



MAGAZINE

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-Wim Laven



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NATO Is a Warfare Alliance, Not a Force for Global Peace or Stability

Medea Benjamin, Marcy Winograd

At his speech during the NATO Summit in Lithuania, President Biden called the U.S. and Europe “anchors for global security” when in reality there are no anchors during this increasingly dangerous and polarized time of never-ending war in Europe. Our NATO allies are not, as Biden would suggest, anchors in a turbulent sea of demons but rather catalysts stirring the cauldron of war on behalf of U.S. empire.

The instability of the NATO alliance was evident in the controversy over the key issue of Ukraine membership. Biden and his administration tried to work both sides of the street. On the one hand, Biden insisted that “Ukraine’s future lies at NATO.” But then the U.S. teamed up with Germany to make sure the summit made only a vague statement about Ukraine joining when allies agree and “conditions are met,” incurring the wrath of a fuming President Zelensky. Biden’s national security advisor Jake Sullivan told CNN that everyone “needs to look squarely at the fact” that allowing Ukraine to join NATO at this point “means war with Russia.”

But this does not mean that Biden, or NATO, are ready to endorse peace talks. On the contrary. The NATO Summit came on the heels of Biden’s much-scorned decision to send banned cluster bombs to Ukraine. And at the Summit, France announced plans to send new long-range strike missiles; Germany announced a new round of military aid, including tanks and artillery shells; and 11 NATO countries pledged to train Ukrainian pilots to fly nuclear-capable F-16 fighter jets. In short, Ukraine’s Zelensky walked away from the NATO summit with a declaration of years of military subsidies, a

virtual blank check to make Ukraine a forever proxy to maintain US hegemony. As NATO members send Ukraine more and more destructive weapons, the terrifying possibility of a wider war, even a nuclear war, casts a shadow over the entire globe.

Instead of seeking a negotiated solution to Russia’s criminal invasion, NATO has shunned peace talks that might address key issues such as neutrality for Ukraine, referendums on the future of the Donbas and Crimea, a demilitarized zone along the border between Ukraine and Russia, and nuclear disarmament agreements that would remove Russia’s short-range nuclear weapons from Belarus in exchange for removal of U.S. anti-ballistic missiles in Romania.

NATO has pushed the world towards greater militarization precisely at this delicate moment in history when we need to invest our resources in thwarting the climate crisis that threatens the future of this planet with collapsing ecosystems, wildfires and floods. Moreover, the tens of billions of dollars spent to continue the Russia-Ukraine war could be invested in alleviating global poverty that affects the daily wellbeing of millions of families worldwide.

Once again, we see that NATO’s modus operandi is war. NATO has never been a defensive alliance. It invaded Yugoslavia in 1999 without a mandate from the UN Security Council. NATO waged a 20-year war in Afghanistan, leaving the people dirt poor and back in the hands of the Taliban. NATO illegally toppled the government of Libya in 2011. In addition to the present war with Russia, it has its sights set on China, building up a provocative Asia-Pacific military



alliance with South Korea, Japan, Australia and New Zealand to counter China. NATO is also a cash cow for arms manufacturers, and it is the enemy of nuclear disarmament in its opposition to the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

Next year, the NATO summit will be held in Washington DC to mark NATO's 75th anniversary. It would be a good time for the emergence of a global peace movement that says 75 years of nuclear proliferation, war and gifts to military

contractors is enough. Without NATO, Europe would build its own security architecture to address the security concerns of all stakeholders, including Russia. Without NATO, there are greater chances to avoid a confrontations with China. Without NATO, the world would be a safer place. In a world where people are desperate to end war and anxious to see a transfer of public funds from the military to human needs, NATO should indeed become a relic of the past.

Lessons on Peace from Africa

Wim Laven

If you ask most people my age about Rwanda the only thing they remember is the 1994 genocide. The United Nations reports that as many as one million Tutsis were slaughtered in a one-hundred day period. I was 16 at the time and my interest and understanding of politics was limited, but it was easy to see something was very wrong.

