

The Washington Socialist
Articles from the December 2014 Issue
Archived October 2016
Editor: Woody Woodruff

[Washington Socialist for December 2014 — An Activist Agenda for 2015](#)

Tuesday, December 2nd, 2014



Welcome to the *Washington Socialist* for December 2014. This is the year-end version of the monthly newsletter of the Metro DC Democratic Socialists of America.

AN URGENT NOTE — THE DC METRO LOCAL MEMBERSHIP MEETING DEC. 13 IS CANCELED SO MEMBERS CAN JOIN THE NATIONAL ACTION AGAINST POLICE VIOLENCE ON THAT DATE. DC METRO DSA WILL GATHER AT THE OLD POST OFFICE PAVILION AT 9:30 A.M. AND JOIN THE MAIN ACTION AT FREEDOM PLAZA AROUND 10:30. WATCH FOR OUR BANNER AND SIGNS. (This note added Dec. 9)

The local is gearing up for 2015 – possibly a year of considerable struggle – and plans for activism are in formation, as you’ll see. But first, a nod to the holiday season.

HERE’S A CALENDAR ITEM ADDED SINCE THE EMAIL VERSION OF THE NEWSLETTER:
Our new **Happy Hours** in Northern Virginia continue Dec. 11 at 6:30 p.m. in the Arlington Pub (inside the Whole Foods, 2700 Wilson Blvd., Arlington). RSVP at the [Meetup](#) site. Metro DC DSA’s regular **membership meeting** is **canceled** (see new note above) The **Socialist Salon** meets Thursday evening Dec. 18, 6:30 at Hunan Dynasty, 215 Penna. Ave. SE. Check our [Meetup site](#) for updates. Jobs with Justice honors the Scrooges of the Year at its [Masquerade Ball](#) Dec. 4, 7 to 11 at the Josephine Butler Mansion, 2437 15th St. NW (at Euclid St.). Entertainment, food, a DJ and roast plutocrat on a platter.

And for our own take on Scrooge, this month’s articles begin with:

[Cratchit’s Christmas Cubicle](#): you don’t have to be a lefty to be suspicious of the Dickensian notion that the holiday spirit will permanently turn corporate greedheads into philanthopists. Even in the era of the “dark Satanic mills,” workers knew better than that; Bill Mosley provides an alternate ending to the saga of our favorite, eponymous Scrooge.

[Socialist Action in 2015](#): A year-end strategy meeting of Metro DC DSA’s activists sets a course for the year we are facing; every facet of our activity got a positive but unsparing critique and follow-up plan for activity.

Troublemakers School: A conference put together by the magazine *Labor Notes* focused on the kind of organizing that DC-area workers and progressive activists need to do. Dave Richardson and Woody Woodruff were among the DSA attendees and report on the nuts-and-bolts spirit of the event.

Expanding the Terrain: Progressive Maryland, preparing to deal with a Republican governor, stretches out beyond its Montgomery County roots to organize in Prince George's County. Woody Woodruff reports on the prospects.

Money, Power, Elections: The Socialist Salon reviews the DC election with an overview from Rev. Graylan Hagler, a candidate for City Council endorsed by Metro DC DSA. The appropriation of public housing by the private development cartel has echoes at the polls in a report from Dave Richardson, David Duhalde and Woody Woodruff.

Facing the Next Two Years: The results of the 2014 election were more unpleasant even than billed by the pollsters. What are the prospects for progressive or radical action when the corporate and financialist hegemony appears to have tightened its grip? Andy Feeney surveys the landscape.

REVIEWS

Sleep and Accept or Awake and Sing: How does drama about history – or radical drama with a history – become relevant for today? Kurt Stand discusses some local attempts, including one classic Clifford Odets play, and concludes that some do it better than others.

Human Capital: A forthcoming film about the lives of workers that uses multiple perspectives is previewed by Dan Adkins.

Living in Poverty— The Insider's View: Linda Tirado has experienced poverty as few of us have – as a continuum with little or no chance of change. Bill Mosley reviews her book *Hand to Mouth: Living in Bootstrap America*.

Good Reads for Socialists: a variety of articles to while away your holiday.

Our readers are our best writers. Join that group and submit an article about activism you are doing or someone else is doing; reviews of important books you have read; think-pieces contributing to the left's perennial search for a better way to explain our crisis to its victims. ***You are part of this conversation. Submit contributions to The Washington Socialist at a number of levels — send us nominee for “Good Reads” (they should be available online so send links); send news and notices of activism; submit articles. Send to woodlanham@gmail.com.***

[“Troublemakers School” Schools Activists in Tackling Trouble Facing Progressives](#)

Monday, December 1st, 2014

The Washington Socialist<>**December 2014**

By Dave Richardson and Woody Woodruff

Organizing and activism for both union members and the public with which they relate was on top of the agenda at the 2014 DC *Labor Notes* Troublemakers School at the Foundry Methodist Church on Saturday, November 15 2014.

The event, sponsored by the Metropolitan Washington Central Labor Council (MWCLC) and DC Jobs with Justice (DC JwJ), attracted perhaps as many as 150 of the cream of the DC labor and community activist left. *Labor Notes* is a monthly print newsletter that keeps labor activists informed about cutting edge labor news from around the country. Julia Kann, until recently on the staff of MWCLC President Jos Williams and now with *Labor Notes*, was the public face, ably assisted by Mark Brenner and the New York staff.

Kann and Williams opened the morning plenary with a welcome, Kann noting that Washington, DC “the only unionization to come out of “Fight for \$15” [the minimum wage campaign] was in D.C.” And Williams urged “if you want to change American society so that justice is simply something that we automatically do... be a troublemaker.”

There were morning breakout sessions on Secrets of a Successful Organizer, Know Your Rights on the Job, Assertive Grievance Handling, and Fighting Privatization. DSA members Colson Breen, Monica Owens, Dave Richardson and Woody Woodruff attended the Troublemakers School and scattered to different workshops. “Privatization is a major issue for my union, American Federation of Government Employees, so I attended [that] one,” Richardson said. Presenters Kewana Battle-Mason and Jackie Jeter from the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU), and Rich Shelley of the American Postal Workers Union were facilitated by Samantha Winslow of Labor Notes, who also pinch hit for the Washington Teachers Union (WTU). “The Postal Workers seem to me to be putting up the best fight, picketing Staples all over the country over the opening of post offices in Staples stores staffed by private, Staples employees,” Richardson observed. On Friday, November 14, as the culmination of a long series of actions, they had a raucous demonstration at Postal Service HQ here in Washington, and at the end of the day embattled Postmaster General Patrick Donahoe announced his “retirement.” Shelley also focused on Congress’s discriminatory requirement that the Postal Service, unlike any other public-private entity, fully fund employee pensions for the distant future – resulting in paper losses, “phony numbers,” for an enterprise that actually continues to make a profit.

