

*The Washington Socialist*  
Articles from January 2014 Issue  
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[Washington Socialist for January 2014: New Year, Enduring Vision, New Avenues of Practice](#)

Friday, January 3rd, 2014



**Welcome to 2014's first issue of the *Washington Socialist*, the monthly newsletter of the DC Metro local, Democratic Socialists of America.**

You have probably already set aside a thankful compartment in your heart for those who have sat down at the keyboard at this time of year and masterfully avoided writing a year-end meditation on What Lies Ahead and What It All Means.

You will not have to make more room in that space on our account. This is, after all, a publication of the Left. And your faithful correspondent will not pass up the opportunity to bloviate on 2013>2014.

As socialists, we are frequently tugged two ways – the vision way, and the “what is to be done?” way.

It's likely to be the same in 2014. Our writers and topics in the January issue fall on both the visionary and the practical side. The hope of nudging history slightly leftward in the DC elections, in the Maryland legislature, in the international political and trade spheres, in respect to the runaway intelligence agencies, and so forth pivot on the prospect of the usual activist trudge. Raymond Mungo, in his ['60s era memoir of the Liberation News Service](#), took a cue from the large letters stenciled on curbside pavement marking the way across the street in New York City and called this kind of work “PED-Xing.” It can be as pedestrian as it is essential. But it makes it hard to keep an eye on the vision, sometimes.

All too often, instead, we have to map our vision with the help of books, and we review some good ones in this issue, as well. The visions of anti-apartheid activists in South Africa and of progressive battlers at home, as well as of Marx, the founding visionary, are treated.

As we struggle to redress growing inequality with measures like an increase in the minimum wage, it's important to remind ourselves that:

- Modernity, increasingly, allows a broad public understanding of the productive work it takes to support a society in comfortable surplus;
- that that work and generous surplus can increasingly be accomplished by very short, socially managed shared worktimes and the surplus (like the work) shared rationally among private and public goods to reduce and even eliminate inequality;
- that the externalities of corporate capital that are ravaging our planet are remediable and likely reversible through the application of socially-based economic management;
- and that these facts (despite the countervailing lies) *are becoming more and more apparent to more and more of our fellow humans*. That's the hope of socialism and why we grind it out with letter-writing, lobbying, rallying and pamphleteering in our PED-Xing mode.

Let the unknowns of 2014 and beyond yield to our practice to the extent we can execute it, and let our vision remain whole before us as the day-by-day offers us more opportunities to push that capitalist noodle leftward around the next blind curve. The work is before us, in 2014 as in every year.

## **FIRST, AN IMPORTANT WORD ABOUT OUR FEBRUARY MEETING:**

### **Metro-DC DSA to Consider Endorsements in DC Primary Election**

*By Bill Mosley*

At its meeting on **Saturday, Feb. 8**, Metro-DC Democratic Socialists of America will consider endorsing candidates in the April 1 District of Columbia primary election.

**The meeting will take place from 1:30-2:30 pm at the Cleveland Park Library, 3310 Connecticut Ave. NW, near the Cleveland Park Metro station.**

Primaries are being held by the Democratic, Republican, Statehood Green, and Libertarian parties. Offices on the ballot are mayor; council chairman; at-large councilmember; councilmembers for Wards 1, 3, 5 and 6; delegate to the U.S. House of Representatives; U.S. senator; U.S. representative; and, for voters in the Democratic primary, members of the Democratic national and state committees. (The delegate to the U.S. House, a salaried position that dates back to the early 1970s, is the official representative of D.C.'s interests in Congress. The delegate, currently Eleanor Holmes Norton, serves on committees and can speak, but not vote, on the House floor. The unpaid positions of U.S. senator and representative were created in the early 1990s to serve as lobbyists for D.C. statehood. Sometimes known as "shadow" members, they are not recognized by Congress and don't serve on committees or have speaking or voting rights).

At the meeting, Metro-DC DSA will consider motions for endorsements to any of these offices. Any local DSA member in good standing in the organization – i.e., having paid dues within the past year – is eligible to propose and vote on endorsements. According to Metro-DC DSA’s bylaws, decisions on electoral endorsements require a vote of two-thirds of the members present.

*(January’s meeting is Saturday, January 11 at the Shaw branch library. Details on the Meetup page.)*

### **ALSO IN THIS ISSUE,**

Bill Mosley in advance of our membership meeting (above) anatomizes the upcoming **mayoral race in 2014**, complete with flawed candidates (but aren’t they always, in every election everywhere?) and issues and agendas somewhat deformed by what is considered “the possible.” [Read complete article](#)

Since the material disclosed by Edward Snowden has hit the news, the things we thought we knew about the **National Security Agency** and the danger to individual and collective privacy have ballooned into a portrait of out-of-control government and the rule of law outrun by technology. Dan Adkins examines the news so far and the effects on the political economy of information and national sovereignty globally. [Read complete article](#)

BOOKS – a trio of book reviews, starting with Carolyn Byerly’s overview of **a recent dual biography of Ruth First and Joe Slovo**, anti-apartheid activists in South Africa who met and married in the struggle and came to different ends as apartheid began to give way to a multiracial South Africa. [Read complete article](#)

Andy Feeney reviews an instant classic from 2011, **Terry Eagleton’s Why Marx Was Right**. A somewhat unlikely ex-Trotskyist defender of full-blown Marxism, Eagleton makes a qualified case for a revered but difficult founder of socialism, in a witty and winning style. [Read complete article](#)

Kurt Stand reviews **Sam Pizzigati’s latest book**, the *Rich Don’t Always Win: The forgotten triumph over plutocracy that created the American middle class 1900-1970*. Pizzigati, at the Institute for Policy Studies and writer of the online newsletter “Too Much” (often featured in our Good Reads), shows how inequality can be contested and reversed – and how it has been. [Read complete article](#)

There's something intrinsically frustrating about **defending the imperfect and unjust US welfare state** as it has devolved to today's thin palliative. Andy Feeney argues that the very PED-Xing kind of effort required to contest further cuts in food stamps is a valuable practice for today's progressives and has strong ties to Gramscian theory. [Read complete article](#)

As the **Maryland General Assembly** gears up for its three-month session beginning in mid-January, legislation on a minimum wage increase and on earned sick leave for all state workers begin another journey through the legislative grinder after having failed in the 2013 session. Vibrant action in the District and two adjacent Maryland counties raising the minimum wage may give a boost to the effort. But there are plenty of roadblocks, Woody Woodruff recounts. [Read complete article](#)

**Good Reads and more**, including an activism proposal, wrapped up in a last-minute package for January. [Read complete article](#)

## **DC MAYOR'S RACE: Crowded Field, Limited Choices**

*The Washington Socialist* <> **January 2014**

*By Bill Mosley*

Now that Mayor Vince Gray has decided he will run for re-election after all, the field of candidates in the April 1 Democratic mayoral primary is taking shape, somewhat resembling that of the older Elvis on a fried-food binge.

The Democratic mayoral primary, whose victor has gone on to win every D.C. mayoral contest since home rule began, this year features 12 candidates, including four current D.C. councilmembers. The Statehood Green, Republican and Libertarian mayoral races have one candidate each – respectively, Faith (the bugle-blowing D.C. statehood advocate and frequent candidate), James M. Caviness and Bruce Majors.

Prior to Gray's announcement there was speculation, and in some quarters hope, that Gray would seek retirement rather than a second term. Certainly his first term has been a disappointment not only to progressives but to a large swath of D.C. voters who placed their hope in him. During his 2010 race he garnered support from much of the D.C. progressive community, including most of

the District's unions and Metro-DC DSA. Support for Gray was heavily driven by the contrast he posed to his opponent, incumbent mayor Adrian Fenty. While Fenty was hard-charging, opinionated and insular, Gray projected openness and collegiality. Fenty's four years in office were dominated by his takeover of DC schools from the elected school board and his installation of the abrasive Michelle Rhee as school chancellor. Rhee ran roughshod not only over the local teacher's union but school administrators and parents' organizations as well. While some admired Fenty's take-charge attitude, over time he created more enemies than allies.

Yet Gray had barely taken office when the bad news began to accumulate. First came the revelation that his campaign had paid Sulaimon Brown, a vociferously anti-Fenty fringe candidate, to stay in the race and nip at Fenty's heels. After the election, the Gray administration rewarded Brown with a high-paying government job from which he was soon fired after news media began questioning the appointment. Then came the more serious revelation: Local businessman Jeffrey Thompson had allegedly run a giant, off-the-books "shadow" campaign that pumped some \$650,000 in unreported cash into Gray's mayoral bid. Several campaign officials have pled guilty to criminal offenses, and Gray, who denies any knowledge of the secret campaign, remains under investigation by the U.S. attorney.

