fair Transit Finance (CFTF) in 1984, demanding that Metro stop filling budget gaps with annual fare increases and that DC, Maryland and Virginia work together to create a dedicated funding stream for the system. CFTF did succeed in helping convince WMATA to forego further fare increases for several years, but a dedicated source of funding remains an unfulfilled demand.

A region-wide gasoline tax is often suggested as a means to provide Metro with dedicated funds. Drivers who might object to paying a few pennies a gallon to support Metro might consider how the Metro system – both bus and rail – benefit all commuters in the region. The March 16 traffic was not as bad as some had feared – largely because the federal government allowed most of its employees to stay home – but if Metro closed for a longer period and everyone who had access to a car used it, the resulting gridlock would bring the region to a standstill. In addition, riding Metro contributes less to climate change and other environmental ills than driving, and transit riders don't gobble up parking in congested areas. Transit is a public service that benefits everyone whether they ride it or not, and it deserves better than to be nicked and dimed to death.

So don't complain about Metro – demand that your elected officials summon the will to give it the funding it needs to fix its safety and reliability problems before they get worse.

[OBAMA SUPREME COURT NOMINATION: A MISSED OPPORTUNITY](#)

Thursday, March 31st, 2016

***The Washington Socialist* <> April 2016**

By Bill Mosley

President Obama's nomination of Merrick Garland, chief judge of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the DC Circuit and a former federal prosecutor, to the Supreme Court seat vacated by the death of Antonin Scalia was, as the pundits have noted, intended to present the Senate with a non-threatening, noncontroversial candidate to whom it would be hard to object. In the thinking of the president and his advisors, an anodyne figure such as Garland, someone without ideological baggage or a crusader image, would deprive Senate Republicans – who have vowed not to give any prospective justice nominated by Obama a hearing, much less a vote – of an excuse not to give his choice fair consideration. If Republicans are serious about leaving the Court one justice

short for at least nine months, until a new president takes office – and one must believe they are – Obama, the Democratic presidential nominee and Democratic congressional candidates can use Republican intransigence as another club to batter the GOP at the polls this November.

Or so the thinking goes. No doubt Garland is the paragon of “[decency, modesty, integrity, even-handedness, and excellence](#)” that Obama says he is. Nevertheless, there is a case that Garland is the wrong nominee for the times. Here are some points to consider:

- **He’s a straight, white, older man** – Call him a SWOM, for short. That is the demographic of which I am a member, and if we were populating the Court from scratch, I might insist on having this group represented on it. But given that of the [112 Supreme Court justices in U.S. history](#) all but six have been SWOMs (as far as we know – at least none of the other 106 has been openly gay) – we melanin-challenged menfolk could afford to stand back until better karma is in the air. Even with the Court having become more diverse since the 1960s, it still had a SWOM majority until Scalia’s death. There were well-qualified women and minorities – including women of color – among the reputed finalists, and a 63-year-old white guy was the best Obama could come up with?

I make an issue of Garland’s age because the trend in recent decades has been for presidents to nominate relatively young justices – among incumbents, the oldest when taking office was Ruth Bader Ginsberg at 60; the youngest was Clarence Thomas at 43 – so that they could potentially serve on the court for decades, extending the influence of the president who nominated them far into the future. (Scalia, who was 49 when he joined the Court, served as “Reagan in a Robe” for more than a quarter century after his patron left the White House, and Reagan nominee Anthony Kennedy is still with us). In nominating the sexagenarian Garland – [the oldest nominee since Lewis Powell in 1971](#) – Obama is attempting to placate Congress by sending them a nominee who probably wouldn’t be on the court as long as a younger justice would. In doing so, Obama is sabotaging his own legacy. (Perhaps in the future we might consider a sensible reform such as limiting Supreme Court justices to a single 10-year term, which would create more churn on the court and be a disincentive to the subtle ageism built into the process).

Since Republicans declared that no nominee of Obama’s would get a Senate hearing, the only advantage of nominating anyone at all would be to provide a weapon to wield in the November elections. If Obama had nominated, for instance, a strong African-American woman – [U.S. District Court Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson was a reported finalist](#), but she was only one of many possibilities – Democrats not only could have hammered the Republicans on their intransigence, but on their hostility to women and people of color as well. That would have been a powerful call to the Democratic base to turn out to the polls en masse. Obama missed his chance.