Of other public-sector unions, ATU president Jeter outlined the threat to public transit as an increasing number of Metrobus routes were eliminated in favor of Circulator routes designed for affluent areas and employing poorly paid non-union workers with little experience and training. Battle-Mason recounted similar problems with private companies contracted to provide public transit, trimming costs by cutting wages and using poorly maintained vehicles. Battle-Mason had provided similar evidence to a Socialist Salon late in 2013 and it was clear little had changed.

Winslow focused on the need for educators to forge community ties and gave as an example the Chicago Teachers Union strike of the past year, a significant victory against an overreaching Mayor Rahm Emanuel. Chicago’s teachers successfully communicated to the public what they were bargaining over, and “they built those relationships in advance.”

Jeter summed up: Although public sector unions were most under attack now, “all unions have to start talking collectively about privatization.”

Jos Williams wrapped the session with the admonition that the work ahead required internal union education – “understand the issue and be committed” – as well as organizing with other unions to achieve overarching solidarity and mobilizing the community. “This is going to take discipline,” he argued, so “think like an army.”

There ensued a lively discussion in which Richardson, a board member of Jobs with Justice, was vigorously applauded for his statement that it was time for AFGE to resign its seat on the Democratic National Committee both in order to effectively lobby a Republican Congress but also because the Democrats have failed in their supposed goals of passing progressive legislation and of keeping the Republicans out. “Of course they [Democrats] have prevented the Republicans from illegally contracting out civilian employees at DoD, by contracting them out themselves. They have also prevented the Republicans from imposing a wage freeze on Federal employees, by imposing a wage freeze themselves. In a similar vein they have prevented the Republicans from starting another losing war in the Middle East, keeping the country in an interminable recession by NOT passing a big enough economic stimulus package, and keeping Guantanamo open.”

The afternoon featured workshops on Creative Tactics, Beating Apathy, Community-Labor Alliances, and Organizing Across Borders, which seem to have been well-received despite an old friend admitting that she fell asleep during the Apathy session. The Community-Labor session featured speakers from JwJ, WTU, and ATU.

Again there was a lively discussion as all the participants and attendees realized that Labor can’t win in this climate without broad community support. DC JwJ director Nikki Lewis observed that unions had a real struggle reaching the community in “the hyper-transactional capitalist culture.” Still, she said, victories came after defeats. The Large Retailer Accountability Act, which would have tamed Walmart’s low-wage approach, passed the Council but was vetoed by the mayor. But, she said, it broke conceptual ground with the community’s consciousness that led to the successful passage of minimum wage hikes in the District. “The success story that stuck with me,” Richardson said, “was that, on day four (of nine) in the Chicago teachers’ strike last year, 56 percent of the residents trusted the teachers to do the right thing regarding education while only 36 percent trusted Mayor Rahm Emanuel.”

“For those of us, liberals, progressives, and racial minorities as well as socialists, for whom the political system doesn’t work, *Labor Notes* and the Troublemakers School offers a different direction,” said Richardson. “By focusing on organizing at work and in our communities, it is an attempt to bypass the ‘two capitalist party system’ in favor of organizing from below for of our rights and our economic well-being.”

[A Christmas Carol: The Alternate Ending](#)

Monday, December 1st, 2014

***The Washington Socialist* <> December 2014**

By Bill Mosley (with apologies to Mr. Dickens)

“What’s to-day, my fine fellow?” said Scrooge.

“To-day!” replied the boy. “Why, CHRISTMAS DAY.”

“It’s Christmas Day!” said Scrooge to himself. “I haven’t missed it. The Spirits have done it all in one night.”

Scrooge pondered the events that had transpired, unbelievably, over the past night — the visits from the three spirits who had carried him to Christmases past, present and future. One spirit had led Scrooge to revisit the holidays of his own past; the second had shown to him the difficult lives led by the English lower classes – including that of his clerk, Bob Cratchit, and his family – this Christmas and every day; the third had foretold Scrooge’s own death and how little sorrow there would be to see the old miser go. He mulled over the message of the ghosts and the visions they had revealed to him. Should he repent of a life dedicated to accumulating money and use some of his wealth to help raise up the less fortunate?

Then he thought of his journeys of the past night, how real yet unreal, and how so much seemingly had happened as would easily occupy a week or more. All of that could not have happened in a single night, Scrooge thought. Then he suddenly slapped himself on the forehead: It had been only a dream! There were no spirits; he had not left the comfort of his bedroom! It had all been in his head.

Scrooge breathed a sigh of relief. “And to think, I had almost convinced myself to change my ways, to give up the pursuit of profit!” he said. “Imagine how that would have drained my bank account! Become a woolly-headed old philanthropist tossing coins to beggars in the streets. How could free enterprise prosper if every businessman acted that way?”

He now felt like his old self again. Happily he shaved and dressed, and then strolled out into the busy street where he greeted every “Merry Christmas!” with a testy “Bah! Humbug!” He stopped by a confectionary store where he bought two dozen gingerbread men, and then returned home to enjoy biting off their heads.

But his greatest joy was anticipating returning to the office the following day. Cratchit would surely slink in late, no doubt hung over from the previous day’s merrymaking. When I catch him not at his desk on time, Scrooge thought, I’ll put the fear of dismissal into his head, and then dock his pay! He rubbed his hands eagerly. Maybe Christmas can be joyful after all, he mused.

And so on Boxing Day Scrooge walked into his office a few minutes before nine. As he had predicted, Cratchit’s chair was unoccupied. Scrooge took a seat at his own desk and was having a pleasant time reading his profit ledgers when he heard a commotion outside.

“What the dickens is that?” Scrooge barked to himself. He hurried to the door and flung it open to find himself face to face with Cratchit. The clerk was not alone; behind him stood a line of men and women, many of them – it seemed to Scrooge – bearing a strong resemblance to the working-class characters he had seen during his outing with the Ghost of Christmas Present. All were carrying placards bearing slogans such as “Unfair!” “Scrooge Abuses His Workers!” and “A Living Wage for All Cratchits!” They were chanting a slogan such as Scrooge had never heard: “The people united/will never be defeated!” The people – united! What kind of nonsense was that?

“What is the meaning of this?” Scrooge screamed at Cratchit. “You were supposed to be at your desk fifteen minutes ago! Get to work this instant or you’re fired!”

“Not until our demands are met,” said Cratchit calmly. “We are on strike – against you and all bosses who drive workers like slaves for starvation wages.”

“All of us ‘ave walked out!” shouted a man whose sooty clothes identified him as a coal miner. “We can’t expect you rich folk to do the right thing out of the goodness of yer ‘earts, can we?”

“Once a capitalist, always a capitalist!” said a young woman, attired for factory work. “It’s in yer blood.”

“We don’t want none of yer charity!” shouted a man. “We’ll fight for what’s rightfully ours!”

Cratchit handed Scrooge a leaflet, which the old man perused nervously. It listed the workers’ demands: a living wage, health benefits, safe working conditions, retirement pensions. “What?” bellowed Scrooge. “Have you all gone mad?”

“No, we’ve just come to our senses,” Cratchit replied.

“I’ll bring you to your senses!” Scrooge screamed. “You’re fired!”

