

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

[Welcome to the May Day edition of the Washington Socialist](#)

Thursday, May 1st, 2014



Welcome to the May edition of the *Washington Socialist*, monthly email newsletter of the Metro DC Local of Democratic Socialists of America. We trust that your May Day is/has been the best and that some thought is bent to the internationalness and workerness of the holiday.

A cascade of conflicts led to the cancellation of the April general membership meeting and a postponement of elections to the Steering Committee. **That election will take place at the May meeting** at the Cleveland Park Library, 3310 Connecticut Ave NW, Saturday, May 10. The membership meeting and election are at 2:30; the steering committee meets at 1:00. Best Metrorail exit is Cleveland Park, about two blocks walk. Updates to this information are at our local's [Meetup site](#) .

Bill Mosley reminds us that Metro-DC Democratic Socialists of America is a sponsor of DC Laborfest, a month-long festival of film, theater, history, poetry, music, books and art celebrating the U.S. labor movement past and present.

The annual festival, organized by the Metro Washington Council, AFL-CIO, kicks off May 1 with a wreath-laying in Silver Spring to honor legendary labor organizer Mary Harris “Mother” Jones’ 184th birthday. Other highlights include a film at AFL-CIO headquarters on labor organizer/artist Ralph Fasanella, along with an exhibit on his works at the Smithsonian’s American Art Museum; a tribute to Pete Seeger by organizer/singer Joe Uehlein; and a showing of *The Salt of the Earth*, the legendary film on the struggles of Mexican/American workers.

Most of the festival’s films will be shown at AFI Silver Theatre in Silver Spring. Other events will take place at various locations in the Washington area. Visit www.dclabor.org for a complete schedule and ticket prices.

IN THIS MAY DAY ISSUE:

April’s Socialist Salon, our monthly get-together, was one of the most fertile and productive in memory. The subject was the sometimes bewildering anatomy of today’s socialist Left, and

detailed handouts prepared by members were the germ of a productive confab. To keep that conversation going, the *Washington Socialist* leads this issue with a **descriptive catalog of socialist left organizations** in the US. [Read complete article](#)

In June, we'll follow up with an essay on the history of the US Left that attempts to trace the lineage of today's organizations from the early days. The essay, by frequent contributor Andy Feeney, will be curated and commented upon by other participants in the Salon – and by readers of the *Washington Socialist*, who are invited to chime in at whatever length and level of detail you choose. Subsequent issues will explore different thematic takes on the unfortunately divided US Left, with an emphasis on DSA's place in the dissonant choir. Salons, generally the third Thursday of each month, are also noted on the Meetup page.

Also in this issue:

Kurt Stand gives us a deep, rich portrait of **the annual Split This Rock poetry slam** in downtown D.C. and its roots in the poetry of rebellion, class consciousness and oppression going back to Shelley and the Romantics. [Read complete article](#)

Bill Mosley, in an annual tradition, reminds us of the **value of May Day**. David Duhalde reminds us that other nations celebrate May Day in different ways. His trip to Vietnam bore that out, but in a fashion that one wouldn't always expect. [Read complete article](#)

Bill Boteler takes on the latest voluminous report by the **Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change** (IPCC), the UN-authorized group of scientists whose work in recent years has set the template for serious scientific approaches to the many threats implicit in rising temperatures due to human use of fossil fuels. A fined-down consideration of threats and policy options is distilled from the huge report. [Read complete article](#)

H.R. 1000, a **bill initiated by frequent DSA ally Rep. John Conyers** of Michigan, couples a proposed transactions tax imposed on Wall Street's casino with job creation and workforce training that would be financed by the revenue. DSA has been at the table with other groups pushing this project, and Andy Feeney reports on the latest angles and new co-sponsors. [Read complete article](#)

The **Maryland General Assembly's** three-month session, which ended in early April, provided some real advances (the raised minimum wage foremost among them) but real disappointments as well (the raised minimum wage among them, paradoxically). Woody Woodruff provides a brief roundup of the session. [Read complete article](#)

An organization of scientists with both radical, and deeply establishment roots flourished in the 1970s and '80s. Dan Adkins reports on a recent historical conference that surveyed the roots and role of **Science for the People**, which still has feisty remnants right in our area. [Read complete article](#)

In this month's **Good Reads**, heavy coverage of Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the 21st Century* is joined by more consideration of climate change and the challenges it presents to work and to conventional notions of the primacy of economic growth. And more. [Read complete article](#)

BOOKS

Some books are about today's and tomorrow's news. As regulators scramble to catch up with technology's effects on the financial markets, Andy Feeney reviews **Michael Lewis's *Flash Boys: A Wall Street Revolt*** which has focused attention on potentially billions in losses to investors because of microsecond differences in computerized trading. Public attention sparked by this book could encourage tighter rules for traders and institutions as threats of another bubble are emerging. [Read complete article](#)

The increasing consolidation of giant telecommunications corporations like Comcast and Time Warner Cable — and the few remaining phone companies — has likewise raised concerns about monopoly pricing for poor infrastructure and slow service in both TV and the Internet. Add to that the Federal Communications Commission's apparent willingness to give away the store on net neutrality to those same giant oligopolies, and Susan Crawford's account of how the regulators came to be captured by big money in ***Captive Audience: The Telecom Industry and Monopoly Power in the New Gilded Age*** is also today's news. Woody Woodruff reviews the book and its radical insights. [Read complete article](#)

In a complementary article, Carolyn Byerly outlines the battleground as the FCC considers both the proposed Comcast/Time Warner Cable merger and **new rules for who rules the Net** – and shows where you can make your voice heard. [Read complete article](#)

You can receive this newsletter, with links to full articles, in your email inbox the first of every month. Email woodlanham@gmail.com

[Conyers 'Jobs for All' Bill Wins Backing of Activist Groups, Local Governments; Staff Eyes Outreach to Business](#)

***The Washington Socialist* <> May 2014**

By Andy Feeney

Significant momentum seems to be growing for HR 1000, the “Jobs for All” bill introduced this year by longtime DSA ally Rep. John Conyers (D-MI). There is virtually no chance of this legislation passing so long as the Republicans keep their House majority, but Conyers, his staff and ‘jobs for all’ supporters are working to educate different constituencies around the nation about HR 1000's provisions for federally funded jobs creation programs backed up by a small financial transaction tax (FTT). The strategy is to build public support for “jobs for all legislation” gradually, although there is no chance of its immediate passage, so as to improve its political odds of future enactment.

Among progressive groups, there is growing support for the idea of an FTT, although the idea is currently opposed by the Obama administration as well as congressional Republicans. Among other groups, the Congressional Progressive Caucus and the left-leaning National Nurses United (NNU) have made adoption of an FTT or “Robin Hood tax” a priority. In April, too, there were

a flurry of media articles calling for such a tax, following publication of Michael Lewis's new best-selling book *Flash Boys* (see WS book review, this issue).

A Cornell University professor quoted recently in the *New York Times* stated that from a public policy perspective, adoption of a national FTT is "a no-brainer," and on April 8, the *Times* editorial board stated, "There are several good [social justice} arguments for a financial transactions tax ... It would also curb speculation, making the banking system more stable."

Whether the response of the liberal-to-progressive media to the Lewis book will make passage of an FTT feasible this year seems doubtful, but in the meantime organizing by the Conyers staff for HR 1000 has been going ahead on its own.

According to Jenny Perrino, who as legislative aide to Conyers has spearheaded his office's work on HR 1000, at least 57 members of the House have now signed on as cosponsors of the bill. As of early April, the newest cosponsor was Rep. Marcy Kaptur (D-OH), who has now hired Perrino as her chief of staff, a sign that Kaptur, along with Conyers, may make the jobs issue a priority in coming months. A new Conyers staffer, Eric Sperling, will replace Perrino as point person on HR 1000 for Conyers.

Conyers aides have now contacted about 100 different organizations to drum up support for the jobs bill, Perrino reported at an April 9 meeting attended by 14 individuals in Conyers' office, as well as others who participated by teleconferencing.

Participants at the April 9 meeting included representatives of the Gray Panthers, the national Catholic social justice lobby Network, the Gamaliel religious fellowship in Texas, and the AFL-CIO central labor council of Dayton, OH. Also taking part was author D.W. Gibson, of the Not Working Project in Pittsburgh.

The National Urban League did not have a representative at the meeting, but the Urban League's 2014 State of Black America report is titled *One Nation Unemployed: Jobs Rebuild America*. The report focuses in part on the crisis of unemployment and underemployment among African Americans and other communities of color, and features among other things a commentary by Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake of Baltimore describing initiatives that Baltimore is taking to drive job creation and reduce the gap between the city's haves and have-nots.

Progressive Democrats of America (PDA) is another organization that is helping to promote HR 1000, Perrino stated at the meeting. Still another organization that is interested in the issue is the industry-backed Opportunities Industrial Council (OIC), whose leadership is apparently reasoning that "business benefits when people are employed," as Perrino put it at the meeting.

