

***The Washington Socialist***  
**Articles from May 2013 Issue**  
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[Washington Socialist May Day issue](#)

Thursday, May 2nd, 2013

May Day 2013

Welcome to the May 2013 issue of *The Washington Socialist*. It's May Day... International Workers' holiday. Other than a few mental maypole circuits, what will you do about it?

First, set aside May 11 as a particularly important DC-DSA membership meeting. An expansion of the Steering Committee from 5 to 7 members is proposed to deepen our leadership diversity, and candidates for a special election to fill those new seats are solicited. The election will take place at the June meeting. The membership meeting is at 1:30 p.m. at the [Watha T. Daniel/Shaw Neighborhood Library](#) 1630 7th St NW, a half-block from the Shaw metro station.

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The May issue of *The Washington Socialist* starts with an exhortation (by Bill Mosley) and a detailed history (by Kurt Stand) of this day of international workers' celebration and resolve. They should fire you up if firing up is what you need. And don't we all? [Read complete articles](#)

A dilemma has been facing socialists and progressives for some time: What is our specific perspective and strategic array on issues of climate change and protection of the environment against corporate depredation? Andy Feeney examines the question in a review essay that also appears on the national environmental blog this month. [Read complete article](#)

We've been, in the last few issues, working the vein of "feasible socialisms" as presented by several authors (David Schweickart's *After Capitalism*, for example). To this add Gar Alperovitz, who has been developing a communalist variety of socialism for many years and has put forth a polished version in *What Then Must We Do?* (2013). It's reviewed by Woody Woodruff. [Read complete article](#)

Alperovitz's transformative future hinges on popular choices beneath the stratum of our moribund, hegemonic national government. Kurt Stand shows how in the US public's current choice – including the choice to look away – of an incarceration-based justice system we see wide indicators of the other choices that make our society the great injustice that it has become. How are those "public" choices coerced or enforced, and by whom? [Read complete article](#)

The District of Columbia recently made choices at the ballot box in a special election that featured not only candidates but also ideas. Will that idea manage to survive the scrutiny of the Congress it explicitly challenges? Bill Mosley reports on the complex outcomes. [Read complete article](#)

In this month's Socialist Takes and Takeaways, you'll read about a job opportunity with national DSA (but the deadline is *very* soon); and brief reviews of a new dramatic film about Jackie Robinson's arrival in the majors and of a new book about our addiction to fat, salt and sugar and why it's no accident. And we'll be begging our readers – again – to contribute writings, short or long, to *The Washington Socialist*. [Read complete article](#)

## [Bonds Elected to DC Council in Low-Turnout, Racially Polarized Vote](#)

Tuesday, April 30th, 2013

### ***The Washington Socialist* <> May 2013**

*By Bill Mosley*

Interim District of Columbia Councilmember Anita Bonds held on to her seat in the April 23 special election, following a contest characterized by appeals to race – on the part of several candidates – and ending in a vote that drew only 10 percent of registered voters. Bonds, a Democrat, was one of only two African Americans in the race, along with Perry Redd of the Statehood Green Party who was hardly a factor with less than 2 percent of the vote. In the fractured field, Bonds' 32 percent of the vote was enough to defeat fellow Democrat Elissa Silverman (at 28 percent) and Republican Patrick Mara (23 percent), with Democrats Matthew Frumin and Paul Zukerberg far behind. Bonds, to be sure, had more going for her than being the most prominent African American in the race; as a longtime local Democratic Party leader and an official serving under several DC mayors, she was clearly the candidate of the political establishment and had the endorsement of most DC councilmembers.

The racially polarized nature of the election is clearly seen in ward-by-ward results. In overwhelmingly white Ward 3 Bonds was barely a fringe candidate at 5 percent, while Mara won the ward with 38 percent, followed by Frumin at 27 percent and Silverman at 26 percent. Bonds, however, polled 79 percent in both Wards 7 and 8, both heavily African American, while none of the other candidates came close to double figures in either ward.

Both Silverman and Frumin targeted the “white progressive” vote, which they largely divided between them. Just before the election it was reported that Silverman tried to convince Frumin to drop out. If he had, Silverman might have won. Mara banked on there being enough fiscal conservatives and “change” advocates in DC to ride to victory, but the other candidates and their supporters wouldn't let voters forget his support for Mitt Romney and his no-new-taxes pledge. Mara also hurt himself in the largely liberal-to-progressive District by opposing both the right to sick leave and an increase in the local minimum wage.

Redd ran on a progressive platform stressing DC statehood, tax and budget fairness, and policies to create jobs for DC residents. His poor showing is further evidence that the tiny Statehood Green Party needs to broaden its support if it hopes to be more than a footnote in a city dominated by Democrats. There is a model for success: The Statehood Party (prior to its merger with the Greens) held an at-large council seat for the 24 years ending in 1998, first under Julius Hobson and then Hilda Mason.

April's council election may be a warmup for next year's regularly scheduled election, in which Bonds' seat will be in play again. Silverman, with her generally progressive message, may have

emerged as the leading candidate to unseat Bonds in a rematch. Mara, on the other hand, is now a three-time loser in Council races, and it appears he will have to content himself with trying to retain his seat on the Board of Education. One can hope that the candidates in next year's election work harder to bring the District together across racial lines, while advocating progressive policies that benefit all working-class District residents.

Also in this election, 83 percent of voters approved the referendum to free DC's budget from the federal appropriation process. The only surprise was that the percentage of "yes" votes was not higher. It remains to be seen whether this will survive scrutiny by Congress or whether it is even legal. But if nothing else, it serves as one more indication that DC residents are fed up with being wards of the federal government and desire more control over their local affairs.

## [MAKING CHOICES](#)

Tuesday, April 30th, 2013

### ***The Washington Socialist <> May 2013***

*By Kurt Stand*

#### Contradictions

A decade of protests led by family members of the incarcerated and by human rights organizations ended in victory this year when Illinois Governor Pat Quinn announced the closure of the Tamms supermaximum prison – a prison which held individuals in complete isolation, often for years. Solitary confinement has been part of the US penal system since its origins in 1820s Pennsylvania, and has been condemned as cruel and damaging for nearly as long. Human beings are social beings — the routine denial of what is essential to our nature bespeaks an attitude that denies the humanity of those so treated. That same inhumanity continues to condemn others to conditions similar to those at Tamms, to imprison men and women at a rate of 716 per 100,000, rates unheard of in any other part of the globe (comparable figures for England and Wales is 149, Argentina 147, Ecuador 81, Sweden 70, as documented on the International Centre for Prison Studies website).