“And who will do all the work – you?” Cratchit asked. Scrooge looked around at the determined faces of the picketing workers.

“Bah! Humbug!” he screamed, before hastily fleeing into the sanctuary of his office. As he cowered inside, the marching and chanting outside resumed.

Panting and sweating, Scrooge looked warily at the leaflet Cratchit had handed him. What now? Scrooge wondered. What would he and his fellow business owners do?

He had no idea. “God help us every one,” he moaned.

[Facing the Next Two Years of GOP Dominance: Thoughts on Progressive Responses to the Election](#)

Monday, December 1st, 2014

***The Washington Socialist* <> December 2014**

By Andy Feeney

For socialists and other progressives, as we look back on the event, there's some good news and some bad news about the 2014 election. The good news, for some of us, is that some timid and mediocre Democrats this year lost their bids for political office. Their losses, which many analysts had expected, arguably stemmed from an inability or unwillingness to present low-income and middle class voters, African Americans, Latinos and younger voters with a compelling reason to come to the polls on Nov. 4.

Some progressives therefore see the election as powerful evidence that the Democratic Party, to mobilize its own political base, urgently needs to become much more progressive, especially on issues of income inequality and job creation. Thus it's possible that this year's low turnout and stunning Democratic losses will result, over time, in a better Democratic Party. There's also a minority on the left sees the election as reason for progressives to abandon the Democratic Party entirely for some third party that presumably would be better — for example, the Greens.

The bad news about the election, of course, and some would say the terrible news, is that a ruthless, hypocritical, economically elitist, scientifically brain-dead, racist, demagogic, gay-bashing, immigrant-bashing, religiously bigoted, union-busting and sexist GOP managed to win extensive power, both nationally and in dozens of state governments.

Obviously when we consider the historical long term, this year's Republican sweep of the Senate races and the victories of numerous conservative Republican governors don't compare to, say, the devastation of medieval Europe by the Plague, or the sacking of Rome by the Visigoths. On the other hand, many winning Republicans this year apparently do have the morals of Visigoths.

Over the past generation, the GOP has gained growing political clout partly by prostituting its policy wing to powerful rightwing corporations and the super-wealthy, as political scientist Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson have noted in their book *Winner-Take-All Politics*. In service to the upper "1 percent," Republicans since Reagan's day have racked up enormous national debts by giving sweeping tax cuts to the rich, then have turned around and argued that in the interest of "balanced budgets," it is urgently important to slash liberal spending programs to help the poor, the middle class and the environment.

Recently many of these same Republicans have demanded reductions in federal spending for food stamps at the very time they have denounced Obama for failing to improve the economy enough to reduce poverty and unemployment – a stunning display of political hypocrisy and Social Darwinism that seems designed to reduce low-income Americans to economic desperation.

Over the past few years, partly in response to Obama's sweeping 2008 election victory, Republicans at the state level also have worked diligently to suppress the voting – and some would say, the voting rights – of low-income voters and racial minorities. In this way they have essentially worked to undermine American democracy, no matter what they may think they are doing: in the view of some black commentators, they are effectively working to bring back Jim Crow politics, at least in the South.

Republican governors in Wisconsin, Michigan, and Indiana over the past few years have drastically reduced the bargaining rights of unions. Michigan governor Rick Snyder's astounding success in making his state – long a bastion of the UAW, and hence of union strength – into a “right to work” state strikes some pessimistic labor observers as a blow aimed at the very existence of organized labor in this country.

Republican attacks on “welfare cheaters” over the years, meanwhile, have repeatedly used racially loaded code words to spread negative stereotypes about black Americans in general, amounting to what some critics call “dog whistle” racist politics, and the Republican Party's longstanding homophobia and attacks on women's reproductive rights are notorious.

In terms of global climate change, the GOP leadership today appears to be split between politicians who, like Sen. James Inhofe of Oklahoma, may actually have convinced themselves that the whole issue is a giant liberal hoax designed to wreck the U.S. economy, and a minority of intelligent Republicans, like John McCain and Mitt Romney, who must know better, and have said so in the past, but are now willing to reverse course 180 degrees and lie about the problem for political advantage.

Now, for all intents and purposes, the fine, upstanding people who have been promoting this brand of sleazy politics for the past generation are apparently going to dominate the U.S. Senate and a majority of state governments around the country through 2016. What are these likely to bring us in the way of political leadership — except stupidity, hypocrisy, cruelty and greed?

And yet no matter how angry some progressives are about this reality, and no matter how depressed or simply numb others may feel in the wake of the Nov. 4 results, the practical question facing all of us is what do we need to do now, under adverse circumstances, to work and fight for a better future in what promises to be a fairly bad time?

I can't speak for anyone in DSA except myself, but to me, the next two years present progressives and democratic socialists with several important challenges. One urgent one, arguably, is providing what solidarity we can to those groups and constituencies whom the Republicans have targeted most harshly in recent years – notably new immigrants, African American voters, the poor of all races, public-sector unions, and advocates for women's reproductive rights and freedoms. LGBT people also urgently need our support, although recent legal rulings in favor of gay marriage and polls showing a growing acceptance of gay people in this country, even among Republicans, may mean that the new GOP majority in the Senate won't be as hostile to gay rights as Republicans traditionally have been.

How much real support the progressive left can or will provide to liberal environmental groups over the next two years is a good question. However, environmental groups and environmental causes are likely to take a shellacking from the GOP-dominated Congress through 2016. Some extreme GOP conservatives, like Sen. Inhofe and Texas governor Rick Perry, are echoing the Koch brothers / fossil fuels industry / U.S. Chamber of Commerce line that excessive government regulation is the cause of most of the country's economic woes; therefore Republican attacks on EPA funding and EPA legal mandates seem fairly likely.

On the Keystone XL Pipeline issue, Senate Republicans and a minority of Senate Democrats have just failed by a one-vote margin to pass a filibuster-proof bill in favor of completing the pipeline's last leg, and when the Republicans take control of the Senate veto in January they seem likely to push through another pipeline bill that Obama will find it hard to resist. Already, in the run-up to the recent pipeline vote, *Washington Post* columnist Ruth Marcus has suggested that Obama needs to "throw the Congressional Democrats under the bus" on the pipeline, trading his approval for Keystone for GOP acquiescing to something else Obama wants – continued authorization for EPA to continue regulating CO₂ emissions from coal-burning power plants, for example. Some liberal Democrats also seem to favor letting the pipeline through in order to save the careers of the few remaining Democrats representing coal- and oil-dependent states, assuming that Louisiana senator Mary Landrieu survives a tough run-off race in a few weeks' time.

One of the sleeper issues that progressives urgently need to attend to over the coming months, meanwhile, is the risk that Obama and the new Republican leadership in the Senate, in order to prove that they can transcend partisan wrangling and "get things done" as voters supposedly are demanding, will agree on two sweeping new measures to benefit huge multinational corporations at the expense of labor, consumers, and even the legal sovereignty of American governments, whether at the state, local or federal level.

