

The Washington Socialist
Articles from the March 2014 Issue
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Editor: Woody Woodruff

[Welcome to the Washington Socialist for March 2014](#)

Wednesday, March 5th, 2014



Welcome to the *Washington Socialist's* March 2014 issue.

Note that our regular membership meeting is Saturday, March 8 at 2:30 p.m. at the Cleveland Park Library branch, 3310 Connecticut Ave. NW, Washington DC 20008. The Cleveland Park metro station is a two-block walk. The steering committee meets at 1 p.m.; all members are welcome to attend that as well.

IN THIS ISSUE:

Bill Mosley [notes](#) Pro-**DC statehood** organizations will hold a candidate forum on March 10 to hold office-seekers' feet to the fire on how they will support the cause of statehood and DC's autonomy from Congress. All candidates on the ballot for Mayor, Delegate to the House of Representatives, Statehood Senator and Statehood Representative will be invited.

The long quest to reduce structural inequality in capitalist society has meant that an idea of a **minimum wage** has deep roots in history. The current struggle to update the wage to meet the stresses of late capitalism is read more easily against the in-depth history of the minimum wage [provided](#) by Kurt Stand.

After World War II, **Italy's Communist Party**(CP) was strong and popular, and the Truman administration worked tirelessly to keep them out of the country's leadership. The party was assimilating the ideas of Antonio Gramsci and showing a post-Stalin sophistication that other European CPs were unable to match. Andy Feeney [reviews](#) a new book on the era that should have — but may lack — some lessons for today's left in our struggle against advanced hegemonic capitalism.

Last month, Metro-DC Democratic Socialists of America made its **endorsements** for the April 1 DC primary election. As Bill Mosley [writes](#), the local made three endorsements in the Democratic primary: Andy Shallal for Mayor, Phil Mendelson for Council Chair, and Eleanor Holmes Norton for Delegate to the House of Representatives.

“Particle Fever” shows how **big science** is increasingly done these days. The movie, about the international, coordinated search for the Higgs Boson by CERN, demonstrates that research is increasingly a social activity, not the realm of the individual lightning-catcher. A [movie review](#) by Dan Adkins.

Just a little over a month into the **Maryland legislature**’s three-month session, some high-priority bills for progressives are hanging on, an outrageous payback to the wealthy appears to be emerging, and some interesting low-profile progressive bills are gaining strength. Low-wage workers are likely to be the beneficiaries of action on the minimum wage, earned sick leave, ex-offender employability and job retraining and realignment as the state adjusts to a drawdown from the era of military adventurism from which we are slowly emerging. But never underestimate the skills of the state’s allegedly deep-blue but quite business-friendly political leadership when the legislature is in session. Woody Woodruff [reports](#) on the scene near the halfway point.

As Bill Mosley [writes](#), last year’s 16-day furlough of federal employees was only the best-known of a series of recent **attacks by Congress against the government workforce**. Unsurprisingly, this is causing an increasing number of current federal workers to seek to leave the government, either through retirement or moving to the private sector, while fewer new graduates see civil service as an attractive career option. And this is part of the conservative plan: A shrunken, demoralized, less-qualified, less-motivated federal workforce will lead to a government even less able to serve the public and act as a check on runaway corporate abuses.

As the **NSA scandal** deepens, countries around the world (friendly and not so) show increasing concern about the security of their Internet communications. Some plan to route their traffic around the US and the big telecom outfits cooperating with the spooks; that could change the game in Net neutrality and access, as well as US primacy in net economics. Dan Adkins has a [follow-up](#) on his recent WS piece.

The skewing of public criminal justice outcomes by politics are well illustrated by the cases of **Mumia Abu-Jamal**, imprisoned for 33 years on dubious evidence of capital murder, and **Angela Davis**, whose radicalism cost her an academic post under then-Gov. Ronald Reagan and, for a time, her freedom. Kurt Stand [examines](#) a recent movie and book on their respective cases and outlines the structural flaws in the system that keeps political radicalism hazardous to one’s freedom, then and now...

As always, we’ve [picked](#) a few good magazine or web articles on the left that you may have missed for “**Good Reads**.” Don’t forget to send us *your* nominees for the April issue anytime before March 25.

[A Long Moment in the Leftwing Sun: On Italian “Eurocommunism” and Its Demise](#)

The Washington Socialist <> **March 2014**

By Andy Feeney

Book review of Lucio Magri's *The Tailor of Ulm: Communism in the Twentieth Century*, translated from the Italian by Patrick Camiller. (London and New York, Verso, 2011), \$49.95 HB.

For a number of leading Western leftists who have pondered the fate of socialism since the Russian Revolution, the performance of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) from the mid-1940s through the early 1980s has been a source of hope and inspiration. For several decades, before its leadership voluntarily dissolved the organization in 1991 to form a new "Democratic Party of the Left" that has since partly disappeared in the shuffle of Italian politics, the PCI seemed to be the subject of a left-wing Cinderella story.

Nearly wiped out by Mussolini's fascism in the 1920s, the party recovered rapidly in numbers and political clout following Mussolini's fall and by 1946 had some 2 million members, making it one of the largest Communist parties in the world at the time. Although (or because) its leaders gradually weaned themselves from uncritical admiration for the Soviet Union over the decades, the PCI by the 1970s was able to command roughly 25 percent of the Italian vote, and in the election of 1984 it received more than 33 percent of the votes cast, giving it the most votes of any Italian party that year.

Thanks in part to its loyal membership base, in part to its flexibility and its willingness to formulate a distinct "Italian road to socialism" that promised to respect electoral politics and democratic rights while pushing for radical economic change, the PCI by the 1970s was considered a leader in what was known as "Eurocommunism," a movement that positioned itself to the left of established social democratic parties yet while embracing a commitment to representative politics as opposed to Soviet-style authoritarianism. Accordingly, the party increasingly attracted the interest of influential leftists, both inside and outside of the international Communist movement.

By the late 1980s, DSA's co-founder Michael Harrington was among those democratically inclined Marxist thinkers who looked to the writings of Antonio Gramsci, a PCI leader who did most of his most influential theoretical work in Mussolini's prison system in the 1930s, for ideas on how strong socialist movements might best survive under basically "non-revolutionary" conditions in the affluent capitalist West.

Today, too, there is a revived interest in Gramsci's ideas within the U.S. left, as DSA activists (among others) look to his writings on socialist strategies of "counter-hegemony" and the gradualist "war of position" (as opposed to an insurrectionary "war of maneuver") for clues on how American progressives can avoid the likely pitfalls of a politics of revolt while also shunning a politics of compromise and accommodation with capitalist austerity politics – a trap that has caught all too many European social democratic parties in recent decades.

There has been considerable interest on the American left, therefore, in Lucio Magri's 2011 book *The Tailor of Ulm*, which despite its full title is largely an account of the PCI's political rise and eventual fall, as seen by a former dissident member of the party.