Yet mass incarceration has supporters: a multi-union council of prison guards, the AFSCME local that represented Tamms employees. For many of those workers, the heightened security of a prison that keeps inmates in isolation was something to defend. An argument retrospectively justified by the murder of a guard at a federal prison in Pennsylvania a month after the Tamms closure – even though it took place in a different institution with a different prison population. Fear is the reason for that connection; fear is what keeps workers on a job they believe is unsafe. Driving the action of prison unions can therefore be found another kind of fear, defined by the reality of job shortages. Even in better economic times, prisons have tended to be built in communities where jobs are at a premium. The desire to hold onto the work one has – even employment denying others' freedom – is all the greater in today's world of permanent insecurity.

Notwithstanding socially progressive politics, potential job loss inhibited AFSCME's national leaders from challenging its local's opposition to the Tamms closure, a silence reported on in an article by James Ridgeway and Jean Casella (Mother Jones, February 22, 2013). The narrowness behind this is evident in other instances. AFL-CIO leadership has recognized the necessity of addressing climate change, but wouldn't take a position against the Keystone pipeline because building trades unions – whose members have been badly hit by our never-ending recession – support its construction. So too, opposition to rapacious military budgets and overseas wars rarely translates into support for closing an arms plant or army base, out of concern that those who do the work will suffer the consequence. It is a narrowness reinforced by the decades-long corporate assault on unions that has left workers, individually and collectively, with ever fewer rights and options. And as the range of the possible becomes smaller, accepting the unacceptable becomes easier.

Labor's prioritizing immediate job preservation/creation over the long-term interests of its members and the society of which unionists form a part reflects the limitations of meaningful choice everywhere placed before working people. The problem is hardly labor's alone – it shows itself every time community groups or social movements compete for the same scarce resources. It is seen, too, in the ease with which society, in the main, has accepted inequality (and its concomitant ubiquitous surveillance) as a way of life. After all, neighborhood gentrification creates informal borders – visually evident in any bus ride from Anacostia to Friendship Heights – keeping the less affluent out of “better neighborhoods.” Yet for the Board of Trade, the Post or suburban newspapers what matters is the growth of affluence, not the fate of the displaced. Greater affluence in the District does enable the city to offer more to many of its residents; yet that sits uneasily with the hardship experienced in some wards, or in parts of Prince George's County. The city's relatively low unemployment rate and growing wealth can obscure the fact that two-thirds of DC public school children are classified as low-income, entitled to free or reduced price meals. A reality barely visible to those not impacted because it is joined with re-segregation: According to a report issued in 2010 by the Washington Lawyer's Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs, more than two-thirds of D.C.'s black students attend schools that are between 90 and 100% black. It is the same racial and class divides that keep from sight the devastation wrought by our merciless criminal justice system – the world where most go to college and few to prison generally interacts only at the margins with the world in which youth are more likely to serve a stint behind bars than get a degree.

Focus on improving a particular neighborhood or school, on holding onto a particular job or making it safer, can be part of a process to improve the quality of life for all. In fact, progress toward social justice will never be made until people join initiatives to improve their immediate circumstances with a commitment to broad egalitarian change. But in conditions of insecurity and social immobility, in conditions of weakened democratic and civil society institutions, particular needs are often posed against general social interests. A zero-sum game results, one in which working people always lose. Ultimately, finding a path toward resolution of the contradictions of labor's position is part of a process of challenging that powerlessness.

### Conditions

Statistics sometimes speak loudly. When 2011 began, more than 7 million people, 1 in 34 adults, were under correctional system authority: 1,518,104 individuals in state or federal prison,

748,728 in jail, 840,676 on parole, 4,055,514 on probation (see the Sourcebook on Criminal Justice Statistics). Terrible numbers become worse when racial disparity is added to the mix. Numerous studies attest to greater likelihood of blacks and Latinos being arrested, and being sentenced to more time, for the same crimes as whites. Another statistic is indicative: 1 in 9 black men between the ages 18-30 are locked up. Women form a smaller part of the prison population, though their numbers rose dramatically over the past two decades. But the impact on them is much deeper, visible in every prison visiting room, as wives and mothers, girlfriends and sisters, struggle to keep families together against the pressure of family-unfriendly prison practices, against the economic pressure of helping loved ones behind bars, dealing with the pressure of being a single-parent household even when there are two parents in reality.

Often a consequence of poverty, prison also reinforces that poverty. Few resources are provided when a door to freedom is opened. The lack of public services for those held by our criminal justice system means that too often those released from prison are homeless, without access to needed drug treatment or adequate health care. And these individuals are concentrated in areas with the highest unemployment and poverty rates. Nearly half of DC prisoners are from wards 7 and 8 – the wards where those segregated schools (and low math and reading proficiency rates) are also concentrated.

Joblessness is a painful reality impacting an even wider number. Overall, about 22 million people remain unemployed or underemployed even after months of renewed economic growth. With three job seekers for every available job, pressure falls too on many who are working. Pressure to accept what would otherwise be rejected has become an all-too-normal part of life, for power is all on the employers' side. Power made greater by the aforementioned attacks on labor, launched by major corporations in the mid-1970's. The full fury of those attacks has moved from the private to the public sector – so teachers and postal employees are now facing denunciations and layoffs once reserved for auto and steel workers. Few institutions could face such pressure without retreat, and unions are no exception. Despite many false steps, labor has not been passive: The list of strikes, organizing, and other forms of resistance is long – a list marked by some victories, many defeats, by internal upheavals, a search for answers.

Answers that will only be adequate if they address the root causes of society's injustices. Government priorities, national economic policy and corporate investment strategy undermined job security and job rights, promoted the rise in racial inequality and massive increase of our prison population. Union progress, by contrast, depends on progress for all – beginning with those who have the least.