The recently created House Employment Caucus will play a key role in promoting HR 1000 going forward, Conyers chief of staff Cynthia Martin said at the April 9 meeting. Martin added, "We think this bill transcends politics," suggesting that it might appeal even to moderate-to-conservative legislators who are concerned about poor people becoming excessively dependent on Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits under the TANF or Temporary Assistance to Needy Families program.

Conyers seems likely to put some effort into reaching out to business groups in his further efforts to get HR 1000 adopted, judging from what was said at the April 9 meeting. Conyers himself stated at the meeting that federally funded job creation efforts should be in the interests of small businesses, and one of the materials distributed to participants was a printed version of an [April 9](#) blog op-ed by Conyers that appeared in *The Huffington Post*, stating that even wealthy Americans should reject the harsh pro-austerity budget proposed by the GOP's House Budget Committee chairman Rep. Paul Ryan.

“Here’s a surprise about the Ryan budget: its drastic cuts would be painful even for the nation’s wealthiest one percent,” the *Huffington Post* op-ed said. The piece goes on to state:

“Successful CEOs understand that America will never be able to compete with China and India on the basis of low wages. Rather, our nation needs to compete on the basis of world-class skills and technical expertise. To do so, we must ensure access to infant nutrition, universal pre-school, well-funded public schools with reasonably sized classes, after-school enrichment programs, and affordable colleges and technical schools.”

The Conyers op-ed further argues that wealthy American investors have an interest in rejecting the Ryan budget because Republican-style austerity would reduce the purchasing power of lower-income Americans, at a time when a “shortage of consumer demand is stifling economic growth, hurting housing market recovery, and denying businesses the customers they need in order to make payroll and turn a profit.”

Thus when the House votes on a budget plan this spring, the editorial concludes, “the choice is not between serving the rich or the poor. It’s a choice between investing in broad-based prosperity and continuing a failed experiment of austerity.”

To the extent that democratic socialists continue to support Conyers in his efforts to champion the establishment of a national financial transaction tax to underwrite job creation by state, local and national government, therefore, it may well be that we end up supporting legislation that will be sold under pro-capitalist auspices, and in the supposed self-interest of even the richest “1 percent.”

On the other hand, it is difficult to imagine how Conyers and his staff might hope to get HR 1000 adopted within the reasonably foreseeable future by relying only on the weak and divided U.S. left, especially given the role that big money obviously plays in Washington politics and given the importance of large campaign donors to both major political parties.

Comments and printed materials distributed at the April 9 meeting indicate that Conyers and staff will be taking part in a number of events over coming months to promote the “jobs for all” agenda. One event tentatively scheduled for May will be a meeting to facilitate the collaboration of the business-backed OIC with the House Employment Caucus.

Conyers’ office also will be collaborating with the Gamaliel “Jobs For All Campaign” as it seeks to influence the revision of three federal workforce regulations in the coming months. These provisions relate to hiring of women and minorities on federal contracts, oversight of

apprenticeship programs in the construction industry and the targeting of jobs and job training to low-income people under various Department of Housing and Urban Development programs.

Conyers also was scheduled to visit Dayton and Cincinnati in April to build support for HR 1000 among Democratic politicians in Ohio and to visit Pittsburgh in mid-May to promote the legislation in Pennsylvania. A longer-term goal is to prepare an impressive presentation on the jobs bill for the annual Congressional Black Caucus Conference that will take place in the fall.

Metro DC DSA representatives have attended most of the regular meetings on HR 1000 that Conyers has held over the past year and will continue to monitor the progress of organizing around the legislation.

[DC Local weighs in on net neutrality, cable megamerger](#)

Tuesday, May 13th, 2014

METRO DC DSA POSITION STATEMENT

ON COMCAST-TWC MERGER AND NET NEUTRALITY RULEMAKING

Adopted by the Steering Committee of DC-Metro DSA

May 10, 2014

Members of the DC-Metro chapter of Democratic Socialists of America oppose the proposed merger of Comcast and Time Warner Cable (MB Docket No. 14-57). The merger, if allowed, would privilege wealthy cable companies over the interests of a majority of the people in the United States. If merged, the new parent company would control 19 of the largest 20 markets in the nation, something that approximates a monopoly. With that kind of economic power, cable customers would see escalating subscription fees, something that would put access out of reach for those in low-income families. Most low-income families are minorities, a fact that should not be overlooked. Lack of access to cable would also affect access to broadband/Internet services, something that would expand the digital divide between the haves and have-nots. Another aspect in the proposed merger often overlooked is the anticipated layoff of hundreds, perhaps thousands of employees.

We believe this clear worst-case instance of the effects of corporate consolidation should move the FCC to consider the essential public-utility quality of cable and internet services and declare these entities common carriers, governed by the agency's public-interest mandate and subject to regulation to ensure net neutrality in its full meaning

As the decision heads toward a vote, we urge Commissioners to remember that the Internet was created and developed largely at taxpayer expense. We believe that this resource, now privatized for profit, should remain widely and fairly available to all in the spirit of public interest.

This statement was passed at the May 10 membership meeting and posted on the FCC comments section (www.fcc.gov/comments) May 13.

Good Reads: the May Day edition

Good Reads for Socialists in May

The Young Democratic Socialists' Red Letter is out with coverage of their February conference: http://www.ydsusa.org/red_letter_s14

Cities are doing their own thing when it comes to combating inequality – a problem that is getting no traction at the national level. The *New York Times*'s take on this focuses on Seattle but has a good chart and some useful links. It's a start...

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/07/business/economy/cities-advancing-inequality-fight.html?action=click&contentCollection=U.S.®ion=Footer&module=MoreInSection&pgtype=article>

Grist, a feisty rad-enviro site, reports on a plan to take the Occupy spirit and method to small towns and locate the movement sustainably... <http://grist.org/politics/an-occupy-founder-says-the-next-revolution-will-be-rural/>

Kurt Stand provides Joe Uehlein's Earth Day meditation on labor and the environment, from *Portside* <https://portside.org/2014-04-21/earth-day-labor-and-me>

PIKETTY's US TOUR – Thomas Piketty, the economist who wrote the hot new book *Capital in the 21st Century*, did a US tour in April that included a local stop at the Economic Policy Institute April 15 – so of course they talked about taxes, but less than you would think. You can watch him talk and respond to a panel that included the magisterial and twinkly Nobel laureate Robert Solow, here http://www.epi.org/event/thomas-piketty-wealth-income-inequality/?utm_source=Economic+Policy+Institute&utm_campaign=8f26523855-Piketty_04_14_2014_14_2014&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_e7c5826c50-8f26523855-55958357

The next day Piketty visited the graduate center at City University of New York. See that event here <http://www.thenation.com/article/179195/livestream-thomas-piketty-inequality-inevitable>

And a writer for The Nation reviewed Piketty's book along with numerous other contributions to the inequality debate, in a quite impressive pocket history essay on the fortunes of Marxism and the term it invented – capitalism – over the years. Today's writers, including the *Jacobin* stable, are not spared, and consideration of Piketty's weighty work is a centerpiece. It's at <http://www.thenation.com/article/179337/thomas-piketty-and-millennial-marxists-scourge-inequality>

Still more on Piketty (who has become a celeb, obviously, marked by the fact that both David Brooks and Paul Krugman had [columns about him](#) on April 25). Here's a softish take by Matthew Iglesias on Vox, the new newsstuff website... <http://www.vox.com/2014/4/24/5643780/who-is-thomas-piketty>

Another take on Piketty by our sometime former member Bhaskar Sunkara of Jacobin, writing in Al Jazeera Online... <http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/4/thomas-piketty-capitalism21stcentury.html>

The US role in the world: A local DSA member who blogs under his initials discussed (in March) the twin preoccupations (or deformations) of 'nation-building' and modernization in U.S. foreign policy:

<http://howlatpluto.blogspot.com/2014/03/nation-building-and-modernization-as.html>

The argument that inequality is due to technological change and a "skills gap" is given a good roughing up in this piece by economist Colin Gordon in *Dissent* – tx to Ben Krieder for giving this a ride on Facebook... <http://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/the-computer-did-it-technology-and-inequality>

Sam Pizzigatti's "Too Much" blog (from IPS) focuses on inequality and wretched excess. Lead this time: the contemptible behavior of the hyper-nouveaux riches in Palo Alto (Silicon Valley, doncha know) Calif., who have criminalized sleeping in cars. Whatever happened to respect for property? Check it out at <http://www.toomuchonline.org/tmweekly.html>

The proposed merger of two giant cable/telcom companies (Comcast and Time Warner Cable) is in gestation now, just as the FCC is considering new rules that some say could endanger the openness of the Internet, and privilege big-money users like the cable giants. We have a review essay on Susan Crawford's new history of this conflict (see main contents) and here's a piece from the Atlantic explaining net neutrality that trends seriously nerdy and has links to even nerdier material. Be warned. <http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2014/04/the-best-writing-on-net-neutrality/361237/>

Discussion of climate change is moving steadily from remediation to mitigation – the news is that bad. Recent posts include a whole package from *The Nation* for Earth Day, such as this suggestion that this be the last Earth Day: <http://www.thenation.com/blog/179375/let-earth-day-be-last>

And another big take from Naomi Klein, whose *Nation* article of several years back changed many readers' perspectives on what's possible... now saying our timing couldn't be worse: "Climate change is a collective problem demanding collective action the likes of which humanity has never actually accomplished. Yet it entered mainstream consciousness in the midst of an ideological war being waged on the very idea of the collective sphere."