Magri, at one time somewhat close to the PCI's top leadership, was temporarily expelled in 1968 for joining with several comrades in publishing an independent critical journal, *Il Manifesto*, yet he apparently remained supportive of the PCI and concerned about its fortunes for long afterwards.

In 1991, he reacted very negatively to the party's leadership dropping the word "Communist" from the organization's name and rebranding it as the new Democratic Party of the Left – a change, Magri writes, that led to the resignation of about one-third of the members at the time. In the early 1990s Magri was involved for a least some period in the launching of a "Refoundationist" Communist group that attempted to revive the PCI's old reputation for militancy. And in *The Tailor of Ulm*, he attempts to reconstruct a history of what the PCI did well and what it did less successfully over the decades leading to its dissolution.

DSA members and other American progressives with a real interest in and some prior knowledge of the twists and turns of Marxist and socialist politics in the twentieth century will find much in *The Tailor of Ulm* that is fascinating, or at the very least, memorable.

For example, Magri's view of how the Truman administration contributed to the launching of the Cold War shortly following the end of World War II should trigger lasting second thoughts among reflexively anti-Communist Americans who have grown up believing that Stalin's ambitions in Eastern Europe were primarily responsible for the dramatic break between the major capitalist democracies and a Stalinist USSR that had contributed some 20 million lives and suffered huge losses in agricultural and industrial productivity to help the Allies win the war against Nazi Germany.

However ruthless Stalin was capable of being, Magri, argues, the Soviet Union in 1946 was still suffering heavily from the war's devastation and was simply incapable of imposing the kind of "Iron Curtain" on Eastern Europe that Churchill complained of in a famous 1947 speech that is generally seen as an opening salvo in the Cold War. By 1948 Stalin had responded to the threat of western aggression by liquidating fledgling coalition governments in Eastern Europe, often quite brutally, and in this way caused Soviet foreign policy to match Churchill's nasty stereotype, Magri concludes. But blame for more than 30 years of nuclear-inspired tensions between the West and the Soviet bloc did not originate with Stalin. Even for anti-Communist Americans, that's one argument in this book that is worth remembering.

Similarly, in his account of Italian politics in the 1950s, Magri offers an interesting slant on the role that the U.S. played in repeated efforts to pressure the Italian government to ban the PCI at the time, in defiance of Italy's own postwar constitution. He attributes the PCI's surprising persistence and growth in spite of such pressures largely to the paradoxical effects of a rapid industrialization of the previously backward Italian economy that was essentially carried out by rather ruthless and predatory Italian capitalists, who themselves benefited from the U.S.-backed Marshall Plan.

Yet what *The Tailor of Ulm* mostly does not provide, unfortunately, is anything resembling a left-wing organizer's recipe book that DSA activists and other progressives might draw on in hopes of duplicating in the United States some of the successes that the PCI won in

Italy. Perhaps there are such overwhelming differences between the backward but rapidly modernizing Italian economy in the 1950s and the rich but sluggish U.S. economy today that make such a left-wing cookbook impossible; Magri's analysis suggests that there probably are. Yet it would have been intriguing if he provided more tactical details on how the PCI won and maintained its once promising position in Italian politics and the global Communist movement, and this book, unfortunately, is mostly lacking in them.

For example, the PCI under Fascist repression in the 1930s dwindled in size to fewer than 20,000 members, yet between 1943 when an armed Italian resistance began against the remnants of Fascism in the German-occupied north of the country and the reconstruction of Italy in 1946, card-carrying PCI members grew rapidly to 100 times that number. The PCI also won a huge and influential presence in the Italian trade unions by this time, one it had mostly not enjoyed in the 1920s.

Well, apart from the participation of brave and disciplined PCI members in the resistance, how was this seeming miracle accomplished? Magri mostly doesn't say.

Again, Magri states near the start of his history that the PCI's Palmiro Togliatti led the party to success largely by drawing on Gramsci's political theories. Yet almost nowhere in *Tailor of Ulm* does Magri state just which of those theories were most important or how exactly the PCI tried to put them into practice.

Similarly, the PCI by the late 1970s was already becoming famous for electing mayors and city council members to big industrial towns in the north of Italy and running municipal governments that were remarkably honest and effective, especially compared with the ruling Christian Democratic Party's record for scandalous corruption (and sometimes collaboration with the Mafia) elsewhere in the country.

How did the PCI's electoral politics work? Why were its politicians so much more honest (on average) than the Christian Democratic and sometimes the Socialist opposition? How, too, was the PCI able to command more than a third of the national vote in the mid-1980s, even though the prestige of Communism was declining sharply in other parts of Europe by this time? Again, Magri offers some tantalizing hints, but doesn't really say.

For these reasons, *The Tailor of Ulm* is probably not a book for younger socialist readers with an activist bent, who are looking for helpful organizing tips from a foreign socialist party that was famous in its day for mass support and successful mobilizations. For readers with an abiding interest in the history of Marxist movements and a sense of how "Eurocommunism" gradually emerged from a once seemingly monolithic Third International, however, this is a book that may well be worth its \$60 price.

For DSA readers who are interested in getting an introduction to Gramsci's theories, meanwhile, Verso has another recent anthology, with an introduction by the late Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm, sampling Gramsci's early writings as a firebrand leader of factory occupations in Turin, as well as some key passages from his *Prison Notebooks* composed in the 1930s.

[An Update on Maryland's Legislature](#)

***The Washington Socialist* <> March 2014**

By Woody Woodruff

Just a little over a month into the Maryland legislature's three-month session, some high-priority bills for progressives are hanging on, an outrageous payback to the wealthy appears to be emerging, and some interesting low-profile progressive bills are gaining strength. Low-wage workers are likely to be the beneficiaries of action on the minimum wage, earned sick leave, ex-offender employability and job retraining and realignment as the state adjusts to a drawdown from the era of military adventurism from which we are slowly emerging. But never underestimate the skills of the state's allegedly deep-blue but quite business-friendly political leadership when the legislature is in session.

MINIMUM WAGE The bills in the House and Senate were filed by the respective chamber leaders on behalf of Gov. Martin O'Malley, who wants the popular measure to be a marker of his last year in office. He told a rally: "If it [the \$7.25/hr minimum wage] had kept pace with worker productivity, it would be \$20 an hour right now. If it had kept pace with the earnings of Ronald Reagan's top 1 percent, it would be \$273."

[The Sun reported Feb. 17](#) that "By a wide margin, Maryland voters want to raise the state's minimum wage to \$10.10 an hour, a poll conducted for The Baltimore Sun shows. ... Statewide, 69 percent of voters surveyed said they back a proposal now being debated in the General Assembly to increase Maryland's minimum wage from the current federal level of \$7.25 an hour to \$10.10 by 2016." That roughly matches the 71 percent national positive view of a minimum wage increase shown in most recent polls.