### Commonalities

It would be impossible to recycle millions of people through prison without prior dehumanization of its victims. That dehumanization grows from stereotypes – rooted in slavery and Native American genocide — casting the unknown as sinister and amoral, controllable only through strict forms of repression. Challenging prevailing practices and outlooks, reaffirming common humanity, the civil rights/black freedom, anti-war, women's liberation and other social movements of the 1960s and 70s helped initiate measurable progress toward equality. Although much more was needed, a ladder had been created allowing for further progress. Progress is what those most opposed to steps toward substantive equality were determined to

undo. Conservative reaction among those who feared the changes progressive movements had started to bring about gained momentum in the mid-70s, around the same time the corporate assault on labor was launched – no coincidence, for employer power relies on structural social and economic inequality. So too, right-wing power mobilized to defeat the Equal Rights Amendment in the mid 1980s and attack abortion rights in order to turn back the clock on movement toward gender equality. A blaming-the-victim mindset replaced demands for justice. Placing people outside the community by placing them beyond the pale of the moral creates a climate in which solitary confinement can be defended, even torture celebrated.

Labor's struggle has been fought to force recognition that the hands that do the work also have minds, have feelings, belong to people deserving of dignity and respect. A century ago child labor, 10- or 12-hour work days, injury and death, were all common features of working life. Today, instead, dignity is denied through a denial of rights of assembly and speech, liberties absent at workplaces because the private rights of employers overcome constitutional rights of those employed. Destruction of jobs and communities in search of the god of profits has not only become acceptable, it is considered natural.

All this finds perfect expression in the Citizens United decision. The 14th Amendment, passed after the Civil War to guarantee citizenship rights to freed slaves, has been turned into a rule giving human rights to corporations that then deny labor rights for those who do the work that enables them to exist. The extent to which people tolerate the massive rise in the prison population, the extent to which people tolerate workers' loss of workplace rights and union representation, is the extent to which inequalities of wealth and power are normalized, the underlying destruction in the form of war abroad and climate change everywhere is accepted. Dehumanization, once begun, spreads to other people, just as violations of civil liberties and democratic rights for some undermines rights and liberties for all. Only when such negative commonalities are turned into positive solidarity can contradictions be overcome.

### Way Forward

The Coalition of Black Trade Unionists and the Coalition of Union Women, each founded in the 1970s as autonomous organizations fighting for equality in society and inside organized labor, exemplify positive solidarity as they also organize for union rights. Today they are recognized constituency groups within the AFL-CIO, as are the Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance and the Labor Council for Latin American Advancement and Pride at Work (organizing amongst lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender workers). Operating on different planes, previous labor peace and environmental justice bodies find expression in the Labor Sustainability Network and in US Labor Against War – unofficial groups that nonetheless work within and outside union circles, uniting concerns and issues that are often divided.

Old borders between unions and non-union workers centers –such as the National Day Laborers Organizing Network, the National Domestic Workers Alliance – are being crossed as they can now directly affiliate with Central Labor Councils or the national AFL-CIO. The common front this potentially creates with the least protected workers is paralleled by an initiative to establish a coalition with civil rights, women's and other progressive organizations to defend and expand our nation's imperiled democracy.

Common threads can only emerge out of a multiplicity of concerns through on-going struggles; this AFL-CIO initiative may succeed where previous initiatives failed because unity is being built by building mutual commitments. We can see such a process in recent successful and unsuccessful campaigns in DC and Maryland: legalizing gay marriage, preventing fracking, abolishing the death penalty, raising minimum wage, granting paid sick leave, passing “ban the box” legislation. Not all supporters of one supported the others, but enough overlap exists to define the core of an alternative national politics challenging the divisions sown by capital, addressing the needs of the moment within the vision of a better world. A politics to expand democracy arises to allow today’s powerless different possibilities and choices — breathable air and a job rather than one or the other; a secure life lived in hope and freedom for today’s prisoner and prison guard alike.

*Other sources not cited above:*

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[May Day Today — And Yesterday](#)

Tuesday, April 30th, 2013

***The Washington Socialist* <> May 2013**

**Happy International Workers’ Day, the Real “Labor Day”**

By Bill Mosley

May 1 will mark the 127<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first International Workers’ Day, the date the campaign for the eight-hour workday was launched in the United States with massive rallies and a general strike. The infamous Haymarket Square massacre in Chicago, where a bomb killed seven police officers, occurred at one of these rallies. Eight workers were convicted, and some historians, including Howard Zinn, have concluded the bombing was the work of a provocateur who wanted to give police a pretext to arrest leaders of the protest. International Workers’ Day is celebrated as the official day of labor in much of the world – but not in the United States where it began. In 1894 Congress, with the support of a few centrist labor organizations, established a “Labor Day” in September for the express purpose of avoiding association with the more radical and militant groups who championed May 1 as labor’s holiday. So remember to raise a fist and a red banner this May Day. May Day Legacies

## May Day Legacies

*By Kurt Stand*

“Nineteen years ago on the fourth of May ... I was one of those at a meeting at the Haymarket in this city to protest against eleven workmen being shot to pieces at a factory in the southeastern part of this city because they had dared to strike for the eight-hour movement that was to be inaugurated in America in 1886. The Haymarket meeting was called primarily to protest against the murder of comrades at the McCormick factory. When that meeting was nearing its close someone threw a bomb. No one knows to this day who threw it. ... And yet in the soil of Illinois, ... the soil in which the great, magnificent Lincoln was buried, in the State that was supposed to be the most liberal in the union, five men sleep the last sleep in Waldheim [cemetery] under a monument that has been raised there because they dared to raise their voices for humanity. I say to any of you ... go out there and draw some inspiration around the graves of the first martyrs who fell in the great industrial struggle for liberty on American soil.”

Lucy Parsons, probably born a slave, of black, Mexican and Native American ancestry, made those remarks in 1905 at the IWW's founding convention. Albert Parsons, her husband, a Confederate soldier in the civil war, was – along with August Spies, Adolph Fischer, Georg Engel, Louis Ling – one of the five anarchist and socialist labor leaders sentenced to death for a bombing they did not commit. Rooted in German, Czech and other working-class immigrant communities, they sought to both build the 8-hour day movement and spread the revolutionary unionism that had begun to take root in Chicago. It was the linkage between demands for immediate betterment of the conditions of life with demands for a fundamental change in the structures and conditions of society that made the dispute between reaction and labor radicalism especially fierce. Speaking at a meeting in London in 1888 honoring the Haymarket martyrs – on a platform with the socialist William Morris and the anarchist Peter Kropotkin — Parsons defined goals she would fight for, organize for, her entire life:

“What is the Revolution? Why, it is the breath of life, that stupendous struggle for relief. I hear that voice in the cold dank mines of Siberia; I hear it in the sunny clime of Italy; I hear it across the mighty Atlantic's wave; I hear it in the prison of Joliet in the state of Illinois; — wherever there is a man or woman beneath the sun who wants better homes, better clothes, better food.” Back in Chicago, unable to speak in public without being arrested, she told an interviewer her belief that “ ... the world and its wealth and its treasures and its happiness should, like the air and the sunshine, belong to all mankind, and not to a few.”