Meanwhile, those who hoped Gray would reverse Fenty's school takeover, or at least modify it to give parents a greater voice, were disappointed: He replaced Rhee with the more people-oriented Kaya Henderson, who continued Rhee's policies, only with a smile.

But for many of Gray's one-time supporters, the final straw was his veto of a bill would have provided a \$12.50 per hour minimum wage for employees of big-box stores, \$4.25 above the normal D.C. minimum. There was no question the bill was aimed at Walmart, and for good reason: The giant retailer's affinity for busting unions is matched only by its eagerness to cut costs, with much of its stock manufactured in Asian sweatshops by workers earning starvation wages. Since the minimum-wage bill died, Walmart has opened two stores in the District, with more on the drawing boards.

If there has been a bright spot for progressives during the Gray administration, it has been his effort to raise the profile of the D.C. statehood effort, featuring his arrest in 2011 during a pro-statehood rally and his defiance of Congress by keeping D.C. government offices open during last fall's federal shutdown. Unfortunately, this is far outweighed by his other mistakes and betrayals.

The Democratic mayoral field began to swell before Gray stepped into the ring, with many of the contenders hoping he would stay out. Of the four councilmembers running, both Muriel Bowser and Tommy Wells voted against the higher wage for big-box workers – a litmus test for progressives if there ever was one. Bowser's vote is not a shock, as she entered office as a Fenty protégé and has little allegiance to labor or other progressives. Wells' opposition to the bill was another matter; he has spent his time in office cultivating a progressive image, although his focus has largely been on promoting public transit and smart growth.

Perhaps as puzzling as Wells' opposition to the bill was the yes vote of Jack Evans, trying a second time for the mayor's seat. Evans has spent his two decades on the Council as the best

friend of developers and other wealthy interests. Speculation is that Evans was trying to carve out space in a Gray-less race to differentiate himself from Wells and Bowser, and believed his corporate benefactors would forgive his straying from the fold this one time.

Councilmember Vincent Orange was a late entry into the field and appears to be making a play for the votes of progressives for whom the other major candidates are tainted. He was a champion of the retailer minimum-wage bill and a vocal supporter of raising the D.C. minimum wage to \$11.50, a measure that was approved by D.C. Council in December. Yet Orange is a late arrival to progressive politics; his political history has generally been one of opportunism. However, he appears to recognize the political vacuum on the left and be moving to fill it.

Among the rest of the Democratic field, Reta Jo Lewis, a former State Department official, stands out for running an aggressive campaign, but her literature mostly offers the uncontroversial mix of better jobs, schools and public safety without real specifics. And then there is Andy Shallal, owner of the Busboys and Poets restaurant-bookstore chain, who is running as a forthright progressive.

Shallal's literature emphasizes attacking poverty and homelessness, promoting equality and ending racial disparities in law enforcement – issues on which the other candidates are largely silent. And his restaurants have hosted numerous events appealing to a left-progressive crowd. As a political neophyte, Shallal's challenge will be to convince likely supporters that he is a serious candidate – one with a strategy for marshaling enough support to win, or at least to be enough of a threat to force the leading candidates to address issues they might otherwise ignore. He also will need to make a compelling case that, should he win, he could overcome his lack of experience to effectively control the machinery of government and work with the D.C. Council.

Gray, despite all of his problems, enters the race as frontrunner. It requires only a plurality of the vote to win the nomination and advance to the general election. Gray retains a core of supporters, and in a crowded field he could easily split the anti-incumbent vote and cruise to victory, unless a candidate emerges from the field as the go-to challenger.

In the unbroken string of Democratic mayoral victories in the general election, only rarely has a non-Democrat come close (Republican Carol Schwartz's 42 percent against Marion Barry in 1994, four years after Barry's conviction for cocaine possession, marked the only time a non-Democrat reached 30 percent). But a lot could happen between April 1 and the November 4 general election – such as more indictments from the U.S. attorney, perhaps of Gray himself. In that case, there is a candidate waiting in the wings to pick up the pieces – councilmember David Catania, a Republican-turned-independent who is exploring a possible candidacy. As an independent, he would skip the primary round and run only in the general election. Catania is no progressive; he was comfortable with Republican economic policies but, as the Council's first openly gay member, ditched the party over its hostility to LGBT rights. A crippled Gray could be vulnerable against Catania, who is a strong campaigner with a forceful personality.

The 2014 D.C. election will revolve not only around the standard issues of economics, schools and public safety, but also along the fault lines of race, age and the clashing priorities of newer vs. longer-term residents. Many longer-time residents, who tend to be African American, are

concerned about being crowded out by gentrification and the rapid influx of new, mostly white residents – many of them members of the millennial generation who are well educated, professional and lifestyle-oriented. In addition, with three councilmembers having been convicted of crimes over the past two years, and a mayor currently under criminal investigation, ethics will be on the minds of voters as never before. This is not the most promising backdrop for progressive politics, but it's the hand we've been dealt.

[Good Reads and Short Takes for January 2014](#)

***The Washington Socialist* <> January 2014**

***Illuminating text from some undergroundish – and abovegroundish – sources...***

**Corey Robin in Jacobin** fingers one of the agonizing and entrapping features of capitalism... the complexity that consumes all your time. How ya gonna have time to seize the state if ya hafta calculate your deductibles every waking minute...?

<https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/?tab=cm#inbox/1430b7403c0b8488>

**The Blue-Green Alliance** – which you may once have heard called the Apollo Alliance – is a labor-based coalition framework for the Green Jobs movement. The monthly newsletter is called The Ally; the latest issue is at <http://www.bluegreenalliance.org/theally/december-2013-the-ally>

Bill Mosley recommends **Bill Blum's Anti-Empire report #123**: an extended account of the care and feeding of the US memory hole on such topics as US complicity in Mandela's original arrest, in the Indonesian genocide and other episodes... <http://williamblum.org/aer/read/123>

**Election of an explicit socialist** to the Seattle City Council got lots of press. Here is *In These Times*'s take. It's helpful also with background on Socialist Alternative, which doesn't have a DC formation so we don't have much experience with SA. And there was the near miss in Minneapolis...

[http://inthesetimes.com/article/15960/can\\_socialists\\_win\\_elections\\_in\\_the\\_u.s/](http://inthesetimes.com/article/15960/can_socialists_win_elections_in_the_u.s/)

Jeff Faux on the **wreckage in NAFTA's wake**, 20 years on. Good prep for taking on the Trans Pacific Partnership corporate boondoggle, doubtless going into high PR mode as early as this month...

<http://fpif.org/nafta-20-state-north-american-worker/>

Need a break from text? The Economic Policy Institute's "**13 Most Important Charts of 2013**" breaks down the growing inequality, declining/damaged labor markets, the myth of the "skills

gap” and other factors that are making the stock market’s exuberance a totally false indicator of national well-being...

<http://www.epi.org/publication/top-charts-2013/>

So: back to text, again courtesy of EPI. A Dec. 19 report by David Cooper demonstrates with some wonkery that **a national minimum wage increase to \$10.10 would create “roughly 85,000 net new jobs”** over the phase-in period (2014 to 2016). That’s actually fewer new jobs than Cooper and a colleague calculated earlier this year. Why? Because since the earlier study was done, five states have *actually* raised their minimum wage, taking their workers out of the calculation. EPI’s latest study is at [http://www.epi.org/publication/raising-federal-minimum-wage-to-1010/#\\_note1](http://www.epi.org/publication/raising-federal-minimum-wage-to-1010/#_note1) and a HuffPost summary is at

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/12/19/1010-minimum-wage\\_n\\_4474183.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/12/19/1010-minimum-wage_n_4474183.html)

Not to pop our own balloon, but there are “**good (morning) reads**” available now every day on the increasingly valuable Bill Moyers site, <http://billmoyers.com/> ... the whole enterprise has surprising progressive rigor and the Sunday show has had guests who track well with our politics, like Richard Wolff, Dean Baker, Grace Lee Boggs, Barbara Ehrenreich, Peter Dreier and more. The “Morning Reads” provide more than you’ll ever want to pursue in this life, but hey...