<http://www.thenation.com/article/179460/change-within-obstacles-we-face-are-not-just-external#>

From *Grist*, the enviro newsletter, another way to view the politics of climate change – through the lens of history... <http://grist.org/climate-energy/is-climate-change-the-new-slavery/>

And from the Guardian, yet another label, and another look at who actually is suffering the most from climate change. Not will suffer, is suffering. The evidence mounts...

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/apr/07/climate-change-violence-occupy-earth>

[Happy International Workers' Day, the Real "Labor Day"](#)

The Washington Socialist <> May 2014

May 1 will mark the 128th 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. – *Bill Mosley*

May Day in Vietnam

By David Duhalde

In the spring of 2005, I was on the extended vacation experienced by millions of middle-class and wealthier American youth: study abroad. I studied at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, and even interned at the *China Labour Bulletin* – an NGO focused on helping mainland workers. This opportunity also allowed me to travel throughout the region. With a Canadian friend, I spent two-weeks in Vietnam including Reunification Day (April 30) and Workers Day (May 1).

Since the mid-1980s, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam had undergone Doi Moi; its own form of capitalist restoration like the People's Republic of China. Vietnam, however, under my observations, had significantly less of an open break with Marxism-Leninism and embracement of consumerism. Unlike in my visits to China, I saw pictures and statues of Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin. The sections of the country that I saw abstained from blatant corporate advertising. Driving down a country road, instead of billboards for consumer goods there was government propaganda. However, the signs spent less time praising the glories of state socialism and more on AIDS prevention advocacy.

The timing of my trip coincided with the 30th anniversary of the fall of Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) on April 30, 1975. Reunification Day and May Day were always back-to-back, but that year saw even larger festivities including a visit by future Cuban President Raul Castro. Castro's attendance meant the cities were filled with Spanish-language banners. With my poor Spanish skills, I read one placard: "Cuba and Vietnam, Together Shall Overcome." What exactly they were overcoming was never specified.

As May Day drew closer, my curiosity was filled with stock footage of mandatory Soviet May Day parades. I predicted the same still happened in Vietnam. So I dragged my friend to tourist information desks pleading for parade details. At one point trying hand gesturing "Cuba" to a confused civil servant, which my travel mate has never let me forget. May 1st came without Stalinist marching. Instead, we found most people enjoying the day off. At night, we looked for dinner and found a restaurant. It appeared to be open, but actually the staff was cooking and eating together. Their solidarity with each other embodied the true spirit of Labor Day in a way no march ever could. Sometimes, the workers of the world have to relax, too.

[History conference remembers radical group, Science for the People](#)

***The Washington Socialist* <> May 2014**

By Daniel Adkins

Science for the People (SftP) is a leftist group that was mainly active in the 70s and 80s. It was the topic of a science history conference at University of Massachusetts in Amherst this April. The conference was supported by a grant from the National Science Foundation. The conference was a multi-generational meeting with older SftP types, professors, and students.

The conference detailed the history of SftP. One lineage was by elite physicists involved in creating the atomic bomb and other military research. Often scientists were hired for non-nuclear research and later told that their funds were in jeopardy if they could not take on weapons projects too. During the Cold War much of physics research was funded by the U.S. military. Today the sciences have broader support. Sadly some of this funding for mathematicians and physicists is from Wall Street in efforts to rig the stock market for instantaneous profits for the 1% while our long-term sustainability is in jeopardy.

The other influence for SftP was politicized progressives and lefties in the sciences. There were many SftP chapters including the Helen Keller (a socialist) collective in Boston which published many copies of the magazine. SftP is unique in that it points out how capitalism focuses on profits for the few and subverts the social use of its products. An example is how our farms and food industry are more concerned with selling and creating needs for their products (creating addiction to sugar), then to meeting the need for healthy food products. The food industry also cognitively captures the U. S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to meet the needs of industry which is why some progressive food experts press for the need to move the definition of the national diet from USDA to the Center for Disease Control (CDC) which has a health focus.

The original SftP group had a reputation of breaking up regular American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) meetings to get their members' voices heard. This may seem crass, but often these meetings were run by defense scientists who were intent on not having their research questioned. In one meeting a defense scientist who was being considered to lead the AAAS, was loudly accused by SftP of crimes of science against the people. The SftP speaker had surrounded himself with activists to avoid being interrupted by the police. This event hit the newspapers.

Today the Department of Defense is still a major employer of scientists, but is not the only major actor. Some corporations try to invent the future making us even more connected, but many just use science as a way to make profits. Capitalism has significantly captured our legislative and the executive branches to feed profits to the businesses as opposed to moving us to a sustainable and healthy future.

Washington is lucky to have the last SftP chapter and this bonus is mainly due to progressive professors and students at Howard University. Some of the issues they focus on are:

- * climate change
- * the militarization of science
- * agricultural science and food justice
- * the scientific construction of race and gender

For information on Science for the People check out:

Science for the People Conference : <http://science-for-the-people.org>

DC Metro Science for the People: <http://www.dcmetroftp.org>

SftP magazines can be found at:

<http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~schwartz/SftP/MagazineArchive/MagTOCs.html>

[Maryland Legislature: Showy, but hard on workers and the poor](#)

The Washington Socialist <> May 2014

By Woody Woodruff

A pretty uneventful, rancor-free budget process and the ballyhoo over passage of a minimum wage increase and decriminalization of marijuana in the Maryland General Assembly's 2014 session masked some major disappointments for progressive ideas and forces when the session ended in early April. The vaunted minimum wage bill was a priority of Gov. Martin O'Malley. But his proposal was gutted by House committee action by the time it emerged, extending the phase-in period to reach a level of \$10.10 per hour to 2018, two years more than originally formulated. Tipped workers were left in the trough they are in now, with a proportional attempt to raise their wages stripped out in the House bill. And a measure to allow the wage to rise further with inflation after 2018 was removed.

But at least the minimum wage bill passed. The Earned Sick and Safe Leave Act that would have allowed 700,000 uncovered Maryland workers to earn paid sick leave failed for the second year in the Economic Matters Committee of the House, [one of many casualties](#) of the persistent pro-business, anti-worker bias carefully built into the committee systems of both chambers. Significant numbers of food service workers, for instance, will need to go to work sick in order not to be fired.

A "Maryland Second Chance Act" (HB1166) that would have enabled ex-offenders to clear their records for the purpose of seeking employment three years after release failed because House and Senate couldn't agree on their respective amendments, though it was passed by both chambers.

As noted in a previous *Washington Socialist* article, a bill supported by labor leaders and peace activists providing for a Maryland Futures Commission that would have planned a post-Pentagon path for the state's workforce was [sideswiped by the leadership](#), which pre-empted it with a study committee of safe centrists appointed by Senate President Mike Miller and House Speaker Mike Busch.

A "Democracy Amendment" that would have committed the state to an "Article V" constitutional convention of the states with the express purpose of reversing the Citizens United Supreme Court decision came close to passage by the Senate as the Assembly's last night of work April 7 descended to its normal chaos. A dispatch from the activist group [Get Money Out – Maryland](#) reported that Senate President Mike Miller was forced to quash the passage by invoking the specter of a "runaway convention" with bad consequences. So "now we know where our main barrier lies" for a success in 2015, the group asserted.

The Assembly rushed to placate business interests and the wealthy by raising the exclusion on the state's estate tax to the federal level. Now an estate must be well over \$5 million to be subject to the estate tax, where before estates of \$1 million or more fell under the tax. That would allow more large estates to escape paying a fair share and staunch a "millionaire drain" apparently perceived by alarmists on the business right – who always have an ear in the Assembly. According to the narrative, the really rich are relocating official residences in other, better states to die. The Assembly's chief financial policy analyst predicted a revenue loss of \$80-90 million a year. Suggestions that a better tax relief move would be to cut the regressive sales tax or increase the Earned Income Tax Credit, [noted in the Baltimore Sun](#), did not find takers in the Assembly.

So, for many progressive causes and bills, it is “wait till next year.” For the Assembly, it was business as usual.

[Michael Lewis’s New Expose of Wall Street Predators: Can It Build Support for a US Financial Transaction Tax?](#)

***The Washington Socialist* <> May 2014**

By Andy Feeney

Book Review of *Flash Boys: A Wall Street Revolt*, by Michael Lewis. W.H. Norton and Company: New York and London (2014). 274 pages, hardcover; \$27.95.