Pledging to continue the fight for the 8-hour day, inspired by the national strike around that demand in the US, and honoring the Haymarket martyrs, the Socialist International meeting in Paris in 1890 called upon workers to make May first a holiday and a day of struggle in all parts of the globe. In following years, the focus of the holiday deepened and broadened in its meaning. Rosa Luxemburg, then participating in the formation of Poland's first socialist organizations, wrote in 1894:

“The first of May demanded the introduction of the eight-hour day. But even after this goal was reached, May Day was not given up. As long as the struggle of the workers against the



bourgeoisie and the ruling class continues, as long as all demands are not met, May Day will be the yearly expression of these demands. And when better days dawn, when the working class of the world has won its deliverance – then too humanity will probably celebrate May Day in honor of the bitter struggles and many sufferings of the past.”

The 8-hour movement, as Luxemburg noted, was widely successful in North America and Europe; but those deeper injustices and hopes identified by her, by Parsons, by the movements and organizations of which they were a part, remained. On May Day 1916, Karl Liebknecht — the first member of the German parliament to vote against war credits in World War 1, drafted into the army because his parliamentary immunity protected him from arrest — spoke before a mass anti-war demonstration in front of the Kaiser’s palace, telling the crowd,

“Our enemies are not the English, French or Russian workers, but the great landed proprietors, the German capitalists, and their executive committee, the government.”

Strikes and other mass protest actions broke out in Germany for the first time since war was declared, acts of insubordination which the government would not tolerate – throwing away the pretense of respecting the rights of parliament, Liebknecht was arrested. In his statement to the court Liebknecht explained his actions thusly:

“Since 1889 the First of May has been dedicated both to education in and demonstration for the principles of socialism and against all exploitation, oppression and violation of human rights. It has proclaimed the solidarity of workers of all countries, a solidarity which is not negated but is strengthened by war. May Day stands against fratricidal slaughter among workers, against war, and for peace. “

Liebknecht remained in prison until liberated by Germany’s November 1918 revolution, as was Luxemburg who had been arrested previously. Both led efforts to realize the hopes of that revolution – and each was murdered in 1919 by forerunners of the Nazis, anticipating the arrests, executions that would intensify all over Germany in 1933.

May Day marches in the US also focused on opposition to militarism. Following Cleveland’s 1917 May Day march, Ohio’s Socialist Party (and future Communist) leaders Charles Ruthenberg, Kate Richard O’Hare, and Alfred Wagenknecht were arrested for opposing a war the US had just entered. It was in solidarity with them and out of determination to make his own voice heard that Eugene Debs gave the public speech in nearby Canton, denouncing World War I, knowing full well he would be paid by a lengthy prison sentence. Jailings, lynchings, beatings, deportations, seizure of publications, refusal to seat elected officials, would continue throughout the country for several years more. The million votes Debs received in 1920 while running for president from his prison cell in Leavenworth, Kansas testified to the resistance against that repression.

All this speaks to events and times long distant, yet not so long ago or distant as to be without relevance. How relevant? Perhaps the most massive march – and strike – in recent years took place in the immigrant rights protest in 2006. A speech Debs gave in 1910 would have fit in perfectly then (and still this year), as he said that the foreign born,

“ ... have just as good a right to enter here as [those] who now seek to exclude them. The only difference is that the latter had the advantage of a little education and had not been so cruelly ground and oppressed, but in point of principle there is no difference, the motive of all being precisely the same, and if [we] should discriminate at all it should be in favor of the [people] who have borne the heaviest burdens and are most nearly crushed upon earth. ... If Socialism ... does not stand staunchly, unflinchingly, and uncompromisingly for the working class and for the exploited and oppressed masses of all lands, then it stands for none ...”

Debs’ statement to the court prior to his sentencing in 1918 would have similarly fit in May Day 2011’s Occupy actions:

“... five percent of the people ... constitute that element that absolutely rule our country. They privately own all our public necessities. They wear no crowns ; they wield no scepters, they sit upon no thrones; and yet they are our economic masters and our political rulers. They control this government and all of its institutions. They control the courts. The five percent ... control all of the sources of wealth, all of the nation’s industries, all the means of our common life ... And so long as this is true, we can make no just claim to being a democratic government – a self-governing people.”

The fact that the struggle for simple justice for immigrants remains a struggle still to be won, the fact that Occupy activists talked of 1% rather than 5% reflect the sad reality of too little progress having been made in the intervening years. But that reflects too the ebb and flow of capitalist society, which tends always to undo the positive change social movements have brought about. Rosa Luxemburg, writing in Germany in 1913 on the history of May Day, could have been writing with thought in mind of the illusions so many had prior to our banking collapse in 2007:

“[In 1890 when international May Day began] the capitalist economy had just begun a phase of splendid growth which would last nearly a decade. At the same time, after twenty years of unbroken peace, the world breathed a sigh of relief, remembering the period of war in which the modern European state system had received its bloody baptism. The path seemed free for a peaceful cultural development; illusions, hopes of a reasonably pacific discussion between labor and capital grew abundantly like green corn in the ranks of socialism. ... Crises, wars, and revolution were supposed to have been things of the past, the baby shoes of modern society; ... democracy in the state and democracy in the factory were supposed to open the doors of a new, better order.

“The course of events has submitted all of these illusions to a fearful test. ... In the following decade, the ten-year period of economic prosperity was paid for by two violent world crises. After two decades of world peace, in the last decade of the past century followed six bloody wars, and in the first decade of the new century four bloody revolutions. Instead of social reforms – conspiracy laws, penal laws, and penal praxis; instead of industrial democracy—the powerful concentration of capital in cartels and business associations, and the international practice of gigantic lock-outs. And instead of the new growth of democracy in the state – a miserable breakdown of the last remnants of bourgeois liberalism and bourgeois democracy.”