**“Socialist Takeaways.” – from a Montgomery County activist:**

“Let’s test the theory that 50 united people can make a difference in public policy! I wish to found a new local Ralph Nader style citizens’ advocacy group in Montgomery County with the purpose of keeping Congress accountable to the American people, instead of to huge corporations, the military-industrial complex, and the wealthy as it now does. We would attempt to influence Congress by petitions, phone calls, and personal visits. I wish to advocate on a wide spectrum of progressive issues, including limiting government surveillance, civil liberties, civil rights, LGBT rights, sex traffickinig, anti-war, more funding for social services like Medicare, Food Stamps (SNAP) and Social Security, prison reform, end the death penalty, anti-drug war, homelessness, and humane treatment of animals in factory farms, and limiting the influence of undemocratic institutions in public policy. Other issues may be included later. Please agree on most of these issues before joining. The purpose of the group is to take action, and not debate the issues endlessly. I will try to reach close to consensus on the issues, and responsibilities will be shared.

“Please respond to me at [cause@gmx.com](mailto:cause@gmx.com), or call me at [301-461-6174](tel:301-461-6174) after 10 am.”

[High hopes for Md. minimum wage increase soured by legislative infighting](#)



## ***The Washington Socialist* <> January 2014**

*By Woody Woodruff*

A remarkable regional accord came together when Montgomery and Prince George's counties in the Maryland burbs passed ambitious increases in the minimum wage and were echoed two weeks later by the District.

In a rash of activities that included coordinated job actions by fast-food and retail workers around the nation, this capital regional compact on higher wages supports a Maryland bill in the legislative session beginning this month. After failing last year, a minimum wage bill is given a good chance this year and may have the backing of Gov. Martin O'Malley as a booster.

The counties, and the District, set a four-year escalation of the wage floor from the current federal level of \$7.25 an hour – which applies in Maryland – to \$11.50 an hour by 2017.

A flurry of similar actions around the country means that “this year's developments provide a higher floor for wages next year [2014] in at least 21 states, a record number,” [writes Don Lee in the LA Times](#).

Lee reported Dec. 8 that The Labor Department estimated 3.55 million workers were at or below the minimum wage last year, out of more than 75 million who are paid on an hourly basis and about 128 million workers overall.

The two Maryland counties' action was intended in part to boost the chances of success for a statewide minimum wage package.

But progressives and unions suspect a devious scheme in the business-besotted Democratic core of the legislative leadership. Jos Williams, president of the Metropolitan Washington Council AFL-CIO, has suggested that power brokers in the legislature are planning to use the upcoming struggle over a statewide minimum wage to quash the independent actions of the two counties. Williams [told the Gazette weekly newspaper](#) of rumors of “a ‘compromise’ to raising the statewide minimum wage [that] would revoke the higher wages passed recently in Montgomery and Prince George's counties in exchange for a higher statewide wage.”

The *Baltimore Sun* [agrees that skulduggery is afoot](#), and knows who's behind it. In an editorial Dec. 19, the *Sun* said “Meanwhile, the biggest obstacle to right-sizing Maryland's minimum wage is a Democrat, specifically Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller. While advocates are pushing for a minimum wage raised to \$8.20 per hour next year, \$9.15 an hour in 2015 and \$10.10 in 2016 and tied to inflation thereafter, Senator Miller said recently he'd like it raised to \$8.25 an hour and then leave it to individual jurisdictions to decide if they want it any higher than that.

“He's right that local governments should be able to raise it higher (Montgomery and Prince George's counties have already taken that action) but wrong to set the standard so low,” *The Sun* concluded.

Gino Renne, first vice president of the AFL-CIO Metropolitan Washington Council, said the session will flush out those behind the alleged compromise.

“And rest assured that we will go after them,” he said.

[RaiseMD](#), a task force on the minimum wage project backed by the state’s unions, says “raising the minimum wage to \$10 per hour will ... directly and indirectly boost pay for over half a million low-wage workers. ... Approximately 350,000 Maryland children have at least one parent who would benefit from an increase in the minimum wage.”

At the federal level, the minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour has lost so much ground to inflation that it would take the “Fair Minimum Wage Act of 2013, a bill introduced by Sen. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) and Rep. George Miller (D-Calif.) that would raise the federal minimum wage in three incremental increases of \$0.95 from its current level of \$7.25 per hour to \$10.10 per hour” to catch up, according to [analysis by the Economic Policy Institute](#) and many other sources.

EPI’s David Cooper noted in the Dec. 19<sup>th</sup> article that the \$10.10 level would “either directly or indirectly raise the wages of 27.8 million workers, who would receive about \$35 billion in additional wages over the phase-in period.” Over half those affected workers work full-time. The resulting GDP boost would bring 85,000 new net jobs.

Fourteen states will see an automatic increase in the minimum wage Jan. 1, 2014, either because of new laws or because existing minimum wages are linked to the Consumer Price Index, [according to a summary by the legal website Mondaq](#). Most such automatic raises are on the order of 10 to 20 cents per hour. They include such unlikely places as Florida and Arizona, where the CPI will push the minimum to \$7.90 (AZ) and \$7.93 (FL). Tipped wage minimums will also rise in those two states. Colorado, Ohio, Missouri and Vermont will raise both minimum wage and tipped wage floors, again tracking CPI. New York and New Jersey came late to the party, passing laws raising the minimum wage in 2013 but leaving tipped wages at their current levels, which in New Jersey is an abysmal \$2.13. California, Montana and Washington require the full minimum wage for tipped workers; California’s goes up to \$9 and Washington’s to \$9.32.

## **Sick leave bill has influential booster**

In Maryland’s 2013 legislative session a well-supported and thorough bill that would have provided earned sick leave to 700,000 workers who otherwise face bad choices [failed](#).

It ran afoul of several money committees well known as the graveyard of progressive legislation: the Senate Finance Committee and the House of Delegates Economic Matters Committee. So for another year, the uncovered workers – 54 percent of them women – continued to have to choose between going to work sick and forgoing a day’s pay; staying home to care for a sick child unpaid or take the child to day care instead, with the high risk of infecting other children.

The crunch, of course, is worst for the state's low-wage workers, 80 percent of whom have no paid sick leave. For them, a missed day's pay can be the difference between making rent or not, paying routine bills or letting them slide into ruinous arrears.

The measure will clearly be fought over again this year, and has an influential booster in Del. Jolene Ivey, a Prince George's legislator who leads her county's big House delegation and is also a candidate for lieutenant governor as ticketmate of gubernatorial candidate Douglas Gansler.

Ivey's announcement in a *Baltimore Sun* op-ed Dec. 9 that she would again sign onto this year's Earned Safe and Sick Leave Act and "fight for its passage in the year ahead" gives the measure some impetus. Last year's lead sponsor, Del. Thomas Olzsewski of Baltimore County, said in late spring that he would submit it again with tweaks to answer the objections of the business-friendly members of the Economic Matters Committee.

The bill, as last year, will allow workers to earn an hour of sick leave for every 30 hours of work, up to seven days, with carryover provisions from one year to the next.

There's no apparent number for the bill yet – prefile reports on the legislative website are not updated – but Prince George's Del. Jolene Ivey assured a crowd at a Dec. 7 SCLC panel on the 2014 session that the minimum wage struggle and the parallel one over earned sick leave would not cancel each other out. Del. Aisha Braveboy of Prince George's expressed the same hopes outside the meeting.

Sen. Paul Pinsky, another Prince George's legislator with a progressive record, has been quoted as saying (in effect) "It takes a bad bill a year to get passed in Annapolis. It takes a good bill two or more." That will be put to the test again this year.

— *Woody Woodruff*

[NSA's Political and Economic Crisis](#)

***The Washington Socialist* <> January 2014**

*By Daniel Adkins*

Most discussion on the National Security Agency is concerned about its voracious appetite for electronic records and its conflict with the 4<sup>th</sup> Amendment<sup>1</sup> – the part of the Bill of Rights that prohibits unreasonable searches and seizures and requires any warrant to be judicially sanctioned

and supported by probable cause. Although some NSA searches are covered by warrants, other efforts just scoop up data streams between data centers. This is to say nothing of scooping up foreign data streams through the U.S and worldwide.

NSA does have a legitimate goal of detecting and dealing with terrorists. Yet it is alleged that NSA cannot read many messages it collects due to a lack of Arabic and Farsi translators. One wonders what is NSA's goal if it is not to be capable of reading the messages? It does boggle the mind that the U.S. now has a surveillance system for the whole world that Hitler or Stalin could have only imagined in their dreams.