Judging from analysis in the *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times* and *Washington Post* published in the first few days after the election, two areas of likely bipartisan compromise that business interests are hoping the GOP victory will make possible are

(A) passage of "fast-track" authority allowing Obama to push the proposed Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) and possibly a proposed Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) through Congress with minimal debate; and

(B) joint efforts by Republicans and Democrats to "reform" the U.S. tax code by drastically cutting income tax rates for large corporations.

According to the Obama White House as well as the Republicans, corporate tax "reform" in the way of steeply lower rates is needed to make U.S. corporations more globally competitive, while possibly reducing the motivations big companies have for shifting their headquarters overseas to take advantage of so-called tax inversions. Even liberal Democrat Ron Wyden of Oregon joined with Republican conservative Dave Camp of Michigan this year to propose a version of corporate tax reform, and with the GOP in charge of the Senate and liberal Democratic voices

more muted than they have been, it's possible that such "reform" could now sail through Congress and be signed into law.

So far, the mainstream media report that bipartisan agreement on corporate tax reform has been blocked because Obama and the Democrats want such a tax law change to produce new revenue for the government, so as to reduce government deficit, while the Republicans – despite decades of grandstanding on and the U.S. national debt — are demanding that it be revenue-neutral. But if Democrats and Republicans can compromise their differences, corporate tax rates may be slashed further, at the likely cost of even greater income inequality being generated by the tax code.

Toward the end of November, veto threats from the White House appeared to stall a more pernicious version of this tax proposal, pending adjustment to ease the burden on poor and middleclass taxpayers.

On TPP, TTIP and other "free trade" issues, Obama is on record as favoring such agreements, both to contain Chinese economic power in the Pacific and supposedly as a way of generating new U.S. jobs. Public Citizen, on the other hand, has compared TPP to "NAFTA on steroids" and argued that it will give foreign corporations covered by the treaty the legal power to overturn U.S. laws that interfere with their profitability in ways that allegedly generate trade distortions.

The AFL-CIO and many environmental and consumer organizations have been hostile to TPP, and Harry Reid as Senate Majority Leader has blocked "fast track" legislation that would allow Obama to get such complex trade treaties through Congress with little debate. With Mitch McConnell replacing Reid in January, effective liberal Democratic opposition to a fast-track treatment for TPP will evaporate, leaving progressives hard-pressed to stop this corporate power grab.

Even some Tea Party Republicans at the grassroots level are suspicious of corporate flight and "free trade" legislation, as demonstrated in the 1990s by Ross Perot's crusade against NAFTA; and this creates at least the potential for a truly "bipartisan" campaign to stop "fast track" authority for TPP approval. Yet it remains to be seen whether socialists, liberals, green activists, unions and grassroots Republicans can mobilize enough popular resistance to keep corporate-friendly Democrats and the Republican leadership from pushing through TPP by 2017.

Other possible casualties of the GOP's big win this year are the U.S. Postal Service, Postal Service workers and their unions, and the federal workforce in general. As Melanie Trottman and Kris Maher reported in the Nov. 6 *Washington Post*, some labor observers are saying the election results "could send a message to politicians that they can take on labor and survive," leading to "more efforts to rein in public-employee pensions, curb collective-bargaining rights for federal workers, and push right-to-work laws that allow employees in unionized workplaces to opt out of paying union dues."

For federal workers and postal workers in general, the outlook seems especially grim. The new GOP chairman of the Senate Homeland Security and Government Affairs Committee is Sen. Ron

Johnson, a former plastics manufacturer from Wisconsin and a Tea Party Republican who issued an alarmist report on federal deficit reduction in 2011.

According to a Nov. 10 *Post* article by Joe Davison, Johnson expects government deficit spending to total \$127 trillion over the next 30 years. Johnson's 2011 report therefore recommended reducing the other federal workforce by 10 percent and cutting the number of federal contractors by 15 percent. In addition, Davidson reports, the report has suggested "eliminating the Office of Special Counsel, the Merit Systems Protection Board, the Office of Government Ethics and the Federal Labor Relations Authority, all of which deal directly with federal employees."

Davidson's *Post* article further quotes the Senator as saying that "I really don't think that the public-sector employees should be unionized," and as advocating that the Post Service should go through bankruptcy proceedings, which "really would turn the post office into a private entity."

Given the reality of labor give-backs in the private sector over the years, where health-care and retirement benefits have been repeatedly reduced, Johnson has reportedly said it is "unrealistic" for public-sector employees to "believe they are immune from modifications in their pay and benefit packages."

According to Davidson's "Federal Diary" piece in the *Post*, Johnson is saying he will look for areas of bipartisan agreement in his committee, so his most extreme ideas on the federal workforce are unlikely to become law overnight. Yet his chairmanship of the committee does mean that federal employee unions will face a very challenging political environment when the new Congress convenes in January.

Still another long-term challenge for progressives, democratic socialists and even moderate liberals that the new Congress will present lies in the area of presidential appointments, both to the federal bureaucracy and to the federal judiciary. Mainstream media commentators expect the Republicans to block many if not most Obama nominees to the federal courts, in particular, which could mean that conservative Republicans get to stack the entire federal court system with rightwing, business-friendly judges for decades to come.

During the darkest days of the American Revolution, patriot Tom Paine wrote that "these are the times that try men's souls." Paine should have added, "and women's souls, too," or simply written "human souls" and had done with it, if he hadn't fallen prey to the sexism of his times. But DSA members and other progressives in the United States, whether we're trying to work inside or outside of the Democratic Party and the electoral arena, ought to remember and embrace Paine's sentiment.

For democratic socialists, the inconvenient truth is that no matter how much we might have wished it otherwise, and no matter how differently Marx may have envisioned things turning out in 1848, the struggle for a humane and democratic socialism has been a long, hard slog that has lasted for more than a century now. In the more developed capitalist societies of Western Europe and the United States, there have been no sudden revolutionary breaks that led to success

– at least not yet – and the mass of working people have yet to declare themselves all to be socialists.

Especially in advanced capitalist countries of the West, as Antonio Gramsci argued in his *Prison Notebooks*, the fight for socialism has become a “war of position” comparable to the grisly and endless trench warfare of World War I, not a “war of movement” comparable to some of Napoleon’s lightning military strikes in the early 1800s. What socialists require to win a “war of position,” a la Gramsci’s phrase, is a mixture of determination, movement-building and organization-building, plus the patience to keep fighting for decades.

In a war of position, as opposed to a war of movement, important battles may be lost, but the side that has the most determination, the best organization, and the most success in identifying and mobilizing resources has a long-term chance of winning the war. I think democratic socialists would do well to remember that as we face what could be a series of discouraging and defensive fights in the months and years ahead.