There are two good reasons DSA members may want to read this new financial expose by best-selling author Michael Lewis. The first is that it’s an enjoyable read – a journalistic expose of some very convoluted double-dealing in the securities market that reads surprisingly like a good mystery novel. The second reason is that in the roughly four weeks that have passed since its March 31 publication, *Flash Boys* has become politically important.

A flurry of media coverage has relayed to millions of Americans Lewis’s conclusion that a small circle of high-tech “High Frequency Trading” (HFT) firms has found ways to siphon off hundreds of billions of dollars from U.S. financial markets, and that HFT traders are now gouging more traditional investors ranging from union pension funds to big hedge funds while creating dangerous market instability in the process.

Lewis has been interviewed on *60 Minutes*, for example; certain critics of his conclusions and their applicability to small investors have nonetheless thanked him for drawing attention to the risks of HFT traders potentially destabilizing the securities markets; and a reporter in *BloombergNews/Businessweek* recently noted that a survey of financial industry participants showed that 51 percent now think of HFT trading as a “serious” or “very serious” problem.

Perhaps coincidentally, new investigations of HFT trading have recently been announced by the FBI and the New York Attorney General’s Office. And progressives who have long wanted to curb the excessive growth of U.S. financial markets by enacting a national Financial Transaction Tax (FTT), otherwise known as a “Tobin Tax” or “Robin Hood Tax,” have seized on *Flash Boys* as evidence that the United States needs a “flash tax” to tackle exactly the sort of predatory trading Lewis describes.

Washington D.C.’s *The Hill* recently quoted Rep. Peter DeFazio (D-OR) and Rep. Keith Ellison (D-MN), for example, on an FTT’s potential ability to cure some of the problems Lewis portrays. Articles and editorials linking *Flash Boys* and proposals for an FTT also have appeared in *Salon*, the *Guardian*, the AFL-CIO’s blog, the *Huffington Post*, the *Christian Science Monitor* and the *New York Times*, although some observers caution that there are still strong headwinds against such a tax, from both Republicans and the Obama White House.

Socialists who support a national FTT therefore may want to give *Flash Boys* a glance, if only to find political ammunition. But a second excellent reason for picking up the book is that Lewis is a talented

writer, with an almost novelistic sense of plot and character development, and in *Flash Boys* as in several previous exposes he succeeds in making technical explanations of obscure financial scams surprisingly pleasurable to read – pleasurable, and often very funny.

In *Flash Boys*' introduction, Lewis writes that his idea for the book began when he read of a rather unworldly Russian-born computer programmer, one Sergei Aleynikov, being arrested by the FBI for allegedly stealing from Goldman Sachs, his former employer, a rather small amount of computer code. According to prosecutors, this code, if placed in the wrong hands, could be used to “manipulate the market in unfair ways.”

Well, Lewis recalls wondering, if it was dangerous to the markets in the “wrong” hands, how safe would it be if it remained with Goldman Sachs?

With this, Lewis introduces the reader to a brave new world of HFT trading firms that has taken off rapidly in just the last few years. About half of *Flash Boys* describes the ways in which some very smart start-up HFT firms as well as several major investment banks (the banks, however, proving much less adept at HFT than their nimbler small rivals) have discovered how to game an increasingly computerized U.S. securities business for their own enrichment.

In the process of perfecting HFT trading, Lewis concludes, the “flash boys” have quietly skimmed off hundreds of billions of dollars – no one knows exactly how much – from traditional institutional investors. The investors victimized, for example, have included large hedge funds, traditional union pension funds and such commercial money managers as T. Rowe Price, Charles Schwab and Janus Capital.

The book's second half, more or less, offers Lewis's account of how a peculiar collection of financial industry misfits gradually puzzled out the ways in which the HFT world was being gamed. We then learn how these reformers have apparently invented an effective strategy – effective for now, anyway — to shield more traditional investors from the predators. But whether the fix for investors is extensive enough to shield securities markets from the larger, potentially destabilizing activities of HFT traders is a question now worrying some financial analysts, and Lewis's gnomic last chapter expresses quiet skepticism over whether any fix can be final in an ever-evolving financial world where rampant greed intersects routinely with high technology.

Central to Lewis's story is an account of how apparently well-intentioned financial regulations have combined with advanced computer technology and high-speed fiber optics to transform U.S. stock markets since 1987. It was in 1987 that an unexpected glitch in the New York Stock Exchange caused a sudden, one-day drop of roughly 33 percent in the average values of securities traded, although the financial markets then recovered almost instantly afterwards.

Because of the misbehavior of certain individual brokers during in the 1987 mini-crash – some simply stopped taking phone calls, leaving terrified clients unable to respond to the news – U.S. financial regulators passed new rules requiring most securities trading in the future to be done automatically, via computer.

Thus while many Americans still think of the stock market as occurring in the New York Stock Exchange building on Wall Street, Lewis notes that today's trading is mostly done without face-to-face human interaction, by computer, over 13 separate electronic exchanges located on big servers in northern New Jersey. A separate computerized exchange services the futures market in Chicago, which is an important but ancillary story to the main tale Lewis tells.

Over the years since 1987, Lewis notes, a series of added regulations, culminating in a 2005 rule called Regulation National Market System or “Reg NMS,” have attempted to keep computerized investment firms from cheating their own customers by requiring the traders to seek out the very best market prices for any given customer in any given buy or sell transaction.

Unfortunately, the ironic result of Reg NMS, combined with high-speed computers and the fragmentation of the securities market into separate markets, is that today, trading firms that can conduct their business just a few microseconds faster than other investors can now prey on their more traditional rivals, especially the bigger ones, through “front running.”

Thanks to Reg NMS, a large traditional investor like a pension fund or an investment bank, when it buys or sells a large block of stock – say, one involving hundreds of thousands of shares – legally must first survey the 13 different exchanges to find which offers the very best price.

However, the differing speeds of the computer algorithms in different trading firms, plus seemingly trivial differences in the efficiency and lengths of the fiber optic cables carrying orders to the different New Jersey exchanges, inevitably ensures that trading orders arrive at different exchanges at very slightly different times.

A smart, predatory high-speed trader with faster processing times than everyone else thus can determine, from monitoring the fastest exchange in the system, just what stock a big traditional investor is hoping to trade at a given time of day, and at what price range. The HFT predator then offers to buy or sell the security in question at a slightly higher or lower price than that originally offered by the market, and trades it nanoseconds later with the traditional investor – at a tiny profit per share for the HFT trader, and a tiny loss per share for the traditional investor. Yet those tiny profits and losses per share amount to billions of dollars in revenues over time, due to the enormous volume of transactions happening annually.

As Lewis puts it, the net effect of the new world that Reg NMS, the fiber optics revolution and HFT traders have together created is to guarantee that since 2007, about 70 percent of all securities transactions in the United States have recently taken place through the functional equivalent of an imaginary intermediary firm, one that we could call “Scalpers, Inc.”

“Scalpers, Inc.,” as Lewis portrays it, interposes itself between potential buyers and sellers in each trade, forcing both to accept slightly worse prices than they might otherwise enjoy by trading directly. By placing itself between buyers and sellers, Scalpers, Inc. also multiplies the number of trades occurring in securities markets – according to industry statistics, more than 50 percent of all transactions in these markets have recently been conducted by HFT firms. Moreover, the HFT traders inside Scalpers, Inc. have powerful incentives both for fragmenting securities markets into more and more sub-markets, and for working to create more volatility – more price swings – in markets, since it’s largely by exploiting price swings and market fragmentation that the HFT firms make money.

Partly to protect themselves against HFT traders, Lewis notes, traditional investment banks have found regulatory loopholes allowing them to do much of their trading in so-called “dark pools” within their own institutions. Recently, about 30 percent of securities transactions in the U.S. have occurred inside these dark pools, where transactions are opaque to the outside world – and in theory to HFT traders, but also to financial regulators and the banks’ clients. Unfortunately, there is no guarantee that a bank will not exploit customers in its dark pool for its own gain, nor that it will never sell access to its pool to HFT predators, if they offer enough money. The dark pools thus offer little protection to investors against being scalped.

The hopelessly nerdy Sergei Aleynikov, Lewis concludes, was considered dangerous by Goldman Sachs because he had spent two years inside the firm devising programs to speed up Goldman’s outdated

computer system, basically so Goldman could increase its trading speeds compared to its smaller HFT rivals. Essentially, Aleynikov had helped Goldman in an attempt to become a HFT trading firm itself – although in the long run, Lewis believes, Goldman’s management has deemed this impossible, and has apparently left the business.

As Lewis portrays him, Aleynikov was truly fascinated by the programming challenge involved in speeding up Goldman’s trading system and amazingly uninterested in what his employer might do with it. The whole business of trading securities for profit was just a form of gambling, Aleynikov apparently thought, and not worth serious attention. But writing good computer code was fun, creative, and even potentially good for the world, so Aleynikov focused on it while observing the mere money-making activities of his Goldman colleagues with bemusement.