NSA is a highly hierarchal and secret agency. Signals intelligence and communication intelligence (SIGINT and COMINT) are and have been among the most closely guarded of secrets. The breaking of the German and Japanese codes during World War II resulted in important victories at Midway and fighting the U-Boats, although U.S. industrial production was decisive in the war. NSA culture treats opponents such as al Qaeda and Iran as existential enemies like Japan and Germany. Yet the nature of the current conflicts is much more complicated than World War II or the Cold War. The West and most of the world (countries that are part of the global market) are engaged in a social-political conflict with al Qaeda that in many ways is a cultural reaction to multi-nationalism and religious extremism. One should remember that on 9-11 the U.S. military establishment was only able to oppose al Qaeda by launching two unarmed fighter planes to kamikaze the fourth hijacked plane. An *informed* public (passengers) brought down that plane! So it would follow that cooperating with the public and allies rather than just scanning them would be in order. Also, al Qaeda is a political as much as a military opponent in that how we respect and relate to Islam may be more important to combating al Qaeda than killing its terrorists would be. Yet NSA is trying to win the struggle by itself when almost the whole world is on its side.

There are three main trends in the Middle East. The Arab Spring has started a rising appetite, especially for the young, for a functional life and economy without graft, favoritism, and corruption. Rising education levels and expectations support that trend. Second, Islamist trends like the Muslim Brotherhood and the Turkish government try successfully (or not) to link religious traditions with governments. In Egypt this trend failed by not paying attention to the economy and the future. This Islamist trend does not necessarily pose a security threat of the sort that the religious extremism of al Qaeda or the Taliban does. However, and thirdly, the chaos of the transitions has made an opening for al Qaeda and other extremists. NSA does have a role in protecting us from those consequences of chaos but the U.S. has a bad habit of trying to solve problems just by technical means and ignoring social, cultural, and political dimensions. The technical methods worked in World War II and to some extent in the Cold War. Now the world is more connected and requires a more fully informed and cultural solution.

Now let us assess the economic and international consequence of this surveillance and the impact on the strongest U.S. economic sector. One cost is that there now are economic, political, and ethical reasons not to use U.S. corporations' clouds (data centers), hardware, and any communication lines passing through our territory. Any firm or country that does not want the U.S. government to know all their secrets has to think more than twice about using services provided by U.S. corporations. The world may view our internet [hardware and software as](#)

[compromised](#) in the same way the U.S. government now views Chinese hardware. The U.S. government forbids its agencies to use Chinese communications equipment because it may, by design, compromise our security. U.S. corporations may protest this issue to buyers, but everyone knows that the U.S. government requires secrecy of its industry agreements. In other words, NSA has just undercut our tech industry's international balance of payments as well as our national and corporate trustworthiness. Major tech companies are now protesting these actions.

Much of the world's communications goes through the U.S. because our industry has developed earlier and has had greater financing. This infrastructure includes satellites, landlines, and undersea cables. NSA has angered Brazil and if Brazil is serious about avoiding NSA spying it will expand undersea cables and satellites to send its emails and data to Africa and thus avoid routing them through the U.S. That would be the only way for South Americans to secure their data privacy in communications with Europe, Africa and even Asia. An example of this logic is the global GPS systems. The U.S. and Russia have their own, and Europe and China will not be far behind creating their own systems to ensure their full access so as not to depend on the U.S. NSA's unilateral actions and the U.S. government's inaction will lead other countries to feel that they are being treated like colonies. This may have been avoided by public country-to-country agreements, but protests from Germany and Brazil suggest there are no such agreements. If the goal is to fight al Qaeda, such agreements should be easy as terrorists do not have the backing of most of the world's governments.

Another consequence of scooping up data streams (without warrants) between the cloud data centers of Google, Yahoo, Microsoft, Twitter, Mozilla, Facebook, Apple, and others, is that those companies are now beginning to encrypt their data streams to protect users from unlawful snooping. Microsoft's general counsel stated, "We want to live in a world that is safe and secure, but we also want to live in a country that is governed by the Constitution." Protecting customers' privacy and our corporations' reputations via encryption adds a business cost to the world's tech industry and NSA.

The end result of NSA's surveillance is likely to be an erosion of U.S. influence as our hubris prevents partners from seeing us as acting with their collective interest. NSA's military outlook toward al Qaeda is understandable, but the insularity of the "intelligence community" has blocked both domestic and international cooperation as well as respect for the Constitution. Our winner-take-all commercial and political culture is shrinking our economic clout as the world develops and we create a "1984" culture in a divided nation. The intelligence agencies view their fight as an existential fight for safety, but the phone-logging program has not been necessary in stopping terrorist attacks according to the White House panel's report. Others see that there are more options for security in cooperating with allies and the public by using a wider range of techniques and knowledge of cultures, languages, religious communities, and sciences beyond electronics and at the same time protecting our economy.

More recent events have suggested a review of NSA's programs and a report by President Obama due in January. The tech industry has met with Obama sharing their concerns of how NSA is limiting their viability and trust. One federal judge has stated that phone meta-data collection is likely unconstitutional, but another disagreed Dec. 27, possibly setting up an early

Supreme Court encounter. A White House panel's review of NSA programs has not found the security benefit of stopping a single imminent attack and made a recommendation that phone companies hold their data longer in order to be accessed by NSA using warrants. The full report is yet to be detailed and may leave other forms of data collection by NSA untouched. It is interesting that NSA is quick to label Snowden a treasonous traitor when the chain of command in NSA has sworn to protect the Constitution and the result casts doubt on their oaths.

### [Revolutionary Lives in the Making of New South Africa](#)

***The Washington Socialist* <> January 2014**

By Carolyn M. Byerly

Review of *Ruth First and Joe Slovo in the War Against Apartheid*, by Alan Wieder, Monthly Review Press, 2013.

As the world was saying goodbye to Nelson Mandela in early December, I had my nose in Alan Wieder's well-researched new biography *Ruth First and Joe Slovo in the War Against Apartheid* (Monthly Review, 2013). First, Slovo and Mandela were part of an ensemble of revolutionary comrades who together reshaped South Africa from the 1950s to the end of apartheid in 1991. The book is full of these and other familiar characters in a level of detail that would impress the most ardent Talmudic scholar. Wieder's research involved hours and hours of interviews and immersing himself in court records, other documents and the personal papers of Slovo, First and others from the apartheid era.

This article – a summary more than a critique – has the goal of drawing a profile of revolutionary lives that were fully committed but also full of contradictions, interesting but also mundane in many ways. Because their lives individually and jointly tell the story of apartheid and its liberation, it is impossible to separate the “personal and political” of these two remarkable historical figures.

Ruth First (<http://www.sahistory.org.za/people/ruth-herloise-first>), a journalist who was assassinated by the South African security forces with a mail bomb in 1982, made her mark reporting on the atrocities of the apartheid government for the *Guardian* and other left-leaning newspapers, beginning in the mid-1950s. Joe Slovo (<http://www.sahistory.org.za/people/joe-slovo>), a lawyer, made his mark challenging the regime by legally defending poor black Africans against everything from petty crimes to more serious allegations. He died of leukemia in 1995 while serving as the minister of housing in Mandela's government.

The husband and wife political team came to their radical inclinations quite differently. First was born in South Africa of Jewish socialist parents who had immigrated to South Africa from Lithuania and Latvia to escape persecution. Her father became a small businessman in Johannesburg and did well, allowing Ruth to grow up in middle class surroundings and to intellectually engage in politics. Joe was born in Lithuania of poor Yiddish-speaking, observant Jewish parents. Not long after his family immigrated to South Africa, his mother died, leaving his father to support and raise several young children. They shifted from one boarding house to another, the father working at jobs where he could, but spending time in jail for debts when he had no work.

Ruth went to college from high school; Joe was forced to work. His lodgings put him among a rag-tag bunch that included some Zionist-Marxists. Having already abandoned religious Judaism, he also turned away from Zionism, feeling that the Zionists cared more about events in Palestine than the oppressive situation going on around them. Joe became immersed in the latter. It was the 1940s and the coming of the apartheid era.

The Union of South Africa, formed by merging former British colonies with those of the Boers (Afrikaners), had been historically racist in its policies but would become more so after statehood. In 1913, the Land Act was passed, forbidding blacks from buying land outside the reserves set aside for them. These were followed by the infamous “pass laws” (requiring blacks and coloreds to carry ID cards) and other measures to control the interaction of the races.