[Good Reads for Socialists, December 2014](#)

Monday, December 1st, 2014

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The Black Friday demo at the H Street Walmart, including many from Jobs with Justice, as portrayed in words and pictures by the excellent blog *DCist*:

http://dcist.com/2014/11/protesters_gather_outside_dc_walmar.php

How much trouble are unions in after the 2014 election debacle? Tom Edsall’s roundup in the NYT has really, really sobering details:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/19/opinion/republicans-sure-love-to-hate-unions.html?ref=opinion>

Another perspective on the same problem: Are the struggles for minimum wage increases and living wages sidestepping the need for workers to gain and wield “worker power” through permanent organization? A longtime campaigner for these causes reflects.

http://www.thenation.com/article/191513/why-living-wage-laws-are-not-enough-and-minimum-wage-laws-arent-either?utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=socialflow

Sam Pizzigati’s weekly blog for the Institute for Policy Studies, “Too Much,” never fails to illuminate – with in-depth studies of inequality as well as blood-boiling portraits of the latest corporate excess and “Petulant Plutocrat of the Week.” The latest episode leads with the hypocritical behavior of Texas congressman Jeb Hensarling, who rails against Obama’s alleged

lawbreaking with his immigration order while quietly... well, you'll see at <http://toomuchonline.org/tmweekly.html>

*Want more "Good Reads for Socialists"? **Better send us some.** This is supposed to reflect the wide reading of our readership, not some canonical listicle. Send proposals of recent articles to woodlanham@gmail.com. To be useful, they must have links unshielded by paywalls.*

[Hagler Recounts Election Manipulation, Importance of Housing Issues](#)

Monday, December 1st, 2014

***The Washington Socialist* <> December 2014**

By David Duhalde, Dave Richardson and Woody Woodruff

Insights into the way money and power manage electoral politics in Washington, D.C., came to the Socialist Salon in November via Rev. Graylan Hagler, senior pastor of Plymouth United Church of Christ, an at-large City Council candidate in the recent plebiscite.

Hagler, an Independent candidate who came in behind several other Independents in a race won by Democrat Anita Bonds and Independent Elissa Silverman, pointed out that of around 100,000 votes cast in the crowded at-large Council race, "60,000 were undervotes." Those voters, who could vote for two candidates because two seats were available, cast a vote for only one of the candidates. The Democratic establishment, he said, had called for a "bullet vote" to ensure that Bonds, an undistinguished legislator who had been appointed to a seat made vacant by a prosecution for corruption, would win an electoral victory.

The stakes in the race were illustrated, he said, by the comparative silence about the real issues in the campaign – housing, poverty and the need for a living wage, and gentrification. The decline of really *public* housing as both a concept and a concrete fact in the District is illustrated by Barry Farms. The Farms, originally a grant to newly freed slaves, is now a victim of the elite-managed cycle into profiteering and out of public hands. Public housing that is judiciously neglected by both government and its alleged private-sector allies becomes vulnerable to takeover and gentrification by the always-lurking private sector predators.

Hagler observed, for instance, that in areas targeted for redevelopment police protection was virtually absent until the developers started to buy up the property. Once they had the property, the police came back and cleaned up the neighborhood *before* any new development took place. Clearly this could have happened in a way that benefited the original occupants but it didn't.

Hagler recounted the dismantling of public housing as a program and an idea stemming from the 1992 imposition of a financial authority or “Control Board” on the District by Congress, punishing the voters for returning the recently-deceased Marion Barry, Jr. to the mayoralty after his drug conviction. Anthony Williams, director of the Control Board and Barry’s successor as mayor, systematically turned over the city’s affordable housing stock to the private sector for management and redevelopment, especially through land-assembly of contiguous vacant residences. A persistent joint strategy of government and developers was to allow communities and neighborhoods to deteriorate until they could be characterized as requiring redevelopment in order to save them.

“Racial politics are class politics,” Hagler asserted, likening the business-based Federal City Council to a White Citizens Council that stays above the fray and leaves the dirty work to Klan-like elements. He observed that D.C., alone among Eastern seaboard cities from Boston to Richmond, had no neighborhoods that were poor *and* white.

Hagler contrasted that steady corporatization of the housing stock with the confrontational politics of the Community for Creative Nonviolence (CCNV), which in the 1980s advocated for the homeless with tactics that prefigured the Occupy movement (and had longer-lasting consequences and results).

Asked how neighborhoods could be improved without gentrification, Hagler observed that organization for action was a prerequisite, along with exposure of the moneyed interests behind public policy.

The Socialist Salon is a monthly discussion meeting of Metro DC Democratic Socialists of America. It generally meets the third Thursday of the month at 6:30 in a local restaurant. Check the [Meetup page](#) for updates on the next Socialist Salon

[HUMAN CAPITAL, the film](#)

Monday, December 1st, 2014

***The Washington Socialist* <> December 2014**

By Dan Adkins

The film *Human Capital* starts near the end of its story where we see a waiter trying to serve and get home for the holiday. Going home, you see a careening SUV that knocks this waiter/bicyclist off the road. The film then has scenes from different personal views leading up to the tragedy. The views come from two families brought together by their children and their mutual lust for money. One family, led by a hedge fund manager, is quite well off but even for them the market fluctuates. The other father is looking to cash in on this new friendship with the rich family. Three different views bring in new relationships and you might not guess the

ending. It is interesting that only one person in the film works, and he gets run over. *Human Capital* is a film of desire, greed, and the value of life in a community where finance capital propels people's lives and labor is disposable or an afterthought.

The film is very well done with superb acting, dialogue and plot. The director is Paolo Virzi, who has specialized in comedies but has now expanded to drama. This Italian film is drawn from an American book called *Human Capital: A Novel* by Stephen Amidon, who lives in New England and Italy. The book was highly acclaimed by the *Washington Post* in 2004. The book and the film's main technical flaw, according to some reviewers, is an inaccurate account of the mechanics of hedge funds and explanations of risk. However, these inaccuracies might have added to the drama and conflict of the film.

There are many definitions of "human capital" but the one identified in the film's credits is from the insurance industry and is used to quantify the potential earnings of a life. This meaning can be used in evaluating the value of a wrongful death and to identify the waiter's monetary loss to his family.

The film is to be released in February or sooner and some previews are already out.

[Living in Poverty: The Insider's View](#)

Monday, December 1st, 2014

***The Washington Socialist* <> December 2014**

By Bill Mosley

Review of *Hand to Mouth: Living in Bootstrap America*. By Linda Tirado. G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2014. 196 pp.

Barbara Ehrenreich's 2001 book *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* provided readers with a powerful, witty, first-hand look at the struggles of low-wage workers shut out of the American dream. And yet, as Ehrenreich took on the guise of a housecleaner or Walmart associate in order to gather material, I couldn't help yearning for the voice of a real low-wage

worker to supplement that of Ehrenreich, who could resume her relatively comfortable life as a writer once her research was completed.

Now we have such a voice: that of Linda Tirado. Her book *Hand to Mouth: Living in Bootstrap America*, is an alternately angry, funny, profane (often all of these at the same time) and always eloquent look at her own struggles trying to raise a family and stay one step ahead of bill collectors while lurching from one dead-end job to another. Tirado got “discovered” when she posted a pointed reply on an online forum to a query about why poor people often act in self-destructive ways. Her mini-essay went viral: It appeared in *The Nation*, *Forbes* and the *Huffington Post* and led to an offer to expand her thoughts into book form. (Ehrenreich, a DSA honorary chair, generously contributed the book’s forward).