When he was convicted and briefly imprisoned for his alleged theft of code that he himself had created from open-source software found on the Internet, Aleynikov was an odd enough character to consider his time in jail a valuable experience, although he was willing enough to leave the place once his conviction was thrown out on appeal.

Lewis’s description of Aleynikov’s idealistic personality and his genial alienation from the competitive, financially driven characters around him offers one of several novelistic pleasures to be found in *Flash Boys*, one even readers with little grasp of Wall Street can appreciate.

There are many other quirky personalities explored in *Flash Boys* as well. In this book, just as he did in *The Big Short*, a funny yet horrifying look at the financial follies preceding the 2007-2008 crash in the securitized mortgages market, Lewis structures his exploration of a complex financial reality by examining it through the shifting viewpoints of succeeding major and minor characters, each with a peculiar — and hence interesting — personality and background.

What could have been a dry lecture about basically incomprehensible flows of money and technology thus acquires a human face, indeed a series of them, and readers are likely to come away from Lewis’s mosaic portrait of HFT trading with affection for many of the characters portrayed, possibly including some of the villains.

At the end of *Flash Boys*, an eccentric posse of reformers led by Brad Katsuyama, a former trader with the Royal Bank of Canada, has apparently invented a new way of doing securities trading that can block the HFT predators and free traditional investors from their baleful power. No less a Wall Street icon than Goldman Sachs itself appears to be backing the reformers’ invention, which is also embraced by many other big names on Wall Street, including some hedge funds that have rarely been accused of financial altruism in the past. Thus *Flash Boys*, unlike some other Lewis exposes, ends with the good guys winning – again, for now.

From a Marxist and a socialist perspective, there is a certain amount of pure nonsense to be found in *Flash Boys*, which may be why many mainstream media like it. For example, Lewis at one point suggests that “front ending” by high-frequency traders, by skimming off billions in profits from the securities business, has the bad effect of reducing the flow of investors’ dollars into productive investments in the real economy.

As leftist financial writer Doug Henwood wrote in *Wall Street* (1987) and as other financial analysts also point out, this is at best debatable. Except for investments in Initial Public Offerings (IPOs), most trading of stocks and bonds in our economy is merely secondary trade in already-issued securities. It does nothing directly to place capital in productive, real-world enterprises that can use the money to employ

workers and use up natural resources while producing actual commodities. Instead, trading in the secondary markets mostly makes different traders richer or poorer.

Admittedly, improved stock prices can make it easier for a popular company to borrow capital for expansion, which does affect the real world, and swings in prices can be a big factor in the long-term health of a union pension fund or commercial investment firm handling middle class 401-K accounts. But the money the HFT traders have been taking from large hedge fund managers, say, is probably not being diverted from the Main Street economy very much.

In an early passage of the book, Lewis also paraphrases Katsuyama to the effect that “the U.S. Stock market was now a class system, rooted in speed, of haves and have-nots.” That seems reasonable in light of Lewis’s general theme, but he then adds: “What had once been the world’s most public, most democratic, financial market had become, in spirit, something more like a private viewing of a stolen work of art.” Given what Lewis himself has written about Wall Street in earlier books, calling it “the world’s most public, most democratic financial market” is just silly. And Lewis himself seems to contradict this statement soon afterward in his saga.

Elsewhere in *Flash Boys*, Lewis offers some sharp, disturbing insights about the disruptive effects of new technology, not only on older Americans and poor children on the wrong side of the digital divide, but even on some of capitalism’s elites.

Thus one of the more profane members of Katsuyama’s reform team, an Irish-born technology manager named Ronan who bristles at being condescended to by arrogant traders who make fortunes by relying on his work, says of his former colleagues: “I realized very quickly, and they’ll admit this, so I mean no disrespect, that they had no fucking clue what they were doing.”

What was true of most securities traders in 2010, Lewis writes, also was true of most officials at the Securities and Exchange Commission when first informed about HFT. To quote Lewis, when HFT trading was becoming common, “stock market regulators did not possess the information they needed to understand the stock markets.” Similarly clueless about HFT trading were high-level executives at some 500 major investment firms, overseeing the investing of trillions of dollars, whom Katsuyama’s team had contacted by the end of 2010.

In a sense, *Flash Boys* illustrates a phrase popularized by Nobel-prize-winning liberal economist Joseph Stiglitz, whose main professional contribution has been to explain how free markets are regularly distorted by “asymmetric information.” Clearly, rapid technological change in computers and fiber optics has produced a new problem of “asymmetric information” in the securities markets, and the HFT predators can scalp older, slower, more traditional traders by exploiting it.

An older phrase familiar to Marx, and before him to the great capitalist economist Adam Smith, further suggests that Stiglitz’s problem of “asymmetric information” is automatically being generated today by Smith’s famous “division of labor in society.” Arguably, the division of labor and specialized skills that make capitalism technologically great also have generated a world in which brilliant but narrowly focused computer technologists, fiber optics designers and Wall Street traders simply don’t understand each other. In this world, even billionaire hedge fund managers can be flummoxed by what futurist writer Alvin Toffler, a former Marxist, has christened “Future Shock.” Many of the rest of us are even more defenseless.

Lewis writes a good deal about future shock in *Flash Boys*, often without seeming to, and also offers deft but stinging insights into other features of today’s financial markets. Whether the barbs hidden in

Lewis's brisk prose and fascinating character studies will trigger any meaningful reforms is undoubtedly too soon to tell.

[Net Neutrality and the Ordinary Folks](#)

***The Washington Socialist* <> May 2014**

By Carolyn M. Byerly

All the progressive players are now proclaiming the “death of the Internet” and “the end of net neutrality” (<http://truth-out.org/news/item/23300-is-the-fcc-poised-to-destroy-net-neutrality>). Even the Gray Lady, the *New York Times* (http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/24/technology/fcc-new-net-neutrality-rules.html?_r=0), ran a leading front-page story in late April questioning whether FCC Chairman Tom Wheeler's public statements favoring higher pricing to some customers (like Netflix) by Internet Service Providers (ISPs) like AT&T and Verizon would be the death knell for net neutrality.

This “fast lane” policy would allow the wealthier ISPs to pass the cost along to customers. Those who can pay the most, get the faster service. Also not to be missed in this controversy is that smaller ISPs, which provide Internet access to millions of community based organizations and ordinary people, would be reduced to the “slow lanes,” i.e., slower service. Those less well-heeled customers who now subscribe to one of the uber-corporations (as media critic and scholar Bob McChesney calls them) could find it hard to pay higher fees. DSA's national office, individual DSA members, and other ordinary folks could be affected.

This (less competition, more control over the Internet), is course, is what the few big ubers want. A fast-lane policy would squeeze the smaller players out of the market by enticing their customers (who can afford higher monthly fees) to go with the more expensive options offered through Verizon, AT&T or Comcast.

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) (www.fcc.gov) has tilted increasingly toward corporate interests since the 1980s under Ronald Reagan. Neoliberal pro-market philosophies that guided communications policies under both Republican and Democrat presidents and Congress since then, have given us a highly concentrated media industry in the USA. It was telecom industry lawyers in the mid-1990s who wrote the Telecommunications Act of 1996, the stealth legislation that was passed by both houses of Congress and sent President Clinton for signature without any publicity or a single public hearing. That legislation, which deregulated the telecommunications industry, has been the Bible of neoliberal policy making by the FCC in the years since.

The Times quoted Todd O'Boyle of Common Cause's Media and Democracy Reform Initiative saying, "If it goes forward, this capitulation will represent Washington at its worst." He also raised one of the hidden effects of such a policy, observing, "Americans were promised, and deserve, an Internet that is free of toll roads, fast lanes and censorship — corporate or governmental." O'Boyle referred to such a policy as one of "betrayal" to Americans, something that fairly condemns the behavior of an agency that exists to assure that media systems operate "in the public interest, necessity and convenience," according to law.

The FCC has yet not acted on the matter of "fast lane" policy for Internet companies, so the public can still get a word in to oppose it. And, flooding the FCC with even short statements from individuals and groups just might have an effect, something seen recently when a flood of opposition to the proposed Comcast-Time Warner Cable merger apparently turned the tide of proposed FCC policymaking.

At this writing, the FCC had received 506 comments on net neutrality, most of them a single short statement. To read these statements and/or to file your own, go to the Commission's domain for comments: <http://www.fcc.gov/comments>.

[Poetry in Motion/Poetry as Resistance: Split this Rock Festival](#)

***The Washington Socialist* <> May 2014**

By Kurt Stand

I

What is Freedom? – ye can tell

That which slavery is too well –

For its very name has grown

To an echo of your own.