A passage that was not a counsel of despair; rather Luxemburg was reaffirming the need to think historically in order to better understand current challenges. Lucy Parsons' life speaks to the possibility of making such connections. She never stopped agitating or organizing, consistently campaigning for the rights of women, the "slave of slaves" as she put it, and for the full participation of women in the labor and left movements of her day. Always poor herself, Parson always took part in actions of the poorest and most disenfranchised when demanding jobs, decent housing, decent pay. And, true to the heritage of Haymarket, she stood with those victimized by repressive actions of police and courts.

Parsons joined the campaigns to free Sacco and Vanzetti (Italian-American anarchists executed in Massachusetts in 1927), Tom Mooney (socialist labor activist, imprisoned for 22-years after being framed for a bombing in 1916), Angelo Herndon (a black coal miner and young communist arrested on a charge of insurrection for leading an unemployed march in Atlanta in 1932), the Scottsboro boys (black youth falsely charged with raping two white women in Alabama in 1931). Continuities can be found between those struggles and today's struggles to stop violence against women, or to end wage theft; in the solidarity campaigns for Leonard Peltier and Mumia Abu-Jamal; of the years the "Central Park 5" spent in prison before finally being released.

In 1941, shortly before her death, a 91-year-old Parsons was honored at her last May Day, carried in a float by members of the United Auto Workers local representing the newly organized workers at International Harvester – workers employed at the McCormick factory of old. Triumph after defeat is also part of May Day's legacy, child of the optimism in Parson's IWW speech:

“ ... we are here as one brotherhood and one sisterhood, as one humanity with a responsibility to the down-trodden and the oppressed of all humanity, it matters not under what flag or in what country they happened to be born. Let us have that idea of Thomas Paine, that 'The world is my country, and mankind are my countrymen.'”

And in the words with which she closes:

“I hope even now to live to see the day when the first dawn of the new era of labor will have risen, when capitalism will be a thing of the past, and the new industrial republic, the commonwealth of labor, shall be in operation.”

[Socialism from the ground up: a review](#)

Tuesday, April 30th, 2013

***The Washington Socialist* <> May 2013**

*By Woody Woodruff*

Gar Alperovitz, *What Then Must We Do?: Straight Talk About the Next American Revolution* (Chelsea Green Publishing, White River Junction, Vt., 2013)

Gar Alperovitz's newest book, *What Then Must We Do?: Straight Talk About the Next American Revolution*, has many pleasures for socialist readers. The book is written in a conversational, almost bar-confab tone that only occasionally lapses into the jargon of political economy. This appears a deliberate strategy to gain wide access for its arguments, though it sometimes makes them seem a little thin and disorganized. But his argument has some bearing on our search for a socialist "elevator speech" (probably the longer one, to the 30<sup>th</sup> floor or so).

The organization of the book is almost deliberately elusive, dwelling first on the current political gridlock and its roots in the erosion of popular power to counter corporate hegemony. The book's arc then dances through instance after well-documented instance of local, specific democratization and institution of worker management that push back against corporate dominance, familiar (Mondragon) and unfamiliar (the State Bank of North Dakota). How to mobilize that scattered set of effects for radical change is the final stage, though it seems incomplete. The title, despite its resonances, is from Tolstoy, not a paraphrase of Lein's "What is to be done?"

The point (and sometimes the reader has to dredge for it): The US national government's gridlock is to some extent a function of the nation's size and scope. To keep working people in charge of their own interests, the scale has to be reduced. Necessity and choice have generated many successful examples of democratization at scale. Alperovitz has been working this regionalist, communitarian vein for many years. I was a participant in one of many seminars he ran at the Institute for Policy Studies in the last decades of the last century, and the theme had well emerged even then.

Alperovitz's grounds for this approach include not only manageable scale, but communication: "Scale also significantly determines who has privileged access to the nation's news media and who can largely shape its political discourse," he notes on page 152 of the advantage wealth confers given the high cost of major media in gigantic national markets .

One advantage for radical, transformative movement work is the "incentive to take independent action" that grows into a wider public when national governments' provision of services falters and becomes obviously inequitable. This leads to a motivator for change that is easily recognizable – the inevitable pain suffered by large majorities as wealth and power are increasingly concentrated and the economy stagnates. His strategy assumes things will get worse.

The book's overall argument develops with many an oblique trail and a frustrating incidence of "more about this later." Alperovitz begins with the breakdown of old political dynamics: "the system (the way underlying institutional power is currently arranged) seems now to be producing outcomes... that do not much respond to the old theory of politics." Thus, change-making strategy "requires getting serious about large-order processes, not simply elections and policies."

Details unfold into a pattern of relentless sealing-up of the avenues of access and influence that ordinary folks and organizations used to have available. The sealing-up is the work of the institutions for whom it's advantageous to do so – the right, corporate money and increasingly co-opted officials, elected and otherwise. As Jeff Faux said in [a recent account](#), Washington is not at all dysfunctional from the point of view of those who have achieved power – it works quite well for them.

What's a little different about Alperovitz's narrative is that he suggests that the level of corporate-rightist influence we see today is only a matter of degree – that the typical “system” in the US was quite similarly dominated by wealth and power, interrupted only by the Great Depression and World War 2 and its immediate aftermath. He cites progressive historians Nick Salvatore and Jefferson Cowie as noting “the progressive gains of the middle third of the twentieth century [were] largely an aberration.”

The inequalities of power, then, are “structural and systemic” and not an artifact of our recent difficult decades marked by Reagan and Clinton, the Bushes and Obama.

A theory of “countervailing power” (quoting J.K. Galbraith) that balanced corporate hegemony in charge and popular response to keep it in check therefore applies just to that anomalous period of the Depression and WW2. From the '70s the decline of union strength, influence and membership has been the principal reason for the return to that inequitable *status quo ante*. Alperovitz's imperative, nearly 50 pages into the book: “The current corporate-dominated hegemonic ideology that *prevents us from acting together in new ways*, quite simply, needs to be replaced” (my italics).