The institutionalized racism known as apartheid came dramatically in 1948 when the National Party came to power. Laws (<http://africanhistory.about.com/library/bl/blsalaws.htm>) were passed forbidding both sex and marriage between whites and those of other races and restricting residency of native Africans to townships. In 1950, the Population Registration Act required every South African to be classified by race, a law that would form the basis for a totally racialized society. In 1951, the Native Building Workers Act limited the places where skilled blacks were allowed to work; and in 1953, the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act allowed racial segregation in public facilities and vehicles. In 1956, the Industrial Conciliation Act forbade formation of racially mixed labor unions and legalized the reservation of skilled jobs for white workers.

Blacks had formally organized resistance to white repression around the time of the nation’s founding. The Native National Congress (later the ANC), founded in 1912, and the Communist Party, with ties to Russian Bolsheviks and later Stalinists, were the strongest opponents. Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo, Walter Sisulu, and Chris Hani were among the ANC’s leaders and would become close allies of First and Slovo, who held membership in both organizations. These groups led mass protests, strikes, burned passes and otherwise resisted the repression.

Living a revolutionary life meant social and political circles overlapped closely for First and Slovo, who had met through CP activities. Ruth, Wieder says, was a “remarkable journalist” who was “wholly concerned with identifying and exposing the horrors of racial rule.” Her most famous story was written in 1951 on the enslavement of Bethal farm workers. She also reported on the government seizure of black land, township conditions, and other atrocities. Her stories and commentaries, it was said, “kept the spark alive.” Her paper, the *Guardian*

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/southafrica>) was banned numerous times, each time to re-emerge under a new name with similar oppositional stories. She also engaged in political protests, particularly in support of black women, who felt the brunt of apartheid strongly. Some noted that her journalism often had a participant-observer aspect to it, as when she reported on the Federation of South African Women's campaign against passes, a campaign she was herself involved in. Her reporting "provided both motivation and ground rules for future women's actions," according to Wieder. She mentored young black writers to enter the profession and report from their own perspectives.

Joe, who had eventually completed law school, traveled around the nation to defend blacks accused of violating the apartheid laws. He had a brilliant legal mind and compelling courtroom manner. By the mid-1950s, his life became more secretive, attending political meetings at night and sharing only necessary details with Ruth and others. His activities included planning and abetting massive strikes in protest against repressive labor laws. First and Slovo were both stalked by the government and eventually put on trial for treason with scores of black Africans. Charges were eventually dropped, but in 1963, they fled. Other major leaders also went into exile, as the ANC had become a banned political group. Mandela was tried for treason, given a life sentence and sent to Robben Island.

First and Slovo's long exile was spent mostly in London, where Wieder observes they "had a full social life." One of the contradictions in these radicals' lives was their class privilege, which allowed them to live well even while they fought against the squalor and injustices others' experienced. While living in Johannesburg, the family (Joe, Ruth and their three daughters) had taken annual vacations to the beaches of Cape Town; they had black domestic help, and otherwise lived a bourgeois life. Joe, who had grown up very poor, came to enjoy "a good meal and a cigar," and both liked to party. They differed from most white South African bourgeoisie by having a multicultural circle of friends, who included the other revolutionaries of all races who came to enjoy social gatherings at their home – something expressly forbidden by law.

In London while exiled, they went to the theater and enjoyed other cultural events. But "good food and good company did not preclude politics for Joe Slovo or Ruth First" during their exile. Joe became involved in recruiting Irish leftists for political propaganda forays into South Africa, Wieder says, and Ruth continued her "torrid pace of writing", including speeches and media work. She produced a special on Frantz Fanon for the ATV Network in London, and completed research for and first draft for her book *The Barrel of a Gun*, a socialist critique of post-colonial African leaders. The book, which emphasized that power lies in the hands of those who control the means of violence, would catapult her into the academic world. The book's complex analysis, which involved politics, economics and other factors, broke new ground in explaining post-colonial Africa and was well reviewed in academic journals. Though having no PhD, she was sought out by the sociology faculty of Durham University, where she served from 1973 to 1978, teaching courses on Marx and Weber, as well as the sociology of gender, the last of these signaling her shift into feminist scholarship and feminist politics.

Joe's life became more international, as he shuffled between Europe, Moscow, Berlin and various African nations interacting with communist and other leftist political leaders. Joe and Ruth had always held fierce political differences on some issues, one of them being his support



for Stalinist policies in the USSR. In addition, both had always had extra-marital affairs, which caused conflict but also a kind of freedom in their individual pursuits. Though their expatriate life settled into its own brand of normalcy, both desired to return home and questioned why ANC leaders weren't doing more to bring themselves home and resume the fight against apartheid.

In 1978, exiled comrade Oliver Tambo organized a contingent of ANC members, including Slovo, to travel to Vietnam for training in guerrilla warfare. Ruth was living in Maputo, Mozambique, by then and Tambo's campaign enticed Joe to also return to Africa. Now at the Center for African Studies as director of research, Ruth hired young researchers to assist her with studies in Marx; academic research and writing occupied most of her time. In the role as director, she was also able to initiate agricultural projects that required city-bred African students to go into villages and live with goals to revolutionize agricultural production. She considered this period to be the most militant and productive in her life, bringing theory and practice together.

Joe became deputy of the Operations Unit of the ANC after returning from Vietnam. He trained 20 soldiers at a time, teaching them to destroy oil refineries and other facilities. Joe's units were successful in bringing "huge financial damage" to the regime." Though gaining renown for these field operations, Joe came home to Ruth in their comfortable lifestyle, again pointing out the discrepancy of class relations in revolutionary work.

With increased coverage of the group's violence against the state by the South African press, which demonized the ANC, the government began what Wieder calls its "reign of assassinations of ANC operatives in both South Africa and the border states." Ruth, a "brilliant orator" since high school, "had a remarkable way with words" and was speaking frequently in these days. She also continued her scholarship, completing work on the book *Olive Schreiner* and beginning research for *Black Gold*; Joe also began to write more and to travel, including a trip to the Soviet Union. Ruth was in her campus office, chatting with others around her, when she began to read her mail on the morning of August 17, 1982. One of the envelopes contained a bomb that exploded, killing her instantly. Those around her were injured but survived. Word of her death spread around the world quickly and comrades and friends and family reacted with eulogies, articles and concerts in her name. Heads of state and other dignitaries from around the world came to her funeral. Ruth's friend Ron Segal gave the eulogy, honoring her as a writer revolutionary, intellectual, feminist and teacher.

Friends surrounded Joe, who was devastated. Those who knew Ruth and Joe said they always imagined it would be Joe they killed first. After the funeral, he began a regimen of swimming daily, meetings and writing. He worked through his grief by writing *Joe Slovo: An Unfinished Biography*. He returned to his special operations work against the government, from his new base in Lusaka, Zambia.

The world was changing. The Berlin wall came down in 1989 and soon after came the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Joe connected these dramatic changes to possibilities for similar shifts in South Africa. President de Klerk was giving signals that there would be a new future. He had released Walter Sisulu and Thabo Mbeki from prison; he unbanned the ANC; and in February 1990, he released Nelson Mandela. Joe returned to South Africa in April that year,

after 27 years in exile. In Johannesburg, he would participate in negotiations that became the basis for the new South African Communist Party. At the same time, he reacted with culture shock at what he was seeing – blacks and whites on buses together, talking in the streets, middle class blacks living in white areas.

Both the ANC and SACP began to redefine themselves to participate openly in the political process. On July 19, Joe proposed the unilateral cessation of armed struggle, something that Mandela supported. But there would be a power struggle within the SACP over the issue, something the press covered, but the problem eventually was resolved. Mandela's election in 1994 brought many of his old comrades into government, something they could not have imagined decades earlier. Instead of appointing Joe to the Justice Ministry, as everyone supposed would happen, Mandela asked him to be Minister of Housing. Joe Slovo, who some called the "most hated white man in South Africa" took over an agency still full of staff from the apartheid era. To build trust and good relations, he established collaborative principles of working and dispensed with formalities, including a chauffeur. He began to lunch with the rank and file staff. He summoned leaders from banking, building industries and civic organizations to develop plans for public housing.

It would be his last mission to put his politics into practice. Joe Slovo was diagnosed with leukemia in 1994 and died a year later, leaving his second wife, Helena Dolny and daughters Gillian, Robyn, and Shawn.