'Tis to work and have such pay

As just keeps life from day to day

In your limbs as in a cell

For the tyrants' use to dwell,
So that ye for them are made
Loom, and plough, and sword, and spade,
With or without your own will bent
To their defence and nourishment.
'Tis to see your children weak
With their mothers pine and peak,
When the winter winds are bleak: —
They are dying whilst I speak
'Tis to hunger for such diet
As the rich man in his riot
Casts to the fat dogs that lie
Surfeiting beneath his eye.
'Tis to be a slave in soul,
And to hold no strong control
Over your own wills, but be
All that others make of ye.
And at length when ye complain
With a murmur weak and vain
'Tis to see the Tyrant's crew
Ride over your wives and you —
Blood is on the grass like dew.

II

These stanzas, written by Shelley in 1819 after English workers were massacred by soldiers in Manchester, were read aloud by Pauline Newman in 1911, at a memorial meeting for the 146 workers killed in Triangle Fire – killed because they were unable to escape the New York sweatshop as the doors were locked (to keep union organizers out). Newman, a Russian Jewish immigrant, herself had recently worked at that very factory. Without formal education, she taught herself to read and then taught others, joined the Socialist Party, became an advocate for women's rights, and an organizer for the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. A century earlier, Shelley, his wife Mary Shelley, and their friend Lord Byron, following on the influence of (Mary's parents) radicals William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft – author of the *Vindication of the Rights of Women* – acted on a revolutionary definition of democracy that celebrated the French revolution, embraced fighters for Irish freedom, feminism, workers rights. They sought a way of living that combined personal independence, commitment to social justice, and an unending search for beauty and meaning in daily life. Those same goals Newman, her fellow workers, her fellow comrades, sought in a struggle that embraced hope even when all seemed hopeless.

Michael Demson and Summer McClinton wrote and drew *Masks of Anarchy*, a graphic novel that interweaves the story of Shelley and Newman. The book tells of a poem written in response to violence and poverty in a society ruled by greed and read nearly a hundred years later as an outcry against the continuing brutalities inherent in another society ruled by the power of greed. Poetry as an expression of love of life and a cry against oppression has as much meaning in this century, as in centuries gone by.

III

Proof of that statement was in evidence March 27-30, for the spirit that moved Shelley, Newman and others was visible, audible, during Washington DC's fourth bi-annual Split This Rock Poetry Festival. Born in 2008, when Poets Against the War marked the anniversary of the US invasion of Iraq with public readings of "Provocation and Witness" which brought together voices demanding an end to the violence and oppression that mark so much of our country's policies abroad, our practices within. This year's event drew over 600 people to workshops and public readings that sought to continue dialogue and engagement – engagement including a "group poem of protest" in front of the White House denouncing government spying and surveillance.

Split this Rock's call for repeal of the PATRIOT act and the 2008 amendments to FISA that have permitted unfettered government abuse of civil liberties reflects the festival's values. Government intrusion into private lives, government infiltration into organizations engaging in public protest, contributes to a state of fear that induces silence. It is that silence which builds walls between segments of society, that undermines empathy and personal freedom, that allows social injustice and oppressive interpersonal relations to exist unchallenged. And it is that silence which poetry, poetry of engagement and imagination challenges. In the words of the late Adrienne Rich (amongst those writers honored during the festival) "Poetry is always being created anew, in new places by unforetold hands and voices. In this it is like the many movements against demoralizing power. We don't know where either will come from. This is a story without an end."

IV

At the heart of the festival were over 50 workshops, which engaged in discussions of activism, of gender, of race, of history, of understanding space and movement; poetry serving as a medium of expression and as a means to communicate across borders that powerful, if often invisible, walls normally make unbreakable. Telling of the achievement behind that is that panelists and participants in those workshops brought together urban youth from DC's high schools whose writings challenge conditions of life too often taken for granted, with academic poets working in university settings who often speak to the discomfort that lies behind the lives of those who appear comfortable. Poets from rural settings, from immigrant backgrounds, of different ages and different belief systems, combined to produce a mosaic of people far richer than many cultural – or political – events are generally able to attract.

Workshop titles give a measure of the richness of the program: “How Political Engagement Affects the Writing Process,” “Women Write Resistance: Poets Resist Gender Violence,” “Gathering Forces: A Living Anthology of Black LGBTQ Poetry,” “Voices from the Latino Heartland: A Reading of Identity & Displacement by the Latino Writers Collective,” “Poetic Strategies for Change,” “March to Equality: How Poetry Can Connect Youth to History,” “Poetry and the New Black Masculinity,” – and many more. Listing these only touches upon the range of topics discussed for key to them all was encouraging those sitting and listening to not just take-in, but to speak and give back. They provided a change to think through what Tim Seibles suggested when he wrote:

Among *the brothaz*, a certain

grip in the eyes. A sense

of something

Swallowed not chewed –

as if they'd been made

a story and were dying

to untell themselves:

profiles – prisons,

the sports inside The Sport.

Outside, the wolf

With a

huff and a puff.

-/-

Culture: a kind of knife:

cuts one way opens

your brain to a certain

breed of light shaves

consciousness to its

purpose, its cross: the nail

thru your hand >< your

other hand holding

the hammer.

V

As those lines should indicate, if the workshops were the heart of the festival, the readings were the soul. Seibles was amongst those who gave readings, so too was Dunya Mikhail — the following stanzas (19-24) of this Arab-American poet of today relating a reality that one can imagine Pauline Newman of old understanding:

Far away from home –

that's all that changed in us.

Cinderella left her slipper in Iraq

along with the smell of cardamom

wafting from the teapot,

and that huge flower,

Its mouth gaping like death.

Instant messages

ignite revolutions.

They spark new lives

waiting for a country to download,

a land that's little more

than a handful of dust

when faced with these words:

“There are no results that match your search.”

The dog's excitement

as she brings the stick to her owner

is the moment of opening the letter.

We cross borders lightly

like clouds.

Nothing carries us,

but as we move on

we carry rain

and an accent

and a memory

of another place.

How thrilling to appear in his eyes.

She can't understand what he's saying:

she's too busy chewing his voice.

She looks at the mouth she'll never kiss,

at the shoulder she'll never cry on,

at the hand she'll never hold,

and at the ground where their shadows meet.

Altogether, five free poetry readings were presented during Split this Rock, each at the National Geographic auditorium, in addition to two later night open mic sessions as Busboys and Poets. Each began with a recording of a poet who had passed away in the preceding year followed by a DC Youth Slam Team member reading from his or her own work. After that three or four published poets, of different backgrounds and styles, would read – some deeply emotional, analytical, challenging, in Shelley's sense, heart and brain.

Too often formal writing separates the search for self and for individual meaning, separates out incisive observations on the everyday, from any thought of the social context in which those observations are made – as though personal heartbreak or joy, as though intimate observation, can somehow have meaning when abstracted from the world of work, pain, hatred, war in which our individual lives take place. And, one can add, too often activists, engaged in struggles for peace and justice, neglect to take the time to reflect back on the intimate and the introspective; pretending that these are unconnected with a life of engagement. To the contrary, political action and cultural awareness ought to be critical and self-critical, touching on what is directly in front of our eyes as well as on what is known even when not seen.

True empathy and solidarity cannot take place without self-knowledge, just as self-knowledge is emptied on content is conceived as taking place in isolation from the lives of others. The readings, as the workshops, made those two as one, the poetry of speech, alternately angry and loving, emotional and thoughtful, opened a window on the poetry of life. Another of the poets reading during the festival, Joy Harjo, expressed that sentiment:

I don't know exactly where I'm going; I only know where I've been,

I want to tell the man who sifted through the wreck to find us here

In the blues shack of disappeared history –

I feel the weight of his heart against my cheek.

His hand is on my back pulling me to him in the dark, to a place

No soldiers can reach.

I hear the whoop-cries of warriors calling fire for a stand

Against the brutality of forgetfulness —

Everybody has a heartache —

We will all find our way, no matter fire leaping through holes in

Jump time,

No matter earthquake, or the breaking of love spilling over the

dreck of matter

In the ether, stacking one burden

Against the other —

We have a heartache.

VI

It is that recognition that returns us to Pauline Newman's story, for she found herself ground down by a life of poverty, by a world of anti-Semitism, by the mistreatment of women who were treated as below men not only by society at large, but also within the Jewish community, in the trade union and socialist movement — a status she, and others, challenged. Her first activism was, while still a teenager working in the garment trade, organizing a rent strike amongst the other slum dwellers. That fight gave her the courage to seek an education within the male-dominated workers' reading library she discovered in New York. Each step was a part and parcel of breaking through to a wider world, opening up doors that had been closed.