The two "cross-filed" bills (SB 331 and HB 295) have each had crowded and grueling hearings in crucial committees. US Rep. Elijah Cummings was a top supporter Feb. 17 at the [Senate Finance Committee](#), where business owners threatened closures of two, three, many Wendy's if it passes. GMU economist Stephen Fuller, a favorite of business, predicted 6000 jobs lost but Economic Policy Institute's David Cooper argued that most data showed little long-term job losses historically despite short-term adjustment bumps.

HB 295's hearing saw over 100 speakers at the Feb. 11 House Economic Matters Committee meeting, noted chair Dereck Davis. Aisha Braveboy, a Prince George's delegate, testified about the poor nutrition available to minimum wage workers and the damage to their children. "They are not empowered economically."

With the support of Senate leader Mike Miller and House speaker Mike Busch, the main thrust of the wage hike will probably pass, but many ambushes and qualifiers remain.

ESTATE TAX BREAK: As if to acknowledge that the impetus behind the minimum wage would require some payback to big business (never far from their hearts), Busch and Miller have sponsored bills “to increase the Maryland estate tax exemption from the current level of \$1 million to the federal level of \$5.34 million.” That would allow more large estates to escape paying a fair share and solve what the business right that lurks inside Maryland’s ostensible left to solve what they seem to feel is a millionaire drain. By that notion, the really rich are relocating official residences in other, better states to die.

In [a thorough takedown of the maneuver](#) – which has rounded up some ordinarily quite progressive sponsors – Progressive Maryland points out the cost to state revenues of this sneaky move.

[The Sun reported Feb. 2](#) that “Warren Deschenaux, the legislature’s chief policy analyst, isn’t convinced. The man whose job it is to throw cold water on many legislative tax-cutting ideas said bringing the exemption to the federal level would cost \$80 million to \$90 million a year in revenue when fully implemented” with little likelihood that revenue would be made up elsewhere. Another Sun interviewee pointed out that real tax relief, costing about the same in revenue, would be expanding the state’s earned income tax credit.

EARNED SAFE AND SICK LEAVE BILL The proposal to give over 700,000 Marylanders a chance to care for sick children or their own ills without getting fired or (further) impoverished was reintroduced by sponsor Tom Olszewski. At the House hearing Feb. 18 Olszewski outlined changes from last year that he said answered [some of the businesses’ concerns that sank it before](#) (he withdrew the 2013 version after an unfavorable committee report, and the Senate bill died in committee without action). They included exempting employers with fewer than 10 employees and the exclusion of some part-time and seasonal employees. The core proposal – that employees can incrementally earn paid leave they can use when they or a family member are sick – remains. The dreaded “fiscal note” that accompanies the revised bill still points out “significant” small business effects, enforcement costs to the state and increased costs to the hall of shame of local governments that don’t offer paid leave now. Work by the Institute for Women’s Policy Research is offered in the fiscal note to bolster the contention that additional costs to businesses for providing leave are essentially offset by factors of increased productivity and reduced turnover. The [Job Opportunities Task Force](#) of Baltimore website Feb. 24 said both House (HB968) and Senate (SB743) versions were awaiting a committee vote.

MARYLAND SECOND CHANCE ACT Companion bills that would allow nonviolent ex-offenders’ records to be shielded for purposes of employment were introduced in the Senate [SB 1056](#) by Montgomery Sen. Jamie Raskin and the House [HB 1166](#) by Baltimore City’s Curt Anderson. As the [Job Opportunities Task Force](#) points out, “Jobs are the key to our economic recovery, and the ability to secure a job is crucial to the successful reentry of those returning to society from prison.”

Research shows that recidivism risks are highest in the first 3-5 years following incarceration. Given that recidivism declines steadily over time, the proposed legislation would make certain nonviolent misdemeanor convictions eligible for shielding after a waiting period. Law

enforcement will continue to have access to the shielded records. The bills are awaiting committee hearings in March.

COMMISSION ON MARYLAND'S FUTURE

A healthy and savvy lobbying effort is getting considerable legislative attention to [a proposed commission](#) that would represent a soft industrial policy for a postwar Maryland. In the words of Miriam Pemberton of IPS, to “get to work on a plan to align our economic strategy with a smaller defense market.”

SB 493 would represent also an economic conversion project, aiming at turning the state's heavy dependence on \$36 billion annually in military spending toward R&D and worker training in innovative and renewable energy technologies.

Pemberton's testimony before the Senate Finance Committee Feb. 18 noted: “The commission would not enforce change on any specific businesses. Rather it would examine ways the state's existing and emerging competitive advantages can be linked to the needs of communities, workers and businesses facing this historic transition. It will outline a general diversification plan, identifying best practices and most useful ways states can facilitate the transition. It will develop a plan for taking advantage of existing federal programs available for this purpose.

Economic development specialists agree that advanced planning is critical to the success of an economic transition strategy.”

Bob Stewart, executive director of Local 1994 MCGEO, the public employees' union, stressed that early action on job training was critical to staying ahead of the curve.

Pemberton and Fund Our Communities leader Jean Athey were joined in testimony and support by other union representatives, civil rights organizations and Montgomery County's Chamber of Commerce.

The project was developed by a coalition led by Fund Our Communities, a Peace Action affiliate that pushes for conversion of military to social spending. comprising those groups and others and drafted by lead Senate sponsors Richard Madaleno and Roger Manno. The Senate version gained the support of Allan Kittleman, GOP leader. HB 738, the House counterpart, has 30 sponsors including lead sponsor Talmadge Branch of Baltimore City, the majority whip.

To a state that had been hoping to build a rep as a “Silicon Valley East” around the bandits who are clustering on the NSA's part of the map, the idea of a little planning might have appeal. Maryland has been almost terminally embarrassed by a miserable IT-procurement experience with its state Affordable Care Act website.

The House version faced a hearing Feb. 26 before that graveyard of good ideas, the House Economic Matters Committee. But the low initial cost of such a study panel should get it through those straits.

[DC Statehood Advocates to Hold Candidate Forum on March 10](#)

***The Washington Socialist* <> March 2014**

By Bill Mosley

Organizations advocating statehood for the District of Columbia will hold a forum for DC candidates for mayor, delegate to the House of Representatives, US (shadow) senator and US (shadow) representative on Monday, March 10.

The forum, which will take place from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. at Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library, is sponsored by the Stand Up! For Democracy in DC Coalition and the DC Statehood Coalition, with MLK Library co-sponsoring the event.

The forum will focus on what the candidates would do to advance the cause of DC statehood and help give the District greater autonomy from Congress. Candidates from all parties appearing on the April 1 primary ballot are being invited to participate. Members of the public will be able to question the candidates.

The library is located at 901 G St. NW at the Gallery Place Metro stop.

For information, contact billmosley@comcast.net.