- **He has no social-justice or activist background** – President Obama seems to be the last remaining person to regard Supreme Court justices as impartial arbiters of the law rather than political actors. But nearly everyone else, especially Republicans in the Senate, realize that the court is a third political arm of the government. It has been so at least since John Adams, having already been defeated for re-election by Thomas Jefferson,

nominated his Federalist ally [John Marshall](#) as Chief Justice, and Marshall went on to be a political thorn in the side of Jefferson and his successors for decades to come. The two current Obama-appointed justices on the Court, Sonia Sotomayor and Elena Kagan, have become reliable members of the liberal bloc, but neither took office having embraced ideological views as extreme as some Republican court nominees of the recent past, such as Scalia, Thomas, William Rehnquist and Samuel Alito (not to mention GOP nominees whose far-right views torpedoed their confirmations, including Reagan-nominated Robert Bork and failed Nixon nominees [Clement Haynsworth and G. Harrold Carswell](#)). As I argued above, given the Senate's foot-dragging on the nomination, Obama needed to energize the Democratic base by giving them a nominee who would fight for social justice in cases likely to come before the Court on issues such as worker rights, reproductive choice, racial justice, and overturning the Citizens United decision. Instead, [as legal scholar Jonathan H. Adler notes](#):

On the D.C. Circuit, Garland tends to write and join narrow opinions that rarely break new ground. His decisions tend to hew closely to applicable precedent and (where possible) avoid larger questions, and are generally devoid of ideological thrusts or rhetorical flourish. . . . Garland also has a reputation for not being particularly sympathetic to criminal defendants, at least as compared with other appellate judges nominated by Democratic presidents.

This is truly a nominee Republican senators should love – in fact, back when Obama nominated Sotomayor and Kagan, some of them were reported to lament that [Obama hadn't nominated Garland instead](#). Why should progressives leap to Garland's defense?

He is no friend of democracy for the District of Columbia – Advocates of full democratic rights for the District have no reason to cheer Garland's nomination, since during his current tenure on the Court of Appeals he was involved in [a ruling](#) that helped derail an attempt to achieve statehood or at least voting representation in Congress – both of which DC, which is under the legislative control of Congress, lacks. Garland, sitting as part of a three-member panel, in 2000 co-authored a decision that rejected a pair of lawsuits filed by DC residents for greater local rights. One of the suits would have required Congress to grant voting representation and the other would have mandated either a path to statehood or union with another state. The third judge on the panel dissented with Garland's dismissal of the suits. Even though the panel rejected the suits, they issue was nevertheless referred to the Supreme Court for review since it involved voting rights, but later that year the high court affirmed the panel's ruling without a hearing.

The nomination of Garland is another attempt by Obama to appease his domestic opponents – a habit that has been the tragic flaw of his presidency. Instead of staking out a strong position and forcing the opposition to come to him, Obama anticipates the other side's objections in advance and meets them more than halfway before negotiations have even begun. The Affordable Care Act was a case in point: He could have set forth a universal, affordable program such as a single-payer, Medicare-for-All plan as he was urged to by progressives (including Bernie Sanders) as a starting point for discussions. Instead, he anticipated Republican objections, and internalized them in proposing a watered-down proposal inspired by the Massachusetts state

healthcare plan that even Mitt Romney supported. Therefore, he started talks from a weak bargaining point, and his already self-compromised plan was further watered down by Congress, including the jettisoning of the public option.

None of this is to imply that the Left should jump on an anti-Garland bandwagon. We should demand that the Senate respect the nominee of the President and give him a fair hearing and a vote. To paraphrase Donald Rumsfeld, we have to live with the nominee we have, not the one we wished we had. However, this cries out for an ongoing grassroots movement to pressure the White House to select judicial nominees – not only for the Supreme Court but all federal courts – who would bring to the courts a greater regard for social justice as well as more racial and gender diversity. But for now, we can only wonder what might have been.

[TRUMP ON DC DEMOCRACY: NO TO STATEHOOD, MAYBE TO REPRESENTATION](#)

Thursday, March 31st, 2016

***The Washington Socialist* <> April 2016**

By Bill Mosley

In last month's *Washington Socialist*, [I offered a rundown](#) on the views of the current candidates for President on DC home rule and statehood. The information was taken from the candidates' public statements or, for those who have served in Congress, their past votes and positions on DC statehood, voting representation in Congress or legislation impacting local autonomy.

In that article, I used Donald Trump's rather vague responses to questions put to him by Chuck Todd on *Meet the Press* to conclude that he was open to considering statehood, although not necessarily endorsing it. But in his [May 21 editorial board meeting with the Washington Post](#), Trump was asked by reporter Jo-Ann Armao about statehood and congressional voting representation for the District. "I don't see statehood for D.C.," Trump said, adding that "having representation would be okay."

That makes it unanimous: All of the Republican candidates oppose statehood, although among them only Trump has expressed at even lukewarm support for voting representation. Meanwhile, both Democratic candidates support it – at least we think they do; Hillary Clinton supposedly confirmed her support privately to DC Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton but hasn't announced it publicly.

If nothing else, we can be grateful that the *Post* remembered to ask the question.