It is that struggle to open up doors, not just to a few, but to all, which connects her activism with the struggles of today. The rate of illiteracy is growing in the United States, a growth particularly high here in Metropolitan Washington DC — a fact that should be shameful, though apparently many of those dictating public policy are beyond shame. And so too, rates of inequality, of poverty amidst plenty, of hunger, of ill-paid work or of no work, are all growing in our nation's capital and beyond. It is little wonder that in such circumstances, violence grows. Realities such as these make freedom something ever-harder to find in life. After defining slavery, Shelley goes on to describe the freedom he means — it is a freedom he describes to which we still aspire, for which we still need to struggle:

What art thou, Freedom? O! could slaves

Answer from their living graves

This demand — tyrants would flee

Like a dream's imagery. ...
For the Laborer thou art bread
And a comely table spread
From his daily labour come
In a neat and happy home.
Thou art clothes, and fire, and food
For the trampled multitude ...
Thou art Justice – ne'er for gold
May they righteous laws be sold ...
Thou art Wisdom – Freeman never
Dream that God will damn forever
All who think those things untrue
Of which Priests make such ado.
Thou art Peace – never by thee
Would blood and treasure wasted be
As tyrants wasted them, when all
Leagues to quench thy flame in Gaul.
Science, Poetry and Thought
Are thy lamps; they make the lot
Of the dwellers in a cot
So serene, they curse it not.
Spirit, Patience, Gentleness,
All that can adorn and bless

Art thou – let deeds, not words, express

Thine exceeding loveliness

VII

Split this Rock's name comes from a Langston Hughes poem – Hughes' poetry and prose, his political activism, all expressing an opposition to racism and injustice by calling upon the our country to live up to its proclaimed ideals. poetry and political activism. The anger of Hughes' poems is built on a recognition of a promise broken and of hope of renewal. Poetry – just as social justice activism – is premised on our ability to communicate, on people interacting, listening, learning, and thereby acting. No organizing is possible otherwise – in fact, the mutual support and solidarity inherent in the vision of socialist activism is premised on such an understanding.

Yet our continuing inability to realize our promise as a society is the reason why poems of old speak so forcefully to the present. In the late Amiri Baraka's words (also honored during the festival), "It cannot come/except you make it/from materials/it is not caught from," – that is, we look from the outside of the world we are within. To return to Hughes, remembered as a name more often than read,

Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death,

The rape and rot of graft and stealth and lies,

We, the people must redeem

The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers,

The mountains and the endless plan –

And, all the stretch of these great green states –

And make America again!

How can that be done? One imagines the faces of those mourning the dead listening to Shelley's call expressing a truth as true today as then:

Let a great Assembly be

Of the fearless and the free ...

From the corners uttermost

Of the bounds of English coast;

From every hut, village, and town
Where those who live and suffer moan,
From the workhouse and the prison
Where pale as corpses newly risen,
Women, children, young and old,
Groan for pain, and weep for cold –
From the haunts of daily life
Where is waged the daily strife
With common wants and common cares
Which sows the human heart with tares –
Lastly from the palaces
Where the murmur of distress
Echoes like the distant sound
Of a wind alive around
Those prison halls of wealth and fashion,
Where some few feel compassion
For those who groan, and toil, and wail
As must make their brethren pale –
Ye who suffer woes untold,
Or to feel, or to behold
Your lost country bought and sold
With a price of blood and gold –
Let a vast assembly be,

And with great solemnity
Declare with measured words that ye
Are, as God has made ye, free ...
And these words shall then become
Like Oppression's thundered doom
Ringing through each heart and brain
Heard again – again – again
Rise like Lions after slumber
In unvanquishable number
Shake your chains to earth like dew
Which in sleep had fallen on you –
Ye are many – they are few.

For more information on Split this Rock and future poetry readings and other events go to: www.splitthisrock.org

Sources:

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Quotes:

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[The coming Comcast juggernaut —a review essay](#)

***The Washington Socialist* <> May 2014**

By Woody Woodruff

One of the critical public utilities of our age – the one, in fact, that makes this newsletter possible where it wouldn’t have been three decades ago – is threatened with oligarchic control at great financial and societal cost to the nation at large and almost no regulatory oversight by government.

Yes, the good old brand new Internet is at risk of having at most three big corporate gatekeepers, for whom provision of actual quality service is a losing proposition forbidden by the overlords of Wall Street. A decision on the merger of Comcast and Time Warner Cable is coming up, sooner than we think, and the evidence is that the deciders, the Federal Communications Commission and the Justice Department antitrust division, have been captured for years by the [lobbying efforts](#) of the big players.

This is big business news, and [decent articles](#) about the stakes involved and the lobbying power being brought to bear on the regulators and their Congressional paymasters have been forthcoming. A companion piece by Carolyn Byerly in this issue focuses on the FCC’s vulnerability to the age of supercapital.

The grim details, including the unusual situation of a cable industry that is resigned to losing TV customers and hustling hard to control the Internet connections that will supplant TV, are best laid out in Susan Crawford’s *Captive Audience: The Telecom Industry and Monopoly Power in the New Gilded Age*. (Yale University Press 2013).

Crawford, a communications law professor at Harvard and Yeshiva/Cardozo, has wisely been promoting her book with the likes of Bill Moyers and NPR, because (as she told Moyers) “The solution is for people to care about this issue, ask hard questions at every debate...” Because this continues to be a [business-section story](#), public awareness is of course far below the threshold needed to react to the genuine crisis here.

Crisis? What crisis? Well, the lax regulatory scheme and the industry's highly skilled massaging of all the players concerned have brought poor quality Internet provision, well below the emerging world standard of fiber-optic delivery, at a price so much higher than the global average that large numbers of people in the US can't afford access. In *Captive Audience* Crawford summarizes:

“...the result is expensive, second-rate, carefully curated wired services for the rich, provided by Comcast and Time Warner; expensive, third-rate, carefully curated wireless services (or no services at all) for those who cannot afford a wire; close cooperation among the incumbent providers of wired and wireless services, and no public commitment to the advanced communications networks the rest of the developed world is adopting.”

“Curated,” we should note, has a particularly ominous meaning in Crawford's analysis, referring to the lock on large amounts of media content that Comcast acquired in its last big merger coup, the scooping up of NBC-Universal in 2010 that is the central subject of her book. Control of content – especially live sports, which will be at the core of the live events that may keep TV and cable alive – gave Comcast two ways to block competitors, who would have to build infrastructure and create or purchase content anytime they wanted to take on the giant that already had in place. Conversely, Comcast/Time Warner Cable would have the wherewithal to crush smaller cable companies and preemptively force a merger or sale if this merger comes to pass.

And massive control of content would allow the new cable megacorp to torment the customer with premium bundles of a variety of prices – all of them high, and getting higher. Comcast's lobbyists promise a lot of things – but they are careful not to promise that their prices won't go higher.

If the Comcast-Time Warner merger is approved, the two cable companies will dominate/control 19 out of the 20 major urban markets, 40 percent of all broadband customers and 30 percent of cable customers nationally. And they have cut a deal with Verizon and AT&T to leave the wireless to them. The phone companies have stopped upgrading their copper wire to fiber-optic and set their caps for wireless supremacy; the landline is on the way out.

An important factor is that in the geographic markets Comcast/Time Warner will control, they don't need to extend their infrastructure to include lower-income neighborhoods. Comcast, which started in Mississippi, does not have a record of serving poor customers – they wired the better-off parts of their franchise territory and made big money charging high prices for service. Volume was not part of their equation, not when the poor were concerned. Millions of people are not “passed” by cable and can't get hooked up if they want to. The FCC, which is charged with weighing the public good in such mergers, has the capacity to extract concessions such as more service to the low-income and rural people who increasingly need Internet access to get and keep jobs. But the FCC's recent record on considering public need is as dismal as Comcast's, in large part because they have been out-lawyered and their congressional overseers massaged with campaign dollars.

Crawford's focus is on the potential for national revitalization that is inherent in the Internet, not so much on the declining fortunes of cable TV. Falling behind the rest of the world in reliable, reasonably priced access to a technological wave that was developed on the US taxpayer's dime infuriates her. She tells Moyers

Parents around the country know that their kids can't get an adequate education without internet access. You can't apply for a job these days without going online. You can't get access to government benefits adequately, you can't start a business. This feels to 300 million Americans like a utility, like something that's just essential for life. And the issue of how it's controlled and how expensive it is and how few Americans actually sign up for it is not really on the radar screen.

The notion that the Internet is a utility lies at the heart of questions like "net neutrality" and concerns about the "digital divide" that grows between those with Internet access and those priced out or in the wrong neighborhood. It also, if applied vigorously by the FCC, would allow for much stricter regulation of Comcast, and reclassification of the cable/broadband infrastructure as a "common carrier." If Comcast had been recognized as the "common carrier" it is (like the erstwhile phone companies) the purchase of NBC-Universal would have been disallowed by both FCC and Justice as an impermissible mix of control over infrastructure and content.

Crawford, like many consumer advocates and communications NGOs, argues that the US is missing the boat and needs to re-engage in "industrial policy" that will put a priority on the widest possible public access to this latest and most versatile form of communication. Other nations are taking those steps and providing faster Internet at much lower costs. Crawford wrote in a Bloomberg View op-ed that "It's time to recognize that industrial policy — true leadership, the kinds of initiatives that brought us the federal highway system and national electrification — is called for."