[Film Review of Particle Fever](#)

***The Washington Socialist* <> March 2014**

By Dan Adkins

Particle Fever (99 minutes): A Film review

Particle Fever is a celebration of discovery of the Higgs Boson particle and a documentary of the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN) quest to find it using the Large Hadron Collider (LHC). The film follows six scientists during the launch of the collider, its problems, and the scientific search.

The LHC is one of the most complex machines humans have ever made. The research effort includes 10,000 scientists from over 100 countries, including countries in conflict with each other. The research data is processed in computers all around the globe. Although the Defense Advanced Research Project Agency (DARPA) created the internet protocols, CERN created the World Wide Web interface to share research communications.

In the past, major breakthroughs in science and technology have been made by individuals or groups. This film shows that major breakthroughs now are based on world-wide collaborations by scientists, technicians, and nations. The idea that great men make history is being replaced by the reality of the social means of research.

The physics is not fully explained and the math is beyond most of us anyway. Yet one does get the gist of the scientific method and the division between the theorists and the experiential scientists who are the only one who can validate the theories. The documentary is edited so that it feels like a drama and the soundtrack adds to the suspense.

Among the film's comments was that it is true that 85% of the scientists are male. Among the women scientists there is a saying that "The odds are good, but the goods are odd."

The film will be available in many theaters March 5th.

Check out the trailer: <http://trailers.apple.com/trailers/independent/particlefever/>

[GOOD READS FOR MARCH 2014](#)

***The Washington Socialist* <> March 2014**

Recent, accessible online magazine and journal articles in our political frame that caught our eye and that you might have missed...

Alyssa Battistoni's "Alive in the Sunshine," from *Jacobin*, was cited here a few months ago. She continues to weave environmentalism and radical futurism provocatively. Here's another from her and *Jacobin*: <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/01/toward-cyborg-socialism/>

Howard Schneider covers world economic policy for the *Washington Post* and does well at it, shoring up the quality of that flagging enterprise. Here, speaking of provocative headlines, is news of a welcome shift in IMF policy about the relationship between growth and redistribution: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2014/02/26/communists-have-seized-the-imf/>

[From Andy Feeney] In the mainstream U.S. media and the business press, it's common these days to read glowing accounts of how basically pro-market economic reforms in India have been improving lives and creating new wealth since the country was opened up more to global market forces in the 1990s. But according to a feature story in the Feb. 22 New York Times, this economic revolution seems to be literally killing many of India's poorer farmers. Since 1995, some 290,000 Indian farmers have committed suicide, the Times reports, and while the government doesn't have reliable statistics on what motivated these suicides, anecdotal evidence

suggests many farmers have taken out loans at ruinously high interest rates from local money lenders, in hopes of competing more effectively in a more open market. When their crops fail or the borrowers can't compete as effectively as they had planned, pressures from the money lenders for repayment are causing significant numbers of farmers to kill themselves.

http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/23/world/asia/after-farmers-commit-suicide-debts-fall-on-families-in-india.html?_r=0

[from Andy Feeney] Coming Soon: Robotic, Self-Driving Slot Cars To Boost Electronics Revolution in the Toy Biz

A group of brilliant Ph.D's in San Francisco have designed the world's first self-driving, quasi-robotic toy race cars, according to USA Today reporter Marco della Cava. Boris Sofman, the leader of a group of high-tech engineers working at the 2007 start-up firm Anki, has succeeded with his colleagues in taking toy race cars out of the traditional "slot car" setting and equipping each toy racer with a 50-megahertz processor, giving these toys "more power than a late '80s computer."

The resulting product, a toy that its inventors call "Drive," is priced at around \$200 and consists of a "monstrously fiendish sports care ... imbued with the ability to sense its competitors and plot its own race" while still responding to commands from each race car owner's iPhone.

According to USA Today, "Drive is merely Anki's fun-filled initial foray into consumer robotics." The feature article notes that the "mere mention of robots tends to conjure fears, from manufacturing jobs vanishing to self-driving cars glitching with tragic results," but adds that Sofman, the son of a Russian immigrant father who works for a large telecomm company, "just smiles" at such worries.

"Think of the first time people were told to get in an airplane," Sofman told reporter della Cava. "There are psychological stepping stones, but we'll get over them." Some observers, the USA Today article reports, "feel confident Sofman and his team will lead us over that psychological hurdle and into peaceful coexistence with autonomous devices."

<http://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/2014/02/25/change-agents-boris-sofman-anki-robotics/5437293/>

Updated March 4 to add: Tom Edsall has a thorough tour of the recently elaborated question: what's the relationship between economic inequality and economic growth? Is there an "optimal level of inequality"? This, of course, is asked in a capitalist system. ...

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/05/opinion/edsall-just-right-inequality.html?hp&rref=opinion>

We know there are more good reads out there. Send us yours! <WS>

[History of the Movement for a Minimum Wage](#)

***The Washington Socialist* <> March 2014**

By Kurt Stand

“It is but equity...that they who feed, clothe and lodge the whole body of the people, should have such a share of the produce of their own labor as to be themselves tolerably well fed, clothed and lodged.”-*Adam Smith, The Wealth of Nations, 1776*

At the origins of the capitalist system, the hope was that the wealth generated by the free market would lift all. This was not to be. In a system that recognizes no limits, unions and social legislation became necessary in order to provide a floor below which living standards would not fall. It was out of this recognition that the movement for a minimum wage emerged.

ONE

During one of his fireside chats on the radio in 1937, President Franklin D. Roosevelt initiated the legislative campaign for the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) – the culminating New Deal legislation – with the remark that,

“A self-supporting and self-respecting democracy can plead no justification for the existence of child labor, no economic reason for chiseling on workers’ wages or stretching workers’ hours.”

Later that year, when the Bill was introduced in Congress, he explained the economic logic that made its passage so important for society as a whole, society still mired in the Great Depression,

“The exploitation of child labor and the undercutting of wages and the stretching of the hours of the poorest paid workers in periods of business recession had a serious effect on buying power ... What does the country ultimately gain if we encourage businessmen to enlarge the capacity of American industry to produce unless we see to it that the income of our working population actually expands sufficiently to create markets to absorb that increased production?”

These comments are important to keep in mind today as we campaign for the increased minimum wage for in them are the two threads that have been constants in the efforts to raise the minimum wage – the moral argument that it is undemocratic and unjust to condemn people to poverty and the economic argument that increasing wages for those with the least benefits all, including business, by increasing purchasing power and thereby expanding markets and reviving the economy.

Thus the need for a minimum wage – and for a minimum wage that can help lift working people out of poverty – is not an isolated act, nor an act of charity, rather it is rooted in the needs of the vast majority. This broader understanding was inherent in FSLA from its inception, for the Act combined increasing wages with cutting hours (minimum wage, maximum hours), for the first

time establishing a 40-hour week. And the legislation, for the first time, made child labor illegal in the United States.