*Personal reflection.* Having spent a week or so in Johannesburg four or five years ago, I read this biography knowing full well that the "new" South Africa is still a long way from being realized. The wealthy Afrikaner bankers and industrialists, who brokered the end of apartheid and to whom Mandela ultimately sold out, still dominate the economy. Mandela's government was never able to bring about education, redistribution of resources, or even better housing for the masses of poor black Africans before it passed to the hands of his successors, and neither have they fully accomplished these things. The nation is still racially divided in many ways for all of its advancements, not the least of which is its progressive Constitution. And yet there is an admirable progress and, among those I met of all races, a determination to look forward, not back. Alan Wieder's interesting critical account of First and Slovo's lives is at once a social history and a biography. In the end, it reminded me that revolutionaries are real flesh and blood people – passionate, complicated, imperfect, and with varied levels of success in what they are able to do given historical circumstances. The lessons in these and other things, replete through the book's 390 pages, may inform our own activist impulses.

To read more about the implications that the South African story has for the United States, read Arun Gupta's commentary <http://truth-out.org/news/item/20893-make-new-york-city-ungovernable-lessons-from-the-anti-apartheid-struggle-in-the-age-of-bill-de-blasio>.

There is renewed interest in South Africa and its lessons for others on the political left, particularly with regard to the enduring socialist question, "Can the Left govern"? Others are also chiming in on this subject.

See Danny Schechter's new book, [\*Madiba A to Z, the Many Faces of Nelson Mandela\*](#)

[Socialism Defended With Wit & Style](#)

### ***The Washington Socialist* <> January 2014**

By *Andy Feeney*

A book review of *Why Marx Was Right*, by Terry Eagleton (2011, New Haven & London). Yale University Press; hard cover, \$25.

One highly intriguing fact about the Marxist theory of revolution is that for the last century, an enormous number of American conservatives who know surprisingly little about it have found it remarkably simple to identify its worst flaws.

When I graduated from elementary school back in 1960, for example, my libertarian Republican friends and I knew full well that Marx believed in the virtues of a totalitarian political state and the utter insignificance of the individual. When I entered college later on, a number of the earnest Christian liberals I met at my church group at the University of Michigan were convinced of the fact that Marx was a complete economic determinist who rejected the notion of freedom. We Christians might have believed in original sin, of course, and the extreme Calvinists taught the “innate depravity” of each individual soul, but at least we differed from the Communists in admiring human dignity.

Many radical environmental activists who joined in the University of Michigan's version of the Earth Day, 1970 teach-ins, similarly, were painfully aware that Marxists, the same people who had achieved total political power in the Soviet Union, perversely believed in the human conquest over nature, despite the damage thus wreaked on the world. And to be fair to the environmentalists, a few of the campus Marxists who turned out to protest against our “middle class” environmental protests in 1970 knew exactly the same thing.

In fairness to Marx and his intellectual legacy, much of what conservative and liberal critics have always “known” about him is wrong. In fairness to the critics, on the other hand, Marx was a complicated 19<sup>th</sup> century thinker with a propensity for embellishing *Capital* with quotations in ancient Greek, and as a young man he unfortunately developed an elaborately German sense of humor. Socialists and Communists since the late 1800s have faced extremely daunting challenges in translating some of his theories into practice, and for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a big part of the international socialist left took its marching orders from Stalin's Soviet Union, where the conservatives had some good reasons to point to totalitarian abuse by the State.

Was the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and its followers in the 1940s and 1950s basically correct about what Marxism means? Are Tea Party Republicans or even liberal Democrats today basically correct in finding Marxism to be an outmoded political ideology, one totally discredited by the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union? Is Marx one dead white European male whose latter day followers have been incapable of appreciating the merits of modern radical movements such as feminism, environmentalism, gay liberation and the struggle for racial justice?

In *Why Marx Was Right*, the Anglo-Irish literary critic Terry Eagleton takes on 10 of the most commonly held misconceptions about Marx and Marxism, and unlike some socialist defenders of the Truth Faith, Eagleton does so with a good deal of flair, intelligence and wit.

Eagleton himself seems like an unlikely and somewhat contradictory Marxist. A former associate of Christopher Hitchens in the British Trotskyist movement, Eagleton also happens to be a believing Catholic, and the dust jacket to this book contains the publisher's praise for his previous work *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflects on the God Debate*. According to a blurb from the *Guardian*, which Yale University Press chose to quote on the dust jacket, *Reason, Faith and Revolution* offers a "coruscating brilliant polemic" against the kind of militant atheism that Hitchens espoused as a reason for George Bush to make war on "Islamofascism" following the 9/11 attack.

Another recent Eagleton work, judging from the dust jacket, is titled *On Evil*, and a reviewer for the *Irish Times* apparently finds it "a valuable contribution to a debate as old as Adam and Eve and as contemporary as 9/11 and Abu Ghraib."

In other words, Eagleton is hardly dogmatic in his defense of Marx, who was an explicitly atheist thinker, and both as a Catholic and a former Trotskyist, he expresses serious intellectual reservations about some of Marx's historical conclusions. Like most Trotskyists, he expresses strong condemnation of the bloodshed and totalitarian terror that he sees as having attended both the Chinese and the Russian revolutions, while at the same time emphasizing that both revolutions contributed significantly to economic development for hundreds of millions of people.

Perhaps because of his Catholicism, perhaps only because of common sense, Eagleton also emphasizes that for all of its scope, Marxism cannot be thought of as a "Theory of Everything," even if many Marxists have wanted to make it one. He writes:

The fact that Marxism has nothing very interesting to say about malt whiskies or the nature of the unconscious, the haunting fragrance of a rose or why there is something rather than nothing, is not to its discredit. It is not a total philosophy ... It has been mostly silent on questions of love, death and the meaning of life."

Yet in the wake of the near-implosion of the capitalist world economy following the great financial crisis of 2008, Eagleton insists, Marxism as a way of understanding capitalism and formulating ways to go beyond it is as relevant as ever. The main reason so many political radicals rejected it following the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991, he concludes, was not because

it was no longer relevant — but was because capitalism at the time seemed invincible. But it doesn't seem that way today.

Eagleton goes on in this book to examine and refute ten of the most commonly held misconceptions about Marx and Marxism, including the myth that Marx – who called the State an instrument of “class oppression” and called for it ultimately to “wither away” – was somehow an advocate of an all-powerful government that would negate all individual rights. In fact, Eagleton argues, Marx was an advocate of a “communist” society that would foster the flourishing of individual lives and individual talent, and there are solidly “Marxist” and materialist reasons why the Bolshevik attempt to establish a revolutionary socialist order in politically and economically backward Russia, in 1917, was almost fated to generate gross abuses of individuality and democratic rights instead.

One excellent feature of *Why Marx Was Right* is Eagleton's obvious familiarity with features of Marx's thought and Marxist practice that have never come to the attention of most American conservatives and anti-socialist liberals. What may be even better about the book for the average reader is that Eagleton is a prominent literary critic, and an Irish Catholic one to boot. As such, he has flair for lively writing and wit that Marx, for all his intellectual virtues, sometimes lacked.

Whether Eagleton's prose can match that of other Irish writers such as George Bernard Shaw or Oscar Wilde is debatable. But in this book, Eagleton has produced a body of pro-socialist arguments that are fun to read, not simply “important.”

[THE JOYS OF LEAFLETTING and DC-DSA's Fight Against Further Cuts in Food Stamps](#)

***The Washington Socialist* <> January 2014**

*By Andy Feeney*

I was walking down Connecticut Ave. near Dupont Circle when she approached to ask me for seventy-five cents. Supposedly it was for a Metro fare to Silver Spring, which I doubted. Yet today I handed over the change anyway, for I had a hidden agenda.

“How do you feel about Congress cutting food stamps?” I asked. She said it was terrible; she knew many people who needed food stamps to eat; they'd have a really hard time on reduced benefits. Congress is crazy to do this, she said.

So I showed her Metro DC DSA's flyer against further cuts in food stamp funding under the next Farm Bill, with phone numbers where people can call to protest to Congress about the proposed changes. And she took some flyers to distribute to her friends — in fact, she asked me for 75 of them.

I had a similar experience when I asked the medical technician in my doctor's office about how she felt about Congress cutting the food stamp program. She replied with a small lecture about what it would mean for single mothers trying to raise two or three children. "They're going to get money to feed their children by any means necessary," she predicted; this meant more street crime and prostitution ahead. When I showed her the DSA flyers she took 35 of them, and said she'd pass them along to people in her church.