In a detailed example, she shows how many small cities are creating their own broadband networks to advantage their citizens and businesses. Every attempt, though, is assaulted with litigation by the associated cable and Internet providers (a trade group helmed by Michael Powell, Colin Powell's son and a former, quite conservative, chairman of the FCC under George W. Bush). Lafayette, Louisiana, for instance, had to scuffle for nearly a decade to beat the legions of lawyers from the corporations and create their broadband network. About 20 states have passed ALEC-inspired laws forbidding or impeding their municipalities from going their own way on this.

"Instead of ensuring that everyone in America can compete in a global economy, instead of narrowing the divide between rich and poor, instead of supporting competitive free markets for American inventions that use information, instead that is of ensuring that America will lead the world in the U.S. in the information age, U.S. politicians have chosen to keep Comcast and its fellow giants happy," Crawford writes in *Captive Audience*.

The communications law professor Tim Wu pointed out in *The New Yorker* that cable providers can furnish broadband (of the slower sort they offer) over their coaxial cables for about \$5 a month; the \$40 or so they charge gives them a high margin indeed. At those margins, why would they feel an incentive to upgrade their sorry infrastructure for better or wider service? “Without the intervention of the government there’s no reason for these guys to charge us anything reasonable or to make sure that everybody has services,” Crawford said on the Moyers show.

Crawford’s book is written for popular consumption and to agitate response to the relentless march of the telecoms. It is, however, scholarly in the distance it goes into the weeds. Often this is valuable; the jaw-dropping detail of Comcast’s lobbying, with promises made and gifts given to critical constituencies like minority organizations and consumer groups, is well laid out here. The ins and outs of antitrust law and its evasion by magnates from John D. Rockefeller to Brian Roberts, Comcast’s affable CEO, can get taffy-like, however.

But socialists will recognize the skill with which Comcast and other major capitalist enterprises weave a web of inevitability out of their increasing command of what is purported to be a competitive market; regulatory agencies, politicians of both capitalist parties and organized groups are all swept into the fabric of oligarchy. Crawford’s book and some enterprising journalism make it clear that there are big stakes for the US in managing the outcome of the latest merger attempt, either turning it down or hedging it with serious conditions that will roll back the industry’s consolidation and control of this vital utility.

Mega-players on the communications capitalism stage have faltered before. Tim Wu, in his undervalued book *The Master Switch: The Rise and Fall of Information Empires* outlines the history of major technological utilities from the telegraph through telephone, radio and TV. He shows how each behemoth overreached itself, raised public indignation and essentially forced the courts to rein them in. His treatment of the Internet holds out hope that net neutrality will be the cause that brings the courts, or public opinion, or government to act.

It would be nice to hope that the cable giants will overreach as well and the courts will step in. But they may, we feel, have overreached without consequence already, and the courts we have today may not be the courts we need to take a hand when we need it. The government has shown itself pretty well bought off. Public outrage may have to be the main impetus for change. Will it come soon enough?

[The UN Panel on Climate Change: Challenges for Progressives](#)

***The Washington Socialist* <> May 2014**

By Bill Boteler

The latest report of the Intergovernmental Panel of Climate Change (IPCC) notes that about half of cumulative carbon emissions between 1750 and 2010 took place in the past 40 years.

Sources of these emissions between 2000 and 2010 were energy supply 47%, industry 30%, transport 11%, buildings 3%. Those are the areas where policy change can potentially alter what now looks like a forbidding future.

The IPCC has produced 3 reports since 2013. The first of these dealt with observed and projected changes in the earth's climate. The second report, appearing in March of this year, dealt with how these changes might probably affect ecosystems and human interests. The third, which was just issued, proposes various scenarios for successfully mitigating or preventing climate change in excess of 2 degrees C above pre-industrial levels, which is considered a level that would be associated with more serious damage to our planet. The latter two reports get our attention here.

We have to note the irony about the IPCC report's reception. The IPCC scientists use terms like "high confidence" and "medium confidence" to reflect lack of complete unanimity, giving opponents the opening to blast their conclusions as poorly founded. Their deeply democratic process masks the fact that [nearly all the scientists agree on nearly all the conclusions.](#)

Risks

Projected risks from climate change mentioned in the report include threats to water supplies, extinction of species, threats to food security, health-related threats, and the impact of extreme weather events on human security and the economy.

The report was in high agreement that the proportion of the human population affected by water scarcity or by major river floods will increase in the 21st century and may lead to more intense competition for water.

There was high agreement that the loss or redistribution of marine species by the mid 21st century will affect the productivity of fisheries and other ecosystem services. These changes will affect fisheries and people dependent on them.

There was high confidence that projected changes will affect crop yields with negative changes being more common than positive changes.

Major food crops like wheat and maize will be adversely affected so

there is high confidence that all aspects of food security will potentially be affected by climate change.

Disease impacts will increase until mid-century, the main impacts on human health will be from a worsening of problems that already exist.

Population displacement risk due to extreme weather and food insecurity rises significantly and is greater when people lack resources for planned migration and experience extreme weather events. People in both urban and rural areas of developing countries are particularly at risk.

Risks to urban populations include heat stress, extreme precipitation, flooding, landslides, air pollution drought and water scarcity. Risks to rural populations include scarce water supplies, food security, agricultural incomes and shifts production areas.

Climate change is projected to slow economic growth, make poverty reduction more difficult, reduce food security and worsen existing poverty while creating new poverty.

The damage to natural systems and probable extinction events for a significant portion of existing flora and fauna are a horrific prospect. But to get institutional and behavioral changes that could slow or mitigate climate change effects, socialists and other progressives have to persuade people at every level of society, and that means talking about the likely damage to their way of life and safety.

Recommendations

The report proposes that mitigation efforts should seek to keep greenhouse gases at levels that allow ecosystems to adapt naturally to climate change, to ensure that food production is not

threatened and that enable economic development to proceed in a sustainable manner. Keeping global temperatures at below a 2 percent increase above pre-industrial levels is the goal.

Any realistic mitigation policy requires large-scale changes in energy and land use. All these scenarios are characterized by rapid improvement in energy efficiency, tripling or quadrupling of the share of renewable energy sources, nuclear energy, CO₂ capture and storage or bioenergy development. Land use changes include reforestation and reduced deforestation.

Sustainable growth patterns would include a reduction in consumption growth by 0.04 to 0.14 percentage points over the century relative to a projected annual growth of between 1.6% and 3% per year.

There was high agreement that Infrastructure developments that lock societies into GHG-intensive emissions pathways may be difficult and costly to change.

But emissions can be substantially lowered through changes in consumption such as energy use in households, longer-lasting products, changed diets and reduced food wastes.

Decarbonizing (i.e. reducing the carbon intensity of) electricity generation is a key component of cost effective mitigation. In most scenarios, decarbonization happens more rapidly in electricity generation than in the industry, buildings, and transport sectors. In a majority of these scenarios the share of renewable energy and nuclear increases from 30% to 80% by 2050.

The transport sector accounted for 27% of direct emissions in 2010 and there is medium agreement that is projected to approximately double by 2050, but technical and behavior changes plus new infrastructure and urban redevelopment could reduce transport emissions by 15-40% by 2050.

In 2010, the industry sector accounted for around 28% of final energy use, but the energy intensity of the industry sector could be directly reduced by about 25% compared to the current level through the widescale upgrading, replacement and deployment of best available technologies.

Agriculture and forestry (called AFOLU) plays a central role for food security and sustainable development. Promoting reforestation and reducing deforestation along with better land management in agriculture and alternative methods in societies where wood is used for cooking and heating are critical to net carbon reduction.

Urbanization is a global trend and is associated with increases in income, and higher urban incomes are correlated with higher consumption of energy and GHG emissions (medium evidence, high agreement). So the next two decades present a window of opportunity for mitigation in urban areas, as a large portion of the world's urban areas will be developed during this period.

There was wide agreement that the largest mitigation opportunities with respect to human settlements are in rapidly urbanizing areas where urban form and infrastructure are not locked in.

Finally, and of most interest to socialists and other economic progressives, substantial reductions in emissions would require large changes in investment patterns.

There was high agreement in the value of regulatory and information approaches. The report notes that many national governments have included climate concerns in their legislative and regulatory criteria and that cap-and-trade systems, for instance, have been installed though their effect has been limited. Policies that reduce subsidies for high-carbon industries have been effective as well.

There was high agreement that technology policy complements other mitigation policies and that this could include a push by governments to publicly fund research and development.

Research on energy efficiency and production with renewables could go a long way toward easing the transition to what is already guaranteed to be a warmer planet. But even a magic bullet will only work if it outcompetes fossil fuels, unless a significant worldwide movement puts a price on them that reflects their true cost. Socialists and other progressives will have to make the case that lower consumption and a sustainable level of economic activity are necessary and can be adapted and adopted by industrial nations, and that a new lifestyle for a changed environment is thinkable, and necessary.