TWO

But success did not come quickly or easily; in fact the legislation itself was the culmination of many decades of struggle. From the earliest days of the workers movement demands were put forward to end poverty wages, for a limitation on work hours and a ban on child labor. These, however, ran aground, in part due to a Supreme Court ruling in the 1880s with implications with which we must still live – the decision that the 14th Amendment making African American citizens would be a perfect vehicle to twist around and turn corporations into people. If today that interpretation means that corporations can have free speech, then it meant that they were entitled to “due process,” under the 5th amendment – therefore, compelling a company to pay workers a minimum wage, compelling business to reduce labor from 12 or 14 hours a day, compelling an employer to only hire adults, was considered a denial of liberty akin to taking someone’s property.

Thus the movement focused in the early parts of the 20th century on a minimum wage for women workers because women as a “protected,” class might escape that usage of the constitution. And, more important, it would prove of direct benefit to women employed in sweatshops, textile mills, garment factories, and other industries where their “protected” status did not prevent them from being ruthlessly exploited. Campaigning began in earnest around 1910 by middle-class reformers (without much labor support, though it was backed by the Women’s Trade Union League) and was joined to a campaign against child labor (another “protected” group left unprotected from the ravages of poverty).

Between 1912 and 1919, 15 states, Washington DC and Puerto Rico enacted minimum wage statutes with the explicit object of enabling women to earn a “living wage.” Men were excluded not only because it was thought more possible to uphold constitutional scrutiny as a protective act for women but also because the AFL craft unions were absolutely opposed to a minimum wage for men (fearing it would become a maximum wage and wanting to keep government out of collective bargaining). The resulting minimums were just enough to get by on, and – set as flat rates — unable to keep up with inflation.

Even such progress was halted when Children’s Hospital in Washington DC (the predecessor of the one today in Brookland; a plaque stands near Metro Center indicating where it once stood) decided that it was paying its female workforce too much money. In 1923, the Supreme Court in *Adkins v. Children’s Hospital* ruled in the hospital’s favor, declaring all minimum wage laws unconstitutional. Then, as now, a conservative court claimed that it was preserving states’ rights – even though, it acted to invalidate state law (no different than what happens with campaign finance reform). Then, as now, it took the position that any interference with the “free market” would cause economic ruin and that raising the pay for the poorest would only cause higher unemployment. Any government action to defend economic and social justice was judged

dictatorial – thus any employer could pay as little as it could get away with, force workers to work as many hours as it demanded, and employ children at any age, no matter how young.

Thereafter, one state after the other abolished their labor protections. By the end of the decade the Progressive era law only survived in Massachusetts, and there it was ineffective and unenforced. Harvard University took the first step to undoing the state minimum wage by firing all its women employees and replacing them with men whom they paid even less. Soon most employers simply stopped complying with the law.

But the end of 1929 saw the beginning of the Depression, the collapse of business and finance, the rise of unemployment to over a quarter of the workforce. Developments all of which gave the lie to arguments that unrestricted capitalism was economically sound and in the public interest. In the outburst of social activism that followed, a new campaign was underway. The minimum wage fight was led by those most active in “settlement house work” – that is amongst the urban poor, especially women. Frances Perkins, whose name today adorns the Department of Labor, was amongst them. She was the first woman ever to serve as a cabinet member, and she became the longest serving of any cabinet member, staying with FDR throughout his Administration. Her decision to accept the post of Secretary of Labor, however, was dependent on FDR’s commitment to see minimum wage legislation through to its passage.

Also involved were progressive, social-minded unionists – the industrial unions grouped in the CIO rejected the AFL’s position (most craft unions opposed almost all New Deal social legislation until World War II) and fought for universal provisions/standards for health, pensions, work hours, wages. A leader in the minimum wage movement was Sidney Hillman of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union. For a union such as the ACW, representing workers in a low-wage industry, negotiating with multiple employers, a wage floor was needed not only as a good in and of itself; it was also a means to prevent non-union employers from undercutting unionized employers by paying substandard wages. It was for this reason that a number of small northern manufacturers concerned about runaway shops – in those days going to the segregated, lynch mob dominated South — supported the minimum wage too. Many large corporations, however, fearful of the wave of activism that was expanding union strength opposed New Deal social legislation as “creeping socialism,” and argued that the “market” alone should dictate wages.

The pre-civil rights South was where reaction was strongest, its elite leaders identifying Southern economic health with the region’s ability to pay low wage. Denying African Americans the franchise made it a one-party region and gave Southern representatives disproportionate power in Congress. Power they used to fight any federal measure that implied equal treatment of black and white, thus at legislation aimed at alleviating poverty. Typical was the comment by South Carolina Senator Ed Smith:

“Any man on this floor who has sense enough to read the English language knows that the main object of this bill is, by human legislation, to overcome the splendid gift of God to the South.”

Translated into English, that meant defending the South’s comparative advantage of forcing workers to live on substandard wages – forcing workers, black and white to live on wages below

those paid in the North. But the minimum wage had its supporters in that region too, as black and white sharecroppers, tenant farmers, steel workers, and textile workers organized, organizing that encouraged a small number of pro-New Deal political leaders to step forward. Outstanding amongst those in 1937 was a newly elected Florida Congressman who some may recall as being, many years later, a leading defender of Social Security when Ronald Reagan sought to undo it – Claude Pepper.

THREE

It was that combination of popular activism, civic engagement and sympathetic government that helped bring a change of heart — or a change of mind when seeing the writing on the wall, know social change was unstoppable — to the then extremely conservative Supreme Court. In 1937, the Court reversed its 1923 decision and in *West Coast Hotel v. Parrish* upheld the right of the State of Washington to pass minimum wage legislation – arguing that a law which benefits the community as a whole did not violate the 14th Amendment. This opened up the door for the FLSA – and it opened equally for all subsequent New Deal social legislation creating the safety net we are now fighting to preserve. Because the political climate in the United States has turned since Reagan’s election in 1980, with his and his successor’s attacks on social welfare, with their attempt to return to the unrestricted capitalism of the 1920s that gave us the Depression, today’s Supreme Court has become a “worthy” successor to prior Courts that protected the rights of property at the expense of popular rights. Therefore it is worthwhile to recall today the language of the *West Coast Hotel v. Parrish* decision:

“Liberty safeguarded in law ... requires ... protection ... against the evils which menace the health, safety, morals and welfare of the people.”

“The legislature was entitled to adopt measures to reduce the evils of the ‘sweating system,’ the exploiting of workers at wages so low as to be insufficient to meet the bare cost of living ... The legislature had the right to consider that its minimum wage requirements would be an important aid in carrying out its policy of protection.

...

“There is an additional and compelling consideration which recent economic experience has brought into a strong light. The exploitation of a class of workers who are in an unequal position with respect to bargaining power and are thus relatively defenseless against the denial of living wage is not only detrimental to their health and well being but casts a direct burden for their support upon the community. What these workers lose in wages the taxpayers are called upon to pay. The bare cost of living must be met.”