Tirado draws from her own experiences to illustrate why the cycle of poverty is so hard to break. Working two low-paying, part-time jobs, as Tirado has done, is a treadmill of driving, loss of sleep, absence from home and the constant fear that one of her employers will suddenly upset the juggling act by changing her schedule and forcing her to lose one of her jobs. Poor living conditions and poor diet make it harder to hold down any job while exacerbating health problems – which, even in Obamacare America, require funds that the poor often don’t have. “Poverty is fucking expensive,” she says, and provides ample illustration of how the poor pay a premium for their poverty through interest on payday loans, lack of ready cash for economical bulk-buying, and other catch-22s seemingly designed to make the poor even poorer.

This being largely a personal account and not a policy analysis, Tirado is stronger on how the poor get that way – and get poorer – than what to do about alleviating poverty. But she does ask the non-poor to take the first step – to try to understand the poor and the difficulties they face rather than mindlessly criticize them as dysfunctional or irresponsible.

Perhaps Tirado will encourage other low-wage Americans to come forward with their stories. Whether or not they do, *Hand to Mouth* is a powerful and valuable addition to understanding of the real barriers poor Americans face in their effort to break out of poverty.

[Metro DC DSA Plans for the Coming Year](#)

Monday, December 1st, 2014

***The Washington Socialist* <> December 2014**

By Kurt Stand

Members of Metro DC DSA’s Steering Committee together with active members of the Local have decided to make the “Fight for Fifteen,” – the campaign for an across-the-board \$15 minimum wage in our region – to be the priority for our work agenda in the coming year.

This decision was made by the 11 participants at a strategy committee meeting held on Sunday, November 23. Details of our work within the “Fight for Fifteen” campaign will be discussed and put to a membership vote in an early 2015 membership meeting. Other potential work in the coming year may include gathering signatures to encourage a potential Bernie Sanders presidential campaign and support for the initiatives of Jobs with Justice. We also will build on the relationships developed last year in local electoral activity through our endorsements of Andy Shallal for Mayor, and Rev. Graylan Hagler and Eugene Puryear for City Council in DC as well as the campaigns members took part in as individuals in suburban Maryland and Northern Virginia.

The “socialism,” in our socialist activity will continue to be present in our work – as demonstrated in Seattle and elsewhere, the fight for a just, democratic public policy on incomes is socialist to the core. Our monthly Socialist Salons will continue to explore different aspects of socialist theory and practice, both at the local and at the national & international levels. Themes in the coming year will include – among other topics – socialist feminism, immigration struggles, the African-American radical tradition, and environmental justice. And the “social” nature of socialism will still be present through our once-a-month “Happy Hours,” which now includes a regular gathering in Northern Virginia in addition to the gathering held in DC. Our monthly online journal *Washington Socialist* will continue to bring these together by reporting on the work of the local and its members as well as providing a forum for “think” pieces on political, theoretical and cultural themes. Membership meetings will henceforth incorporate presentations on arenas of on-going or potential engagement. The local will conduct a survey early in 2015 to better determine the views, energy level and interests of all members, including those who pay dues but are not otherwise active.

Discussion at the strategy meeting also addressed the need to address members’ concern with both national/international issues and local community struggles in order to better balance our work throughout the area – a breakdown of our 208 national DSA members locally indicates that 44 percent live in Maryland, 33 percent in DC proper, and 23 percent in Virginia. A report on national DSA helped place in context the work breakdown of the Local’s activity last year and the contents of the *Washington Socialist* indicated what we already knew about the extensive work we have done. Written reports detailed the extensive activity Metro DC DSA engaged in last year as well as the wide-ranging themes addressed in the *Washington Socialist* – these providing a firm basis upon which to build for the future. Although the national political picture is bleak, the meeting was conducted in a spirit of hopefulness and the spirit of determination to do our part in bringing about much needed change to our society.

[Progressive Maryland Faces Political Challenges, Expands Suburban Md. Organizing](#)

Monday, December 1st, 2014

***The Washington Socialist* <> December 2014**

By Woody Woodruff

[Progressive Maryland](#), a longstanding left organization in the state with deep labor ties, is coming out of a somewhat fallow period and adding significant staff just as progressives wake up to the reality of a Republican executive in this allegedly blue state.

Tuesday, Nov. 18, members old and recent gathered at the IBEW Local 26 headquarters in Lanham to mark the organization's addition of an assistant director and a commitment to organize in Prince George's County.

Kate Planco Waybright, Progressive Maryland's executive director, acknowledged to a crowd of more than 100 that the organization had a reputation as a Montgomery County-oriented outfit, and vowed that Prince George's would get equal attention.

Waybright's new No. 2 is Larry Stafford Jr., who had served as leader of the Prince George's Young Democrats and had a gaggle of associates in the seats at the meeting.

Waybright and Stafford said the poor turnout in Prince George's and Montgomery – largely blamed for the loss of the governor's race – was galvanizing their efforts. Arguing for renewed organizing starting now, Stafford said “we can't just wait for another election.”

Progressive Maryland will resume the fight for paid sick leave for all workers (twice turned down the legislature) as well as reforms to eliminate tax loopholes enjoyed by out-of-state corporations and reversing the weakening of the estate tax. Also on the agenda: a redistricting commission, a continuing battle to reverse the Citizens United decision and a concurrent fight for public financing in state elections.

Metro Washington Labor Council President Jos Williams fired up the crowd with his statement that with the election of Republican Larry Hogan to the governorship, “the [deep Blue Maryland] bubble was burst” and the task now is “reclaiming our state.”

Waybright said that the Republican victory “will make our work a little more difficult” but suggested it could increase participation as well. Stafford, introducing himself with an account of how a supportive, active government had enabled him to get an education despite a tough background, warned “there are forces that are trying to take all of that back.”

Progressive Maryland counts 23,000-plus individual members and 30 affiliated organizations and has offices in Silver Spring and Baltimore. Eleven union locals, the DC Building and Construction Trades Council, the state and two county NAACP organizations, several peace and justice organizations, Maryland NOW and several religiously based social justice groups are among the organizational affiliates.

Monday, December 1st, 2014

***The Washington Socialist* <> December 2014**

By Kurt Stand

Theatre as Past

Knowing the end point of a given historical process can make the outcome of prior social developments appear inevitable; the choices left unfulfilled along the way dismissed as irrelevant or marginal. Yet that assumes history has an end point, ignoring the reality that existing relationships are themselves in a constant state of flow. Progress may look to have been inevitable for those whose family trajectory took a path out of poverty and toward comparative prosperity, family stability, a settled state of being; the conflicts of Depression-era life may appear to belong to a different world or be the fate of others less fortunate (or less worthy). The truth that such apparent gains may prove hollow, or that setbacks to challenges of political or social conventions from one period may provide the soil for subsequent re-emergence of such challenges — the truth that settled “facts” may be far from settled — is then lost. Whether the past is depicted as frozen or as still full of life are alternatives that can be set before us in the theatre, rendering revivals pointed or pointless.