I visited Rwanda this year, arriving just in time for the 4th of July. I'm used to the triumphant jubilee of Independence Day celebrations in the U.S. but in Rwanda the 4th represents Liberation Day—the day in 1994 when rebel troops marched into Kigali and ended the genocide. It is hard to put the stark contrast into words.

In the U.S. many people follow the colloquial wisdom: do not speak of sex, politics, or religion. The things many hold closest to the hearts and see as the greatest reflection of their values and identities can frequently become the catalysts for great division. How many Thanksgiving dinners have been ruined by arguments and bickering over politics?

In Rwanda every day I was meeting and talking with people who shared their survival stories. The horrendous experiences of cruelty were not swept under the rug or hidden—they were memorialized and actively remembered. It would be impossible to forget, even if a person tried, because even 29 years later the reminders—the scars—were everywhere.

One memorial has a mass grave with the remains of more than 250,000 lives cut short. A church I visited is no longer used for worship, 45,000 bodies are interred, and the story is preserved. Churches were a common location for massacres. It seems unthinkable, it feels gratuitous to write about the violence, but I was not educated in a country with a peace curriculum.

Light pierced the church's corrugated metal roof like stars in the night's sky because shrapnel from grenades had made hundreds of tiny holes. Children who were lucky enough to survive learned lessons about playing dead and smearing themselves with blood to make it look believable. And it was all shared, because of a commitment to "never forget."

Of course it is uncomfortable; if you are talking about genocide and it is comfortable, then you are either not talking about genocide or you are a sociopath.

The U.S. should learn from Rwanda. We are having political debates about Ron DeSantis's "Slavery Was a Good Thing" Curriculum. We sugar-coat atrocities, crimes against humanity, and war for a whole range of reasons and I think it contributes to amnesia and denial.

I think we would all benefit from an honest appraisal of our painful past. Remembering our collective history—with all its blemishes and bloodstains—could be more than a wakeup call.

The whitewash is not just more dishonest political gaslighting. It provides cover for more malicious agendas, the ten stages of genocide include discrimination, dehumanization, and polarization before getting to persecution and extermination.

The contrast could not be more embarrassing. While Rwanda takes great pains to remember cruelty that pushes beyond the mind's limits the U.S. plays mental gymnastics to find the silver lining in slavery. Can we learn a lesson in being honest about the past? Clinging to lies is not doing us any favors.

The Movie and the Moment

Marcy Winograd

The ground-breaking movie *Oppenheimer*, despite its unsympathetic protagonist, packs a powerful anti-nuclear punch that makes it hard, if not impossible, to sleep after watching the film.

For this reason alone, the movie should be shown on the floor of Congress and in the White House as required viewing by all in DC bent on spending \$1.7 trillion over the next decades to build new nuclear weapons to kill us all.

Only those with a global death wish or on the payroll of Northrop Grumman, the military contractor with the nuclear “modernization” contract, could watch this film and still root for US nuclear rearmament, a horror show now underway with the blessings of DC politicians. Unless people rise up in fury, unless this Hollywood movie sparks a second nuclear-freeze movement, a repeat on steroids of the 80’s nuclear weapons freeze, Congress and the White House will raid the treasury to expand our nuclear arsenal.

On the agenda is a new sea-launched nuclear cruise missile, a gravity bomb with two-stage radiation implosion, a long range strike bomber and the replacement of 400 underground nuclear missiles in the midwest with 600 new Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles. These new ICBMS—The Sentinel—could each carry up to three warheads 20 times more powerful than the atomic bombs the US dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki to incinerate 200,000 people in a span of three days.

Irish actor Cillian Murphy plays the role of J. Robert Oppenheimer, a hand-wringing scientist, an unfaithful lackluster womanizer, a man with few convictions but lots of demons, who