Key to this language, which also facilitated subsequent civil rights/Great Society legislation, was the assertion that ***“regulation which is reasonable in relation to its subject and is adopted in the interests of the community,”*** could not be construed as a violation of the 5th and 14th amendment.

Recent Supreme Courts have ignored that decision, conservative majorities have issued rulings which have step by-step overturned any standard that speaks to the interest of the community, thus undoing the legal edifice for any social welfare measures. The argument that minimum wage hurts small business and leads to higher unemployment – however specious it may be – is language which challenges any consensus as to what is “in the interests of the community.”

FOUR

Attacks limited what Roosevelt and progressives/liberals in Congress could do; the Bill that eventually passed was far from perfect – it allowed employers two (or more) years to reach the new standards of a 40 cent minimum, 40 hour maximum. Child labor was prohibited in “interstate commerce,” but numerous exemptions and differentials were allowed. ***The importance of the FSLA, however, lay not in the immediate gains but in the official recognition that working conditions and standard of living were no longer only questions between employer and employee – they were issues for society at large.***

And even though weak, it meant immediate pay raises for millions. In 1937, 12 million workers in industries affecting interstate commerce earned less than 40 cents per hour – no southern textile worker earned that much, neither did New England shoe workers. Moreover, it opened up the possibility for changes in the years ahead. After World War II the ban on child labor was vastly extended. Many wage/hour exemptions were eliminated through the years too, especially with the law’s expansion in 1961 when coverage was extended to large retail and service enterprises, local transit, construction and gas service stations. In 1966, FLSA’s protection was brought to state and local government employees, to hospitals, nursing homes, schools, laundries, large hotels, motels, restaurants, farms. Subsequent amendments added federal, state and local government workers who had remained excluded and certain categories of domestic workers.

Minimum wage pay has generally been inadequate to fully meet the needs of a full-time worker with a family. Pressure, largely from organized labor, has led to the amount being raised more than 20 times – \$1 per hour first being attained in 1955. The real minimum wage – adjusted for inflation – reached its highest point in 1968. Those increases also helped maintain a connection between productivity levels and economic growth, between 1947-1973, productivity rose by 104%, the minimum wage rose by 101%. Then came Nixon, Reagan, Bush Sr. and Jr. – the result: between 1973 and 2004, productivity rose by 78%, the minimum wage fell by 24% (non-supervisory workers wages fell by 11% during that period). Which brings us to the present and today’s initiatives in Maryland, Washington DC, federally.

FIVE

Ultimately the importance of the minimum wage is as one of many means needed to combat rampant poverty in our society. The following quotes by Martin Luther King and by Nelson Mandela serve as a reminder that no measure of social justice should be weakened or left unmoved until all have a decent standard of living, until substantive equality is understood as a needed goal in and of itself.

Just a few days prior to his assassination in 1968, Martin Luther King told workers in Memphis, Tennessee,

“It is criminal to have people working on a full-time basis ... getting part-time income. We are tired of working our hands off and laboring every day and not even making a wage adequate with daily basic necessities of life.”

While in London in 2005, Nelson Mandela attended an anti-poverty rally and said to those gathered there,

“Massive poverty and obscene inequality are such terrible scourges of our times – times in which the world boasts breathtaking advances in science, technology, industry and wealth accumulation – they have to rank alongside slavery and apartheid as social evils.

“Like slavery and apartheid, poverty is not natural. It is man-made and it can be overcome and eradicated by the actions of human beings.

“And overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity, It is an act of justice, It is the protection of a fundamental human right, the right to dignity and a decent life.”

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[METRO-DC DSA ENDORSES SHALLAL, MENDELSON, NORTON](#)

***The Washington Socialist* <> March 2014**

By Bill Mosley

Metro-DC Democratic Socialists of America, at its February 11 membership meeting, endorsed Andy Shallal in the April 1 Democratic primary election for D.C. mayor. The organization also endorsed the re-election bids of Phil Mendelson for chairman of the D.C. council and Eleanor Holmes Norton for D.C. delegate to the House of Representatives. It made no endorsements in other primary races.

Members supporting the endorsement of Shallal cited his outreach to the progressive community and his support of social and economic justice, as shown in his campaign platform. Shallal's fair treatment of his employees as a business owner also was a factor in the endorsement, as was his

willingness to host events by progressive organizations at his Busboys and Poets chain of restaurants.

The endorsement of Mendelson was based on his support for labor and progressive causes over a long career as an at-large councilmember and council chair. Norton was cited for her support of progressive causes in Congress and her effective advocacy of the District despite not having a vote on the House floor.

Because of the closely contested nature of the mayor's race, Metro-DC DSA will focus its efforts on supporting Shallal. Members interested in helping DSA support Shallal should contact Bill Mosley at billmosley@comcast.net.

[Response to NSA's Impacts on the Economy Expand](#)

***The Washington Socialist* <> March 2014**

By Dan Adkins

News continues to mount that the NSA's spying is leading to increased challenges to U.S. and U.S. corporate leadership in the internet.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel stated that she plans discussions with France about building up European communication networks to avoid snooping by the NSA. She disapproves of companies like Facebook and Google storing data in countries with less-secure services while doing business with more secure European countries. The European network will avoid sending e-mail across the Atlantic unnecessarily and thus avoiding NSA. France is agreeing to the chancellor's proposals.

Some Europeans are pushing for U.S. influence over internet leadership to be lessened and shared, although the push is not to place them under U.N. control which could lead to less internet freedom, given the influence of less-democratic countries.

NSA received information from the Australian intelligence service scanning a U.S. law firm representing Indonesia in a trade dispute. It is not clear how that information was used.

Another criticism is that journalists may now find it increasingly difficult-to-impossible to keep sources secret.

New products are emerging from secure cell phones, apps that route your web searches through other countries, and techniques to keep your phone and credit cards secure in public (aluminum foil in your wallet).

A contributing factor to government leaks is the intelligence conglomerate's response to 9-11 failures. The failure to stop 9-11 was partly due to the lack of intelligence sharing between agencies. The failure was to be solved by more sharing and increased surveillance. It seems that the extreme surveillance efforts may have appalled some new employees.

A political repercussion to NSA's unwelcome visibility may be that Silicon Valley companies and billionaires are funding a challenge to a Democratic Congressman incumbent who supports the industry and poor people. The aim is replace him with another Democrat more focused with the valley's industry needs. Traditionally Silicon Valley has been more hands-off with Washington, but that has changed.

[Thirty-three Years and Counting Mumia Abu-Jamal and the Struggle for Freedom](#)

***The Washington Socialist* <> March 2014**

by Kurt Stand

The Case

Thirty-three years is a long-time in anyone's life: children grow, parents pass; stores open and close; new technologies appear while older ones vanish. Thirty-three years is a period of time that changes neighborhoods and cities, social changes unnoticeable at the onset can create "new normals" that seem to have always been in place. To say that 33 years is a third of a life is optimistic, most of us will not be around to celebrate a 99th birthday. Thirty-three years is the length of time that Mumia Abu-Jamal has been behind bars.