A waiter at the restaurant where I went after my annual checkup agreed it was insane for the government to reduce food stamp benefits given the slack growth in jobs in this economy; he took flyers for himself and a friend or two. A homeless street vendor near my downtown office scanned the contents of the flyer, nodded to himself, and asked for 100 to hand out to people in his mother's neighborhood in Anacostia. A security guard took 75 to give to her neighbors. And when I knocked at the back door of a downtown evangelical church, the middle-aged white man who answered said he needed food stamps himself; he'd take 30 flyers to hand to others in the congregation.

Some long-time socialists who've contributed a lot to DSA over the years hate handing out radical flyers to strangers. I can't blame them. It seems undignified; it takes a bit of gall if you're a naturally shy person; you're basically intruding on someone else's space, and some people resent it. Also it's easy to feel hopeless when you're trying to press a bit of socialist propaganda on someone who really doesn't want to read it.

But when our chapter's Steering Committee in early December decided to authorize the preparation and distribution of a DSA flyer urging local residents to call Congress in opposition to further cuts in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) funding — SNAP being the new name for the old food stamps program — I believe we hit on a message that many people in DC, Northern Virginia and suburban Maryland actually do want to read.

According to recent articles in the *Washington Post* and the *Baltimore Sun*, as well as information on the web sites of charitable food bank organizations in our region, some 101,000 D.C. residents have recently depended on food stamps to some degree for their basic nutritional needs. In Maryland, the USDA has found an estimated 720,000 people to be "food insecure," and even in Loudoun County, Virginia, which reportedly has the highest average per-capita income in the United States, some 82,000 people went to church and charitable food banks last year for some of their groceries.

Nationwide, upwards of 47 million Americans have received food stamps in recent years — a number that conservative Republicans and not a few congressional Democrats now seem eager to cut, by slashing billions of dollars in funding from SNAP expenditures in future years. On November 1, 2013, food stamp recipients and hunger advocacy groups got a taste of austerity to

come when Congress, under the 2013 sequestration deal, allowed food stamp funding to drop by \$5 billion from its previous all-time high.

Because of the large numbers of needy people involved, and probably also because of the wide coverage that food stamp and hunger issues have recently received in the local and national media, a big fraction of the people living in the Metro DC area were already concerned about the food stamp issue by last December. Many local residents therefore have willingly taken our flyers. The local DSA Steering Committee authorized expenditures for the printing of 500 flyers, initially; since then, individual DSA members acting independently have printed up roughly 1,500 more.

By late December, nearly all these had been handed out – in some cases to local DSA members, in many other cases, to sympathetic non-socialists who have promised to distribute them more widely to friends, family and community – not because they necessarily agree with democratic socialism, but because of their deep concern about the pain that further SNAP funding reductions will cause.

Can DSA members, either locally or nationally, hope to build “socialism” or a socialist movement by trying to rally members of the public to call on a conservative-leaning Congress to protect a “liberal” and not especially generous welfare program – namely SNAP?

Not directly, no. Our flyers opposing food stamp cuts, although they mention DSA’s name and give readers directions to our local and national web sites, say nothing at all about socialism or even the major flaws in capitalism that make hunger and malnutrition and poverty so surprisingly present in the world’s richest capitalist society.

However, what some of us are hoping is that by distributing these flyers in significant numbers, and by urging readers to contact Congress soon to save existing SNAP funds, we may help to rally local low-wage working people, the jobless and homeless, and enlightened middle-class liberals to act politically in their own class interest.

At the DSA national convention last October, delegates approved of a resolution identifying the struggle against “neo-liberal” budget austerity as one central priority for democratic socialists this year. Fighting Congress to save food stamps from further reductions is only a part of that anti-austerity struggle, but some of us in the chapter hope that it will support the larger anti-austerity struggle.

Beyond this, several DSA activists at the national level have recently expressed growing interest in the political theories of Antonio Gramsci, an influential Marxist thinker imprisoned by Mussolini in the 1920s and 1930s. Our chapter’s food stamp flyers, in whatever limited fashion, are partly an attempt to put into practice a little of what Gramsci wrote about the need for socialists to wage a “counter-hegemonic” struggle in basically conservative capitalist societies, such as Italy in the 1920s and the United States today.

As Michael Harrington, one of the cofounders of DSA, noted in his last *book*, *Socialism: Past and Future*, Gramsci, a fiery would-be revolutionary himself, played an important role in the

1930s in recognizing that in most prosperous western capitalist societies, the majority of working people are not revolutionary, contrary to Marx's predictions from the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Under those circumstances, Gramsci wrote, socialists need to recognize that capitalists combat the spread of socialist ideas not only through military and economic coercion – though these are important – but also through moral and intellectual means, through what Gramsci called the “hegemony” of capitalist values as promoted by the press, the entertainment industry, the established political parties and in many cases the established churches.

To make change under these difficult circumstances, Gramsci argued, socialists must work to create a “counter-hegemony” to capitalism by formulating and defending key moral values, in almost the way that the Catholic Church in Gramsci's Italy had long formulated and popularized conservative and anti-leftist ones. Gramsci died in 1937, long before the Italian Communist Party (the PCI) could put his ideas about “counter-hegemony” into practice. But after World War II had put an end to Italian fascism, the PCI – a tiny minority party before — achieved a surprisingly healthy growth and considerable political influence in Italy by doing just that.

Writing personally, and not necessarily on behalf of everyone in the DC-DSA steering committee, I am hoping that by taking public positions on such obvious moral issues as opposition to food stamp cuts for the poor, DSA at the local level can begin to carve out a small amount of “counter-hegemonic” space for socialist ideas people in the metropolitan area who have the most to lose from the capitalist politics of austerity.

I also think it's obvious that simply fighting for SNAP funding this year can only be a small step that direction. But if our local chapter can follow up our effort on SNAP by continued efforts to promote Rep. John Conyer's “jobs for all bill” and the notion of a financial transaction tax to make further budget austerity unnecessary, I think we have a chance of helping local low-wage workers to Fight the Powers That Be.

And to the extent we can produce and distribute additional literature that tells DC residents things that they actually want to hear, I hope that some of us can find “joy in leafleting,” while helping to build public awareness of DSA and its political positions on more complicated topics.



[Working People Can Win: A review of Sam Pizzigati's "The Rich Don't Always Win"](#)

***The Washington Socialist* <> January 2014**

*By Kurt Stand*

Sisyphus was condemned to forever roll a huge rock to the top of a hill, then, just before reaching the summit, watch it roll down again. A myth from ancient times that speaks to much of what those struggling for economic and social justice experience with victories won rare and all-too-fleeting. The weight of unjust power by the few means that inequality and injustice persist despite the best efforts of so many to bring about change.

Yet it need not be so for it has not always been so – a point well made by Sam Pizzigati in his book, *The Rich Don't Always Win* (Seven Seas Press, 2012). The book's subtitle, "The Forgotten Triumph over Plutocracy that Created the American Middle Class, 1900-1970," serves as a reminder that the summit can be reached. He provides a history that bears repeating in this era of seeming neo-liberal invincibility. Economic policy leading to the destruction of jobs and pensions, the breakdown of communities and the loss of good schools, stemmed from fiscal and tax policies that prioritized ending inflation as opposed to ending unemployment – a direction that has been dominant since Ronald Reagan's triumph in 1980.

Foreshadowed by initiatives undertaken by the Ford and Carter administrations, those policies did not come out of the blue. Rather they were implemented as a reaction by capital to something that had been won – strong unions and social welfare systems that resulted in a steady decline in poverty levels, wage standards that put college education and homeownership within the reach of most. It was a reaction by the wealthy to redistributionist tax policies that limited the gap between the rich and working people and prevented the degree of inequality of income (and therefore power) that undermines any pretense of political democracy. Pizzigati, currently at the Institute for Policy Studies, was long active in the labor movement and worked for the National Education Association for over twenty years, serving as the union's director of publications. At 384 pages, this book may seem too lengthy, but it is well written and the combination of detail, substantive information and anecdotes illustrating past views and struggles, give his narrative a sense of flow that most political and historical writing lacks.

Pizzigati begins his story at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The defeat of the combined Democratic/Populist campaign of William Jennings Bryan left the country firmly in the hands of the handpicked representative of business, William McKinley. The rich and powerful not only had one of their own in the White House; thinly veiled corruption meant that the Senate and the House, most state governments, and the judiciary, were also firmly in their pockets. What followed were a set of measures designed to prevent challenges to the rule of capital such as those that exploded from time to time in the decades after the Civil War. Now protected – by law, by police power, by business monopoly, by banking consolidation, by government action and inaction – such resistance seemed to face dim prospects. As well, direct power brandished by authorities was augmented by a dominant worldview that gave credence to the idea that the wealthy deserved their riches, the poor deserved their poverty. Extremes of inequality of income and political power followed that seemed unstoppable.