What can bring change? “Evolutionary reconstruction,” (p. 35) as he terms it, is a slow-building displacement of the failing national government with new institutions. The narrative comprises a number of existing examples starting with the apparently failed attempt at worker ownership of Youngstown Sheet and Tube in the late '70s-early '80s. Alperovitz points out, perhaps overhopefully, that although that pioneering effort finally withered because the Carter administration lost interest in supporting it, Ohio now “many worker-owned businesses,” has an innovative worker-ownership think tank at Kent State and “the support system for building them [worker-owned enterprises] is one of the best in the nation.” (pp. 30-31)

The United Steel Workers, which initially opposed the worker-ownership project at Youngstown Sheet and Tube, has now come around, Alperovitz says, and with other unions is supporting worker-owned projects in Ohio and around the country.

Alperovitz highlights other existing avenues to worker control, such as “B corporations” that are legally released from fiduciary requirements to pursue public ends. A pro-public goods decision by leaders of a B corporation cannot be constrained by stockholders or anyone else demanding that the company maximize profits under all circumstances.

And he has good words for ESOPs – Employee Stock Ownership Plans – designed by former Sen. Russell Long of Louisiana to give employees a financial stake in businesses large and small. Alperovitz acknowledges that “most ESOPs have not been set up to encourage

democratic control” (p. 42) and that there are significant tax incentives for capital and ownership built in. He mentions “bad apples” that have made progressives and unions suspicious of ESOPs as deliberate, short-circuiting bars to real radicalization but doesn’t name the most egregious, like Home Depot or the Tribune Co., the media giant purchased for a song by real estate magnate Sam Zell. By loading most of the debt into an ESOP – onto the employees, in other words – Zell purchased the flagging enterprise for very little of his own money and set a vivid example of the law’s vulnerability to exploitation. Efforts in Congress to democratize ESOPs by providing incentives for allowing employees to vote their stock (not a requirement of the original law) are ongoing and have a strange-bedfellow collection of conservative and progressive sponsors.

ESOPs and B-corps are just two of the many activities going on right now around the US – many of them framed like or inspired by the Mondragon cooperative in Spain – that Alperovitz touts as making up an expanding “checkerboard.” Those democratized patches grow together, in his narrative of a future, to form the evolutionary reconstruction of practices and institutions in the US. Many of them have the blessing, if not the wholehearted support, of municipal and state government entities.

Alperovitz appears to recognize the reader’s problem here. Every one of these activities, positive as it is, appears to be happening independently. There is no coherent strategy. What will bind them together?

“Socialism” gets its first serious mention (in a chapter heading) on page 58. Though it’s often what he terms “Socialism, American style” or perhaps Socialism Lite, Alperovitz checks off the 2,000-plus publicly owned electrical utilities in the US, unburdened by the need to satisfy shareholders with dividends and therefore able to deliver better energy pricing – and, sometimes, broadband as well. States, cities and counties engage in public management of development, including hotel and resort ownership, and energy recovery from landfills. Public management of pension plans (prefigured in Rifkin and Barber’s *The North Will Rise Again* in 1977) is widespread. Publicly funded economic development incubators are rife. One state – North Dakota – even has its own state bank (a bill to study starting such a bank in Maryland had a short half-life in this year’s legislative session).

But real institutional change is marginal, even though the buzz of democratic solidarity often accompanies these enterprises.

A “strategic plan” that will enhance democratization as part of the effort would include “a coherent economic way forward” that builds the local and regional tax base to lower taxpayer pressure and allows for alliances based on worker self-management, control and eventually ownership – alliances with a political dimension. Clearly – and, as mentioned above, Alperovitz has been working this vein for years – these effects are most easily brought off at the local and regional levels, where scale allows for visibility, effective communication and transparency plus easy identification of oligarchs and democrats in the public eye. Alperovitz concedes that much of the struggle ahead will be complicated by the need to reduce the pain, poverty and joblessness that are inevitably the product of corporate hegemony and its consequent stagnation, current and future.

At the national level, the slower evolutionary reconstruction might be hastened or abetted by crises at the national level, Alperovitz argues. Two “hot spots” where “crisis transformations” might arise are the financial sector and health care. Both are highly visible as causes of accumulating pain, and their benefits to the public are burdened by their obligatory benefits to the rulers of private capital. The Affordable Care Act’s political price for passage, Alperovitz notes, was to pay hush money to the insurance and pharmaceutical industries – to leave them “in the game” for their agreement not to oppose universal health care. Both health care and the Wall Street casino, however, might be ripe for “crisis transformation” because of their high public visibility and low popularity – spurring moves in the direction of regulated banking under the shadow of nationalization, and toward an approximation of single-payer health care.

But all these events, actual and possible, appear to be random. Alperovitz argues they have enough similarities, within the overall hegemonic framework, to “become strategic political ideas rather than random developments and events.” What will bring that step? Alperovitz argues that the coming “new normal” of permanent stagnation brought on by extreme economic inequality will provide the public pain to push political radicalization – at least to the point that a coherent strategic plan for change coupled with the existing examples of democratized workplace success will encounter a more receptive public. But “how far such processes might develop as the pain deepens is clearly an open question.”

Many potential variables in the future of change provide different future paths, good and bad – demographic change that undercuts the rightist stranglehold on Congress; mass response to the growing evidence of climate change; a recovery of labor power through some of the very regional checkerboard strategies the book illuminates – even sporadic violent resistance bringing on “[Friendly Fascism](#)” (Bertram Gross’s projection of the tendencies of Reaganism) and paradoxically sharpening that resistance. Alperovitz argues that no path should be discarded because all potentially lead out of the swamp of the “new normal” of stagnation and oligarchy that will likely culminate in a “legitimation crisis.”

(N.B.: The legitimation crisis is already very nearly here, we can surmise from the recent work of two economist-pollsters who found that although US respondents were quite favorable toward redistributing income and wealth in the current economic environment, they were unwilling to trust the US government to accomplish it.

<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/04/21/our-feelings-about-inequality-its-complicated/> )

Under such conditions, Alperovitz argues, a communitarian regionalist strategy can displace, or replace, existing national institutions with rightly-scaled democratic local institutions. “*The institutional requirements of community pose fundamental issues that neither corporate capitalism nor state socialism ever took seriously,*” he summarizes (his italics).

Regional democratization efforts, he proposes, may allow a bottom-up democracy (Benjamin Barber’s “strong democracy,” engaged and participatory) to replace “checkerboard” style the top-down variety that’s endemic to national government under corporate hegemony. This may be like, or similar to, what the reviewer has learned (all too recently) to call autonomism. Alperovitz refers frequently to the impetus that fueled the Occupy movement as the horizontal radicalism he seems to mean.