On January 29th, the Institute for Policy Studies showed the film *Justice on Trial: The Case of Mumia Abu-Jamal* – a documentary that tells the circumstances that led to a fatal shooting of Philadelphia police officer Daniel Faulkner in 1981 and of the wounding, arrest, conviction and imprisonment of Mumia Abu-Jamal. And it tells of his struggle for freedom. That struggle has taken place against the backdrop of a determined effort by Faulkner's widow, members of the Philadelphia police department and members of the Pennsylvania political establishment to see Mumia executed – a threat that only ended in 2010 (as the film was being made) when a court ruling definitively took him off death row, but did not reverse his conviction. Instead, he remains in a state prison, serving a life sentence.

Neither Mumia's arrest – and the divide between those who want him free and those who want him dead — can be understood in isolation from our recent past; a past the film attempts to depict. This begins with the radicalization of the Black freedom movement in the late 1960s as the civil rights movement ran into an impassable wall when it attempted to join economic equality with the gains being made toward legal equality. The rampant poverty and police violence that prevailed in the black community made the need for substantive equality especially clear in urban ghettos. Out of those circumstances, the Black Panther Party emerged and found a base of support by attempting to fuse community self-defense with neighborhood programs to

provide food, health care and education to those who were being denied. It was a combination that inspired fear and hatred amongst those in power, those who were used to having their commands obeyed – a hatred Mumia experienced first hand in his early teens when participating in a peaceful protest by black students violently attacked by police. Anger at injustice and hope that a better alternative future was possible led him to join the Panthers. But their existence was brief as state-sanctioned repression destroyed the organization from within and without. Such repression was particularly fierce in Philadelphia where the police department epitomized a belief in order over law, power over justice.

Riding the crest of the wave was Frank Rizzo, police chief who was later elected Mayor based on his appeal to racist fear amongst white working people who saw their world in decline and didn't know where else to point their finger. And it was based on the supposed success of his “toughness” and brutal methods. Rizzo was amongst those who epitomized the return of the right, a pattern replicated throughout the country and nationally with Ronald Reagan's election as President in 1980. Reagan's victory meant the demise of the hopes that gave birth to civil rights and peace movements, of labor insurgencies and movements of the urban poor, of the hopes of the New Left and of aspirations for a revolutionary change. Many of those willing to give-in decided to advocate a more piecemeal process of reform, while others sought to begin radical change by a turn inward — the path taken in Philadelphia's black community by Operation Move. Mumia was attracted to the movement and, already a journalist, reported on its growth and activities and on the violent attack which left many of its members dead or in prison, with a city block bombed under orders by local government.

The Context

Membership in the Panthers and sympathy with Move were sufficient reason for Philadelphia's police to hate Mumia, that he was a journalist able and willing to expose official corruption was reason all the more. A symbol of what they hated, his presence when Faulkner was shot was sufficient by itself to set in motion a chain of events that could not be stopped. The film documents judicial bias, evidence tampering (and ignoring evidence discovered), jury selection racism as part of a process of a prejudicial process that marked every step of the process through to Mumia's trial. His lawyers have presented evidence of bias and misconduct during his repeated appeals, but none of that has mattered in a criminal justice system designed to keep appeals from going forward rather than resolve them in the interest of justice.

Moreover details mattered little for Mumia was convicted more as a symbol than as an individual. That transference is made obvious by the fury with which Faulkner's widow and the local police, made vivid on screen, reject any evidence that the wrong man may have been convicted. Logic might indicate the opposite, as the aggrieved party should want – more than anything else – to punish the person who “did it,” and thus be absolutely positive that the person convicted is in fact the guilty party. But Mumia fit the bill as to all they oppose and thus his finding of guilt is far more important than any concern for the truth. And so he remains in prison.

He remains there in part because his legal options are narrow, narrow because of changes in defendant rights that have been steadily narrowed from Richard Nixon's days in office. That narrowing occurred as a response by the government to the success of many to use the court system in the 1960s and early 70s to defend civil liberties. And that narrowing took place because the left-wing movement for radical change out of which Mumia's politics first emerged was weakened nationally and globally – the fate of the Black Panther Party an example of repression that took numerous shapes and forms. A sense of what has been lost can be seen when viewing *Free Angela and All Political Prisoners*, a documentary made last year about the arrest and imprisonment of Angela Davis in 1971 and about the building of a movement that resulted in her acquittal by an all white jury on charges of murder, kidnapping and conspiracy in 1972 – even after then President Nixon assured the country of her guilt.

First publicly attacked by then Governor Ronald Reagan when she was fired from her university teaching position because of her Communist Party membership, Angela's academic skills, radicalism (a term she beautifully defines in the movie), support for the Panthers and for the "Soledad Brothers" – three politicized state prison inmates falsely accused of murder – made her a particular target, hated all the more by those who felt threatened by societal changes then underway because she was all this and a black woman. The film depicts the violent repression against those struggling for liberation that Mumia also experienced – but it depicts too a powerful movement for peace, freedom, justice and equality in the US and abroad able to change the terms of debate, able to change the political and legal atmosphere so that her liberation – and that of other falsely accused political prisoners – was possible.

Many of the reforms and social changes gains made in those years have taken hold and have helped change society for the better. But much has been lost too, for in the years since, political space for openly radical politics has been lost, weakening the ground for democratic action in any direction. With socialist ideology and left-wing organization undermined alongside the weakening working-class organization in all of its forms, numerous limitations have been placed on legal rights. The rights of labor, the public rights of communities, the rights of those caught up in the criminal justice system have all been restricted to an extent impossible to imagine in 1971. As a result our public education system is part privatized, divided and ever more unequal, so our unions represent a smaller percentage of the workforce than almost any country in the world, and so we have by far the highest rate of imprisonment, with 2.3 million (60% black or Latino) in prison or jail, millions more on parole or probation. Political prisoners, once able to find arenas for contestation as the brilliant legal defense Angela Davis' team put forward exemplifies, can no longer be implemented as one legal avenue after another blocked. Thus Mumia remains locked up.

Yet so too resistance continues. Angela Davis under harsh conditions and imminent threat found a way to create a space for herself, to continue to think, write, struggle and live – space shared with family, friends, solidarity movements, and through the holding on to feelings prison often denies. So too with Mumia who reminds us in *Justice on Trial* that he is not just a political figure, a symbol in the fight for justice, but also a human being who yearns to enjoy the warmth of life. Interviews with his sister help complete the picture, giving a personal dimension without which his politics, and his strength of will are impossible to understand. A will that has enabled

him to remain active and engaged during all his years on death row, that enables him to continue to speak out today.