As was the case with the just-closed Olney Theatre production in Montgomery County of Clifford Odets’ 1935 play, *Awake and Sing*. Groundbreaking in its day, the challenge for the director and cast was to give it a contemporary relevance. It was a challenge not met; what the audience saw was a museum piece. Perhaps providing a glimpse of a life those in attendance recalled from their own now-distant childhood or heard in stories their parents or grandparents told, the performance allowed, encouraged, a sweet feeling of memory for times gone by, pleasurable even when watching painful scenes. Enjoyable, certainly, moving at times, but far removed from the anger that comes through in every line of dialogue as written. Efforts were made in the stage setting and display of artifacts throughout the building to be true to the original significance of the play and locate it historically; the attempts fell flat because of a superficial view of history that presents the past in one-dimensional terms. A superficial view encapsulated by the notion that relevance comes by depicting the family drama as “timeless,” thereby rendering it meaningless as all family dramas (on stage, in life) take place in time. In consequence, nothing in the production spoke to the emotional impact it had on audiences in the 1930s, no attempt was made to have an equivalent impact on audiences today.

Past as Prologue

Social conflicts reached a high-water mark in the US in the years leading up to World War I. The war and its aftermath left many of the radical hopes contained in political movements of the time unfulfilled, replaced by a celebration of individualism, “Americanism,” the culture of celebrity and the worship of material gain — even though millions were left behind in this supposed march of progress. A questioning of the emptiness and pain contained in all the glitter gave rise to a rebirth of critical writing during the 1920s. This was what underlined the rejection

of such “progress” by those who went off to Paris — Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Kay Boyle, John Dos Passos, H.D. to name but a few; it was behind the bitter realism of writers like Sinclair Lewis, Dorothy Parker, Ring Lardner, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Stephen Vincent Benet, William Carlos Williams; behind the upsurge of the Harlem Renaissance and the work of Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, James Weldon Johnson and many more.

Unlike in previous periods, the theatre joined the other arts in giving voice to suppressed or ignored truths. Up the early 20th century, American stage had primarily offered works derivative of European models or provided uncritical comic/melodramatic entertainment without pretense to anything deeper. Pioneering plays by Maxwell Anderson, Laurence Stallings, Susan Glaspell, and, most significantly, Eugene O’Neill, brought life to drama, depicting the intersection of personal/family conflict in the context of societal tensions thereby providing a critique of the oppressions contained in everyday life. All this was in the air when the Depression brought the illusion of endless paths toward prosperity to a screeching halt, and set a framework that allowed the best of the new writing to connect individual fate with social conditions while engaging in the search to find hope where hopelessness was all around.

And perhaps none did so more effectively than Clifford Odets, who breathed in the air of 1920s literary and theatrical developments alongside the conventions of Yiddish theatre — where melodrama and comedy were used to depict the tension between tradition as self-protection and tradition as self-repression, in the process expressing the inner-tension of immigrant life. Odets combined these various currents in *Awake and Sing* via its depiction of tenement family life, in its telling a story through conversation in everyday speech, in its rootedness amongst the Jewish poor (it was the first Broadway play with exclusively Jewish cast). By combining the various currents of theatrical and literary innovation, that rootedness did not isolate the Jewish immigrant experience as singular; rather, it allowed for points of connection, as other immigrants, other audiences, could hear the language of their lives and conflicts. Though such techniques and subject matter were to become staples on and off Broadway in following decades, it was new in Odets time — new to commercial theatre, and because of showing the political in the personal, new to radical theatre in the US; mirroring forms of expression adopted by dramatists such as O’Casey in Ireland, Brecht in Germany, Tretyakov in the Soviet Union.

The Play

The setting of the story told is the Bronx apartment of an impoverished family fearful of losing what little they have, while each member dreams different dreams of a way up and forward. Caught between ideals of socialism that seem unable to compete with the allure of glamour and wealth that Hollywood and magazine advertising suggest capitalism can offer; caught between the lure of success defined by material goods and the reality of a scramble every day simply to make ends meet, anger becomes a weapon against surrender into passivity. The world Odets depicts is anything but benign; all the characters are living a life where a precarious security holding the wolf at bay is purchased at tremendous cost. A cost paid in a bitterness that trumps love. Children and marriage are seen as enormous burdens, especially marriage that doesn’t help move the family up the economic ladder. Women are the chief victims of that process, marriage in such a context being depicted as nearly the respectable side of forced

prostitution, a vehicle to move even one small notch up the ladder, a means to prevent sliding down further. Powerless when facing the world outside, power is exercised by a cruelty in family life, a cruelty that stems from crushed dreams and reflects the necessity of implacability against the outside currents of instability. Life as lived by those characters and, by extension, to the audiences who first responded to the performances on stage, calls for passion not charity's compassion.

Adding to the power of the play, as written, was its indictment of an older generation who were charged with having given in to those pressures. The generational anger evident in every scene is central — and how could it not be? For the Depression's young people, the bust following the boom greeting them as they reached adulthood was laid at the door of their parents' and grandparents' defeats, illusions, failure. With all doors closed to those just starting out on life's journey, that anger should have been palpable — yet was a conflict lost in the Olney production because it conflicted with the nostalgia of the performance (for nostalgia softens memory — familial or historical — and so softens a sense of pain). Odets' indictment is not one-sided; he makes clear why the older generation acted as they did, why the mother makes harsh choices that hurt those she is trying to protect, rejects the socialism that she sees as simply another encumbrance in a life already filled with wasted sacrifice. The indictment is also political; the grandfather in the play is a socialist, a reader of Marx, a militant who despairs as he sees his children and grandchildren enticed by dreams of material gain. Yet, he indicts himself too, his words have little meaning because his socialism became abstracted from life, a socialism of dreams removed from action, a socialism undone by the too many personal compromises along the road — and so he has become a useless old man, with old dreams that do not speak to this new world. Taking comfort only in listening to records of Italian opera sung by Enrico Caruso, he has refused risk.

Real change, for Odets however, involves real risk — when the granddaughter in the play abandons her child and “arranged” husband for a relationship of choice, there is no assumption that those choices will lead to happiness. Instead, her acts are an assertion that personal meaning can only be found by willingness to act cognizant of cost. Costs willingly accepted are the only path out of the personal surrender that leads to desperation manifested by lashing out at those near and dear. So too, when the grandson decides to stay his ground and resist by organizing, he both is and is not following in the grandfather's footsteps; for him socialism is a means to act, not dream. Odets that is, was trying to challenge his audience, to make his theatre-goers feel uncomfortable and question their own choices/compromises, just as his earlier play, *Waiting for Lefty*, was aimed at challenging audience passivity.