Comments on the first draft of this review pointed out omissions on Alperovitz's part that this writer overlooked, which doesn't reflect well on the book or the reviewer. Neither the specific needs and remedies for women and minorities, nor a consideration of the effects of globalization, make a significant appearance in this book. I surmise that Alperovitz sees the coming economic pain as so universally applied as to blur those differences among the oppressed. And his analysis focuses principally on the opportunities for transformation that are implicit in the unwieldy size of the US.

Though he has not developed the notion much, Alperovitz also argues in his closing that a communitarian regionalist polity can manage a sustainable economy not chained to a constant growth rate. More concrete work on these subjects by Lester Brown (on the environmental side) and economist Herman Daly would back him up, but this book is thin on that near-throwaway premise. (Daly, however, provides an enthusiastic blurb for the book).

Socialists will find this book satisfying but finally not very tightly fashioned at the crucial points – who and how will develop the strategy that can replace existing institutions with bottom-up democratic institutions; who will create the regional patterns; how will public provision and commodity equity be ensured? A two-page quickie on “planning” in the book's Afterword amounts mostly to a call for research (on trade, he references Schweickart's *After Capitalism* Chapter 3.6). Socialists will have to bring socialism as such to this nascent social-democratic flux.

Still, Alperovitz offers one clear vision: The national government in a sense is making itself irrelevant, and regional, communitarian solutions will become a clearly preferable alternative, appealing to a much wider, previously non-socialist public. In fact, it seems to this reader, the development of these regional solutions, deeply democratized and linked to work and consumption, will be more likely to create a socialist *society* – that is, a public consensus on the scope of public goods and on the need to control their management democratically. Socialist governance encompassing workers and consumers alike could emerge organically from such a set of practices.

This might reduce the need for direct struggle against the corporate hegemonists; radicals can sort of slide past that battle into regional transformation. However, as Bill Fletcher Jr. says in [a review in Jacobin](#), there's no guarantee that the ruling class will allow its power to slip away without a response.

Alperovitz's meticulous itemization of locations where workplace democracy and public management are already taking place is a heartening picture and shows that organizers and radicals do not have to depend on their utopian imaginations to talk of, or participate in, a better tomorrow. And if we socialists have anything to sell, it must be grounded on concrete examples of how it works. Many of the materials are available in this book; the strategic plan appears still to be fashioned.

*A tidy summary by Alperovitz of some of this book's premises and findings is at <http://truth-out.org/author/itemlist/user/46199>*



The following addition to this post was made on May 29, 2013:

An excellent review in *Dissent* of this book plus another by Alperovitz and David Schweickart's *After Capitalism* is at [http://www.dissentmagazine.org/online\\_articles/a-realistic-radicalism](http://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/a-realistic-radicalism)

### SOCIALIST TAKES AND TAKEAWAYS

Tuesday, April 30th, 2013

#### ***The Washington Socialist* <> May 2013**

First, a job opportunity from Maria Svart, DSA's national director:

#### **DSA is hiring a Young Democratic Socialists student organizer**

#### **Deadline to apply May 3rd**

YDS is an organization of campus-based democratic socialists who are members of DSA. The organizer works out of DSA's national office in New York City and travels throughout the United States to speak to both new and experienced YDS campus chapters, as well as to independent progressive students interested in learning about democratic socialism. The position includes work for both DSA and for our affiliated 501(c)3, the Democratic Socialists of America Fund.

[Full job posting is on the DSA website.](#)

***Salt Sugar Fat Provides Case Study in Corporate Abuse of Public*** – Sometimes the bankruptcy of the capitalist system is best illustrated in “big-picture” books such as Karl Marx's *Capital* or the works of Michael Harrington. But the case against capitalism also can be captured at a micro level, such as Michael Moss' new book *Salt Sugar Fat* (Random House), a briskly reported story of how food companies are willing to jeopardize the public's health for the sake of profit. Moss gets inside the deliberations of giant processed food corporations and their use of sophisticated scientific and marketing techniques to hook consumers on unhealthy food – and how they use their money and clout to prevent the government from requiring them to reduce the amounts of salt, sugar, fats and other unhealthy ingredients in their products. This is a must read for anyone concerned about excessive corporate power, as well as for anyone who eats. – *Bill Mosley*

**“42” Gives Worthy Portrayal of Jackie Robinson Story** – 42, the new biopic about Jackie Robinson, gives a mostly accurate, if Hollywood-ized, account of the integration of major league baseball. Director Brian Helgeland pushes all the right narrative buttons in portraying Robinson's story as an inspirational episode in the nascent civil rights movement, and the film

doesn't mask the racist ugliness Robinson (played ably by movie newcomer Chadwick Boseman) faced. And while the film practically beatifies Branch Rickey, the Brooklyn Dodger executive who signed Robinson, it also hints that racial justice may not have been his only motive – he wanted to snatch the best Negro League players before any other team could, thereby quickly building a dynasty. “All money's green,” Rickey (played by Harrison Ford, no less) says. If you don't demand subtlety in your cinema, you'll likely find 42 (the title refers to the number on Robinson's uniform) an enjoyable, even inspirational, visit to the theater. – *Bill Mosley*

\*\*\*\*\* ***Be a contributor to SOCIALIST TAKES AND TAKEAWAYS***... we do not ask for epics here; announcements of events are welcome. We would especially solicit nominations for “Good reads on the left.” If you have read something that you think readers of The Washington Socialist would like, or profit from, send us a citation or, if possible, a link. Contact us at [dcdsaoutreach@gmail.com](mailto:dcdsaoutreach@gmail.com)

## **What Would an Ecosocialist Politics Look Like?**

*The Washington Socialist* <> May 2013

*By Andy Feeney*

As many Americans prepare to observe Earth Day this year, democratic socialists who are paying attention might want to contemplate two possibly disagreeable questions.

The first is: what if anything can we contribute to the understanding of climate change and other urgent environmental problems that countless green activists haven't already discovered themselves – and long before us? The second is: what unique contribution can socialists make – if any – toward fixing what's wrong?

When around 17 million Americans attended the first Earth Day events some 43 years ago, an easy answer to both questions was: “not much.”

With some exceptions, socialists and others on the U.S. left had concerned themselves throughout the 1960s with other urgent issues – notably including the antiwar movement, the struggle for civil rights and Black liberation at home, urban poverty, and late in the decade, the Second Wave feminist struggle and the post-Stonewall Riots struggle for gay liberation.