And so the campaign for his freedom remains alive and important. At the conclusion of the showing Johanna Fernandez, the film's producer, talked to the audience at IPS through Skype. She explained that although there are no more grounds for appeal, other possibilities for action remain, which is part of the reason this 2010 film is being re-distributed. President Obama recently appointed Debo Adebile to head the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice – a fortuitous appointment, as Adebile is familiar with Mumia's case having taken part in the post-sentencing legal briefs that successfully challenged the constitutionality of his death sentence. As the film notes, the officers in the Philadelphia police department have been cited numerous times for corruption, brutality and racism. Therefore the campaign is today focused on Washington DC and building public demand for the Justice Department to launch an investigation of Philadelphia. If the city is found guilty of systemic rights violations, it may be possible to have Mumia's case re-opened, may be possible to win his freedom.

The Future

And it may be possible to regain space in which far seeing visions of what society could be again gain political relevance. Mumia and Angela have co-authored an essay that puts forward a vision and a politics of future without the injustices that define our present. To understand what the campaign for his freedom means it is important to grasp the meaning of the 'abolition democracy' they envision in the following excerpt:

Social structures—courts, police, prisons, etc.—have within them a deep bias about what constitutes crime and what does not. Any social structure is a product of its previous historical, economic and social iterations, and these previous forms bear significant influence on later forms. The present system, in addition to being increasingly repressive, is the logical inheritance of its racist, hierarchical, exploitative past, and it is also a reactive formation to attempts to transform, democratize, and socialize it.

For authentic democracy to emerge, "abolition democracy" must be enacted—the abolition of institutions that advance the dominance of any one group over any other. It is the democracy that is possible if we continue the legacy of the great abolition movements in American history, those that opposed slavery, lynching, and segregation. As long as the prison-industrial-complex remains, American democracy will continue to be a false one. Such a false democracy reduces people and their communities to the barest biological subsistence because it pushes them outside the law and the polity.

The idea of abolition democracy comes from a reading of U.S. history where the freedom struggle is central to who Americans are and to why we are who we are. We are less exemplars of legendary “founding fathers” than we are of “founding freedom fighters”—inheritors of those who fought for their freedom, not from a British aristocracy, but from American slavocracy.

We need to prepare not only a critique of a repressive, carceral status quo, but a vision of a new, enlightened, more human, more socialized view of a future without mass incarceration.

Quote:

“Alternatives to the Present System of Capitalist Injustice,” by Mumia Abu-Jamal and Angela Y. Davis, from *Imagine Living in a Socialist USA*, edited by Frances Goldin, Michael Smith and Debby Smith (Harper Collins, 2014). The article was posted January 20, 2014 on <http://thefeministwire.com/2014/01/>

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Further Information:

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[Treatment of Federal Employees Could Hurt Future Government Workforce](#)

***The Washington Socialist* <> March 2014**

By Bill Mosley

I recently retired after 31 years of service with the federal government. During the final year alone I witnessed the across-the-board budget cuts known as “sequestration” that led to many employees being furloughed without pay, last October’s 16-day government shutdown, and the

third year of a federal pay freeze. These and other actions (or inactions) by the elected leadership of the government communicate, in no uncertain terms, that civil servants are viewed as something less than valued members of the federal community.

Nevertheless, today's feds have it good compared to those yet to be hired. Future workers will have to contribute more than five times as much of their salaries to their retirement compared to current workers – amounting, in effect, to a steep pay cut. Some members of Congress also are threatening to eliminate federal pensions for future employees altogether, which would leave them only with Social Security and their savings to see them through their golden years.

Some elected officials have expressed sympathy with the civil servants' plight. Sen. Barbara Mikulski of Maryland, for instance, noted that federal employees "have been the targets of unending attacks. They've been furloughed, laid off and locked out through no fault of their own."

To be sure, it's congressional Republicans who have been the principal instigators of the attacks on federal workers, while President Obama and many Democrats in Congress have spoken up in favor of their employees. Yet for the past several years, the defenders of federal employees have retreated while fed-bashers have been on the march.

Elected officials who demean their employees, freeze their pay, threaten their retirement earnings and label them as "non-essential" have to ask themselves: How will this affect the federal workforce over the long term?

I could have asked myself a similar question when I first went to the work for the government in 1982. While many of my peers were gravitating to high-paying jobs in the corporate sector, I viewed working for the federal government as an honorable way to serve the public while earning a decent salary and benefits, if not in the same league as my classmates who became corporate lawyers. Yet President Reagan had just fired the air traffic controllers for striking, federal employees were subject to "reductions in force" (a polite term for "firings"), and in general the treatment of civil servants was at a low point. But they fared somewhat better during the George H.W. Bush and Clinton administrations, and federal service became a more attractive career option for many. After the 9/11 attacks and the nationwide mobilization of the war against terror, elected officials seemed to gain a new appreciation for the value of a dedicated, highly motivated federal workforce. However, the anti-government Tea Party's success in the 2010 congressional election put fed-bashing back on the agenda.

According to the Government Accountability Office, about 30 percent of federal workers will be eligible to retire by 2016. Even before the most recent attacks on federal workers, experts were predicting a federal "retirement tsunami" in the near future. What incentive, besides economic necessity, would keep them working in this atmosphere? If the attacks on feds convince more veteran employees to retire than usual, agencies could suffer serious gaps in experience and institutional memory.

Although the economy is said to be recovering, there are still more job seekers than available jobs, and few federal vacancies will be lacking applicants for the foreseeable future. But what

will happen when the economy is booming, as it was in the late 1990s? Will the government be able to compete for the best-qualified, most highly motivated applicants? Or will it become an employer of last resort, having to accept second-tier hires while the blue-chip candidates opt for higher-paying private-sector jobs? Stories in the media have chronicled how attacks on the civil service have made recent college graduates reluctant to seek government careers, or driven current federal workers to private-sector jobs. In many professional fields — such as law, the sciences and information technology — federal pay can't compete with the private sector but has traditionally compensated with good benefits and the satisfaction of serving the public. If you take these away, why would anyone choose a government career?

Do members of Congress want less-qualified, less-motivated workers inspecting their constituents' food, controlling their flights and ensuring the safety of their drinking water? For some – if they were truthful – the answer would be “yes.” The attacks on federal workers are part of the larger conservative effort to undercut and devalue the role of government in society, of which the sequester and the shutdown were only the latest chapters.

A shrunken, demoralized, less-qualified, less-motivated federal workforce will lead to a government even less able to serve the public and act as a check on runaway corporate abuses. The botched rollout of the Affordable Care Act was both a result of and further contribution to this degradation of government. The inability of the government to set up the ACA on its own led to the hiring of an unqualified contractor; and the contractor's failure has invited more attacks on the government's competence to administer complex domestic programs. The right does its best to ignore federal programs that have worked well, such as Social Security and Medicare, when backed by adequate resources and broad public support.

It doesn't have to be this way. Government again can become the first choice for the best and brightest – but only if outrage over the attacks on government itself forces conservatives to back off. Only then will federal employees find themselves treated with respect rather than contempt.