But popular movements refused to give in to despair or to stop organizing against the prevailing order. Pizzigati recounts how a mixture of reformers and revolutionaries – muckraker journalists, socialists, moderate and radical unionists, the “settlement” movement amongst the urban poor, farmer and sharecropper activists, wealthy individuals appalled at the selfishness and ignorance of their peers, academics who challenged the prevailing wisdom, and numerous others organized to give voice to the voiceless, strength to the marginalized, and a change in the climate of opinion throughout the country. There was never any formal organizational or political unity among these varied movements. To the contrary, activists had strong differences that were often fiercely argued. Nonetheless, these movements did interact with each other and most never lost sight of the fact that the principal danger facing US society was that of concentrated wealth. Thus, cumulatively, these various organizations and individuals reinforced positive, democratic changes in society.

By 1912 all candidates ran on a reform platform. Theodore Roosevelt led a split within the Republican Party based on a call for more regulation of the economy, forcing the Republican incumbent, William Howard Taft, to campaign on a program that most Democrats, let alone Republicans, would today find hard to accept. Eugene Debs, the Socialist Party candidate, won 6% of the national vote, a figure that would have been higher if the Democratic Party candidate Woodrow Wilson had not stolen large parts of the Socialist platform with calls for social welfare and support for taxes on inherited wealth.

Real change began to take place during the Wilson Administration – changes furthered but also cut short by the experience of World War I. It was a time too that saw reform and radical movements reach new heights of strength and new depths of mutual antagonism. Those who sought to work within the system through support of the war saw the imposition of taxes on wealth, the development of protections for labor – and the expansion of union membership – overcoming business opposition that previously had kept such changes at bay. Those who condemned the war saw in it the growth of an authoritarian corporate state that used national security to suppress dissent, shut down debate of radical alternatives, and promote a militarism necessarily hostile to democratic values.

That prophecy proved true. Violence swept through the land when the war ended, with an anti-union, anti-radical, racist offensive across the country that put reaction back in the saddle, undid most of the reforms that had been won and destroyed labor’s hard won gains. Progressive reform and left-wing radical movements were divided within themselves and among themselves, and the loss of what had been painfully gained led to demoralization. The administrations of Harding, Coolidge and Hoover saw business get what it wanted no matter what the social cost. In consequence, according to figures Pizzigati cites, by 1928, 1% of the population owned 23.9% of the nation’s wealth. Such extreme inequality, in turn, contributed to the stock market crash, ushering in the Great Depression, the worst economic decline in US history.

But the story doesn’t end there. Labor and social reform movements — Socialist, Communist and independent left organizers, middle-class liberals and activists of all stripes — drew on the legacy of protest, resistance and action from proceeding decades and this time achieved more lasting success. Real tax reform did lead to wealth redistribution and a more equitable society, the labor movement did grow in size and strength, regulations with teeth helped limit the power

of banks and created a genuine social welfare safety net. For a little more than a decade, from the early 1930s through the mid-1940s, the rich and powerful were forced to retreat as working people won victories that seemed unimaginable before (as they may seem unimaginable today). Real price controls, controls on profits, and maximum incomes all received genuine consideration as potential policies. Economic planning during World War II created a framework that prevailed until the mid-1970s.

This framework was so long-lasting, Pizzigati explains, because it rested on two critical foundations,

[First] ... a system of sharply graduated progressive tax rates that placed the lion's share of the tax burden on those most able to bear it. The second: a vital trade union presence in workplaces all across the United States. The tax system bankrolled the public services that enabled entry into America's new middle class. The union presence forced employers to share the wealth the post war economy was creating. Together, complementing each other, unions and progressive taxes prevented the accumulation of private fortunes powerful enough to sabotage the nation's new economic order. (p. 13)

These reforms were roughly co-extensive with Franklin Roosevelt's four presidential terms of office, but they can neither be reduced to the fact of his mixture of compassion and pragmatism, nor to Eleanor Roosevelt's more committed vision of social justice. Rather their achievements, the New Deal itself, were the result of millions of men and women understanding that democratic progress is possible and acting on that conviction. True, the power structure did not change during those years, nor did the class struggle disappear. Rather, those were the golden years of capitalism, yet golden years in which working people had more security, more possibility of advancement than ever before. Contradictions still existed, but the social struggles of the 1950s-70s were able to build on that already created foundation.

Published in 1962 and 1963, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, highlighting the continued second-class status of women, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* focusing attention on the emerging environmental dangers posed by our profit making industrial system, Michael Harrington's *The Other America*, pointing out the continued poverty amidst plenty, all took for granted that change could happen, that the "rich don't always win," because they shared a legacy of popular victory that was still in living memory. In a sense this also animated the civil rights movement's battle against racial discrimination, the burgeoning anti-war movement, as well as the labor uprisings of farm workers and public service workers left behind in the previous wave of organizing gains. And so too it was the spirit behind an emerging youth culture and critical literary, arts and music scene that flourished (parallel to the flourishing of the New Left) from the late 1950s through the early 1970s as people felt able to ask more out of life than the existing system offered.

Yet the period of popular gains were to come to an end. Reaction returned with a vengeance and set the tone for the realities we now encounter. Pizzagati points out that in 2007, on the eve of the financial collapse and the Great Recession – with an impact that we live with still – 1% of the country owned 23.5% of the wealth – almost the same as in 1928. The causes for that reversal are legion, involving changes in the business cycle and the introduction of new technologies (with an impact already evident during Kennedy's first term of office) that

undermined former centers of progressive power at a time when the labor movement had become complacent. At first unwilling to confront new challenges, labor was later too weak to do so successfully.

To that we can add that those in power full well understood the connection between popular power and equality – and so when social movements sought to build upon the New Deal by establishing genuine economic as well as social equality for all, business interests drew a line in the sand and were able to use various forms of prejudice, fear and insecurity to build political support for a retreat from the gains working people had made. The political victories won by the Business Roundtable following its 1972 founding mark the success of that strategy. Finally, the expansion of the US imperial order with the onset of the Cold War served as the Achilles heel of US progressivism, creating a framework that undermined democratic rule and opened the door for corporate power to reassert itself more strongly than ever. Such a reassertion of militarism has been a central thread in mainstream politics since that power was shaken by resistance to the Vietnam War.

While understanding the causes of defeat of working people's movements are important, Pizzigati's book makes a powerful argument that it is more important is to understand the basis of the victory that was gained. Today's organizing among Walmart and fast food workers, the demands for more equitable taxing, universal health and guaranteed pensions, for banking regulations and environmental protection, for voting rights and immigration rights, for peace and military spending cuts, for civil liberties and equality in all facets of life may be seen in the not-too-distant future as harbingers of a more just society that is coming. Such movements will focus on different issues and objectives and frame their understanding of society, their short-range and long-range goals differently as well.

Reformers and radicals, movements of the urban poor, of immigrants, of university students, of already organized workers will all necessarily emphasize varying needs and develop varying organizations. There is neither the possibility nor the need to any formal unity amongst these, for strength today can grow out of the diversity of forms of progressive social protest. Nonetheless some unifying centers of ideas and goals are needed – and Pizzigati's work demonstrates the centrality of redistributionist tax policies and a strong trade union movement as the underlying basis for power counter to capital that can make all forms of progress, for a democracy rooted in equality possible.

Sisyphus had one break in his labor – when Orpheus in search of Eurydice played music so beautiful that even death paused. The moment any forever is broken stands as proof that what is need not always be so. Our labor for a better world is not – has not been – endless repetitions of the same; struggle made the world a better place at one time in history and can do so again. Allowing ourselves to hear the music of that possibility will allow us to see – and act – so that what may be, can be.

Resources: Sam Pizzagatti edits a weekly on-line publication: Too Much “A commentary on Excess and Inequality ([toomuchonline.org/](http://toomuchonline.org/)). “Antidotes to Avarice: A 2013 Top Ten,” was posted on December 12.

His articles can be found at [Inequality.org](http://Inequality.org)

Joshua Freeman, *Working-Class New York* (Life and Labor Since World War II) (The New Press, 2000) provides a survey of the same time period as Pizzigati in a localized area. While focusing more evenly on labors gains and losses, the points he and Pizzigati make reinforce each other.