Present as Prologue

And contemporary theatre is still capable of doing the same. Two performances in the 2013-2014 season at Washington DC's Woolly Mammoth theatre provide examples, witness the appropriately long-named work by Jackie Sibblies Drury: *We Are Proud to Present: A Presentation About the Herero of Namibia, Formerly Known as South-West Africa, From the German Sudwestafrika, Between the Years 1884-1915*. The fully scripted play is performed by six actors — three men, three women — as though an improvisational exercise in how to tell a story, how to stage a story. Doing so, each confronts the others and the lies, myths and exercises

in avoidance that most people use to escape discomfort — especially when race is the subject. The characters, nameless throughout, have only the letters of German soldiers home — banal letters, filled with trivialities — to tell the story of the genocide. No written records from the slaughtered Herero people exist, therefore accounts of what took place — even empathetic or sympathetic accounts — come from outside the experience.

When victims are not allowed to tell their own stories, the tragedies they undergo are not seen for themselves — a point brought home when one actor's claim that what happened in Southwest Africa was a precursor to the Holocaust is challenged in anger. The pain of oppression wrought in colonial Africa was awful enough in its own terms without having to be compared to the pain suffered in Europe. Similarly, when one (white) character attempts to demonstrate sensitivity by speaking about a painful family memory of witnessed racist violence, he is upbraided; it is not his painful memory that is relevant, but that of the victims. The barbs the actors throw at each other are barbs thrown at the audience, the conversation on stage about stories and truth, about written records and collective memories, about “plays” and history come back again and again — telling the story of the past to regain impact or telling stories to avoid uncomfortable realities. The seeming improvisational telling of the play adds to this, indicating how conversations can move past each other, unintentionally reproducing the prejudices of society that lead double standards in everyday life to go unheard. Linking all is the recognition of how the experience of racism colors the way the past is seen. And not just the past: the play was staged in the wake of Trayvon Martin's murder and conversation was encouraged to grapple with the meaning of George Zimmerman's acquittal.

Mike Daisey's *American Utopias*, also performed at the Woolly, directly moves from the world on stage to a confrontation to the world outside. Daisey's one-man show begins as a running commentary on his personal experience joining in two versions of American utopia. He takes part in the countercultural Burning Man festival in Nevada, a celebration of self-reliance in community that allows a brief moment of escape from the everyday world of work and bills and order, a world all will rejoin immediately thereafter. He next narrates a family trip to Disney World with its vision of order and place created by turning dreams into commodities, Utopia as something that can be stage-managed through masks and play, as something the market can offer for sale. Sarcastic and cutting about these two, Daisey challenges illusions and self-conceits people bring to them. Though he tempers that, he also offers an homage to the honesty many bring to these, their respective sense of belief and striving toward a means of belonging. Daisey condemns the lacks, economic and social, not the various searches for a truer life, however misguided they might be.

And that leads to his contrast with a more pointed Utopia: Occupy Wall Street, a utopia that challenged the system at its roots and so was judged a menace to be crushed. His sympathy and solidarity with those who took part is balanced by his own inability to commit, for unlike Burning Man or Disney World, he did not join in. Failing to turn beliefs into action, Daisey did not set foot in Zuccotti Park, and so, like many good people ever and again, standing on the sidelines allowed reaction to regain the upper hand. Thus Daisy turns his non-involvement into a self-indictment, an indictment made all the more real when he spoke of the beatings and arrests suffered by those who took part, his commentary on police violence enhanced by video images of the Park being forcibly cleared.

Non-involvement, watching from the sidelines, is itself a form of complicity — a washing of hands, an acceptance rationalized by the belief that nothing can be done — thus his self-indictment becomes a shared indictment with those in his audience who similarly observed and did nothing. A point he drew home during his performance, by leading people outside the theatre and — from a street corner — urging theatre-goers to break down the gap between good thoughts, staged performances, and the world of oppression and repression, urging each to take action to reclaim public space, take risks, act to change our world.

Past, Present and Future Choices

Which brings us back to *Awake and Sing*. One means to recapture the spirit of the play would be to put it in the setting of an immigrant family in the United States of today; for the world is similarly exploitative to those who live at the margins now as compared to then. The difficulty, however, would be to avoid the distancing — the seeing of other's pain only in terms of them being the other, only in terms of pain. Here one can recall Richard Wright's self-critique of his first collection of short stories, *Uncle Tom's Children* — for they were stories that made readers weep from afar. And so he followed it with *Native Son*, which doesn't allow its central character to turn into an object of unalloyed sympathy. Rather the honesty of its picture forces readers to confront rather than patronize. The novel's central character Bigger Thomas is trapped in a world defined by poverty and racism; the link to most of those who read the novel is not his world of limitations, it is a shared sense of limitation, of walls and barriers, that define the life of most. It is a claustrophobia experienced by all characters in *We Are Proud to Present...*, a claustrophobia Daisey brought home in the telling of the ring around Zuccotti Park as the police charged.

Trapped by student debt, trapped by jobs with no security, trapped by a system that still offers no sense of belonging apart from that which can be bought by wealth is today's reality; Occupy spoke to that sense and so touched a nerve that allowed it so spread so swiftly. And that sense of claustrophobia, of tenement life, of life without choices and possibilities, rings true in every line in Odets play and is why it touched a nerve of recognition in its day — and could in our day too. Claustrophobia is bred by the closed doors of our winner-take-all system with no way out. The competition at the root of capitalism engenders a permanent state of insecurity that enables other forms of injustice to thrive, that encourages a live for today not tomorrow mindset. That insecurity can set jobs against health and the environment, can welcome job growth in the form of prison expansion and overseas war. Today's radicalism is as much a search for meaning as it is for social justice as it is for economic justice — at once, the same and different from strivings in the past.

There is nothing wrong with a work of theatre aimed at giving an audience pleasure, nothing wrong with enjoying an evening's performance as a form of relaxation and leaving it as that. Yet there is also nothing wrong with a theatre production, with any work of art, making its audience work. Perhaps it is only our alienation from work itself that makes it difficult for many to connect pleasure on a night out and being challenged to think and act. It is a connection, however, as central to artistic values that challenge conventional wisdom as it is to political movements that similarly push against the limits of what is deemed possible, deemed

acceptable. Intersecting political and cultural challenges, celebrating work and critical thought, is the best way to keep hope alive in our troubled times.

Odets lived out the choices, the risks, thrown at his audience in his early plays. Eventually leaving New York for Hollywood, he found material success, but though he produced good writing in his later years, nothing matched his early brilliance — he lost his connection with his audience and was unable to re-establish a new one. So too, the risk of political engagement caught up with him. Angry at McCarthyism, defiant in words, he eventually gave in and testified before the House Un-American Activities Committee. Unlike others who did so, however, Odets did not justify himself. According to most accounts, he died a broken man trapped by the system he hated. It is a story that gives more, not less, meaning to *Awake and Sing*, for it foreshadows the difficult road any would have to follow to escape the impositions of a heartless system. Trying and failing is far more meaningful than a life of non-engagement, for it leaves in its wake a legacy upon which others can build. That is the meaning of the grandfather's admonition which we fail to heed at a cost:

“That is why I tell you — Do! Do what is in you. Do what is in your heart and you carry in yourself a revolution”