The 1970s incubated radical and indeed “revolutionary” movements for change, but most leftists involved gave environmental issues little heed, and some in fact denounced pollution concerns as

“petit bourgeois” compared to, say, the urgency of halting the Vietnam War or combating police brutality towards Black youth in the cities.

Also with a few exceptions, most leaders of the US environmental movement in 1970 were lukewarm or antagonistic to socialism. In fact some green critics charged – with some justification — that the style of “socialism” embodied by the old Soviet bloc was a worse environmental nightmare than western capitalism.

Socialism in western Social Democratic guise, the critics further noted, seemed addicted to what leading green thinkers considered ecologically ruinous forms of economic growth. And many critics argued that socialism’s environmental flaws were hardly accidental, but instead rooted in Marx’s radically mistaken loyalty to a “labor standard of value” — although both the critics of the “labor theory” and some of its self-styled Marxist defenders were often rather vague on what exactly it meant.

For these and other reasons, including disputes over the legacy of population theorist Thomas Malthus and the mainstream environmental lobby’s understandable search for political respectability in Washington, open cooperation between American environmentalists and American socialists was rare in 1970. It continues to be extremely rare today, although eco-anarchist and eco-feminist ideas seem to have flourished in the US, while new movements combining green and socialist perspectives have emerged in other societies.

Despite this problematic history, however a variety of socialists have struggled for the past generation to address the global environmental challenge, both politically and theoretically. And on the occasion of Earth Day 2013, democratic socialists who haven’t followed their debates too closely may want to familiarize ourselves with an increasingly impressive green socialist literature.

One theoretically interesting, but sometimes frustrating, place to start our reading is a recent book from Monthly Review Press, *The Ecological Rift: Capitalism’s War on the Earth*. Coauthored by John Bellamy Foster, current editor of *Monthly Review* magazine, and two fellow environmental sociologists, Brett Clark and Richard York, *Ecological Rift* is arguably a bit too ambitious in its scope.

Addressing climate activists as well as socialists, taking sides in complex academic debates within both environmental sociology and biological ecology, and striving to integrate Marx’s intellectual legacy with recent environmental reports by global scientific bodies, this book sprawls at times. Several of its chapters (closely based on previously published journal articles) also are somewhat repetitive. It’s not a book that most people will read in one sitting, or in two.

A major strength of *Ecological Rift*, however, is that it rescues Marx’s reputation from misunderstandings about the labor theory of value and in fact demonstrates how Marx’s acceptance of Adam Smith’s earlier distinction between the “exchange values” – monetary values – of commodities and their physical “use values” helps to explain why capitalist societies are chronically driven to plunder the planet, for nothing more solid than mere money.

The authors also employ Marxist economics to explain how the compulsion to “accumulate” capital, by repeatedly investing money to generate profits, then reinvesting the proceeds in the search for even higher profits, drives capitalist economic systems to expand beyond all conceivable social and natural boundaries – towards long term ecological ruin.

A third major environmental flaw in capitalism, as the book’s title suggests, is the geographical “rift” it has historically made in natural ecological processes, notably the circulation of nutrients between human civilization and the soil.

As famed German chemist Justus von Liebig observed in the 1850s and as Marx noted afterwards in *Capital*, early industrial capitalism by uprooting rural peasants and converting them into a landless “proletariat” in large industrial cities, where they depended on food imported from the countryside, broke the tradition pattern of nutrients being returned to their places of origin through human excretion.

Capitalist agriculture instead “robbed the soil” by extracting minerals like nitrogen, phosphorous and calcium from place A and transporting them long distances to city B, von Liebig and Marx note. There they eventually reentered the environment in the form of water pollution – thus perpetuating environmental destruction at both ends of the food chain.

The development of a huge artificial fertilizer industry since Marx’s day means today agribusiness doesn’t destroy soil productivity nearly as fast as it once did, but severe pollution of lakes, rivers and even “dead spots” in the ocean from excessive fertilizer runoff has become a global problem, if not a crisis. And this “ecological rift” created by agribusiness seems likely to worsen as global capitalism ships foodstuffs increasingly long distances from the growers to the ultimate consumers.

Unfortunately the global “rift” in nutrient recycling and the crisis in global emissions of anthropogenic greenhouse gases represent just two out of 11 different ways in which today’s civilization is pressing dangerously past key environmental boundaries, the authors report. The acidification of the oceans from excessive CO<sub>2</sub> levels in the air, increasing extinction rates leading to global losses in biodiversity, excessive levels of freshwater use and the conversion of natural landscapes to other uses are some of the other effects of our basically capitalist global economy and its relentless expansionary drives.

Yet many existing and proposed environmental reforms aimed at curbing the global crisis are almost certain, because of the laws of capitalist growth and accumulation, to make it worse, according to *The Ecological Rift*.

The authors at the end of this long book then go on to outline the kind of eco-socialist revolution that they believe is ultimately necessary to stop the damage, through the “associated producers” (to quote Marx’s words in *Capital* Vol. 3) governing “the human metabolism with nature in a rational way, bringing it under their collective control ... accomplishing it with the least expenditure of energy and in conditions most worthy and appropriate for their human nature.”

The strategy by which Foster, Clark and York believe an “ecological proletariat” can accomplish this revolutionary goal is too complex (and in places fragmentary) to summarize easily here and is likely to strike at least some DSA members as unsatisfactory. The book suggests, for example, that Asian peasants with Maoist politics and South American followers of Hugo Chavez, Evo Morales of Bolivia and Rafael Correa of Ecuador are likely to be more pivotal to eco-socialist transformation than European-style social democrats.

Whether or not socialist history – including the checkered history of Leninism – truly justifies this focus on more Third World revolt is debatable. In any event, it’s to be hoped that democratic socialists will find some ways to make a global eco-transformation attractive to unionized US workers as well, even including some older white men, or the book’s vision of eco-socialist revolution could be a little too long time in arriving to avert global disasters.

Yet regardless of whether all socialists agree with each detail in *Ecological Rift*, the book represents a bold advance in progressive attempts to grapple with the theoretical causes as well as practical consequences of global environmental crisis. It will be good if DSA members can read it and learn from it in that light.

*This review essay also appears in the national DSA [environmental blog](#)*