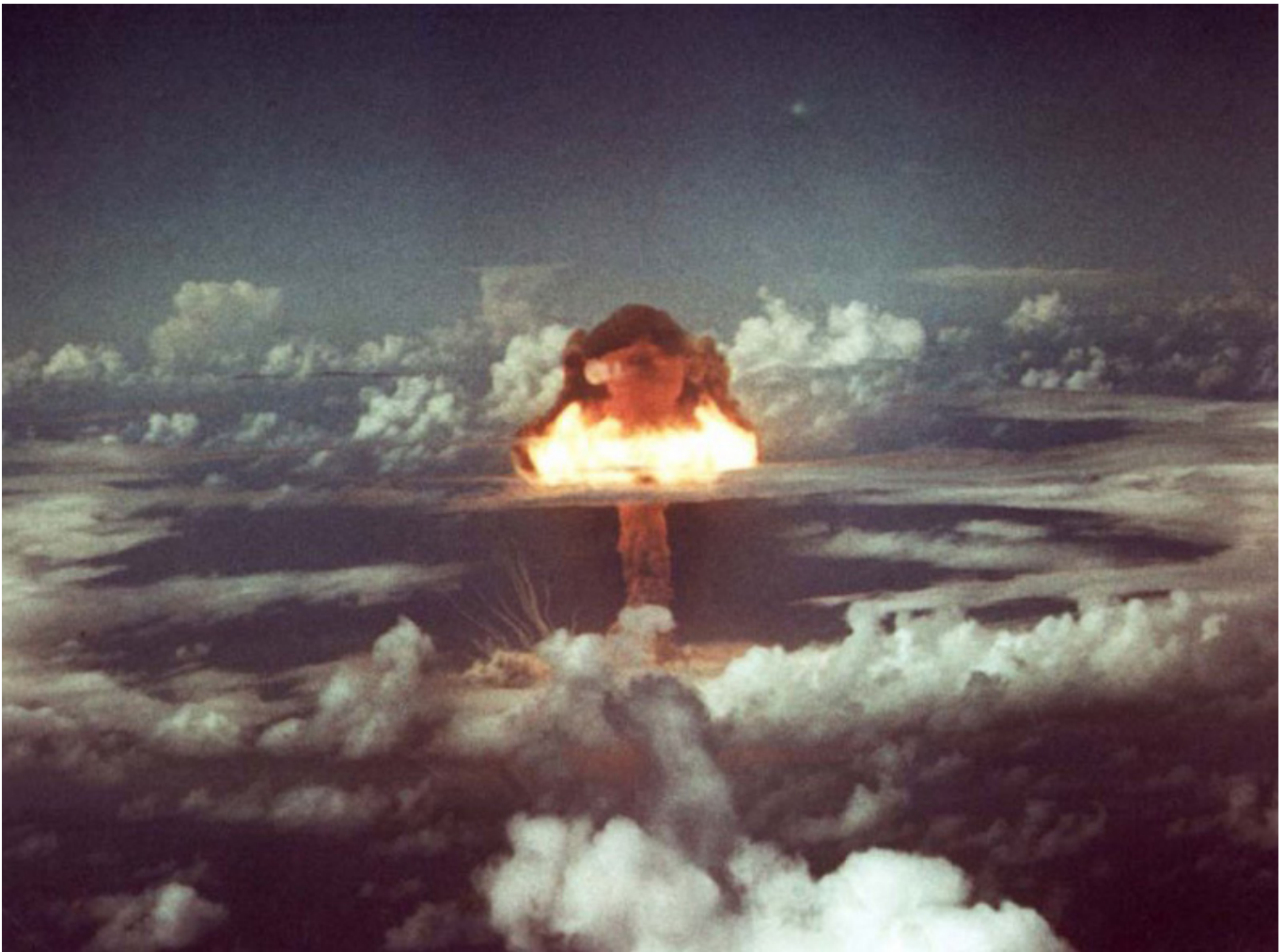
traverses an emotional landscape of ambition, doubt, remorse and surrender.

Oppenheimer oversees the Manhattan Project, the team of scientists hunkering down in the beautiful desert of Los Alamos, New Mexico, to build the hideous atomic bomb before the Germans or Russians crack the code.

In a scene reminiscent of the absurd 1950s, when pig-tailed school children scrambled under desks in mock nuclear drills, scientists don sunscreen and goggles to protect themselves during the blinding Trinity Test. This was the first atomic test conducted with no warning to the downwinders—the nearby indigenous people of the Southwest who developed cancer as a result of radioactive fall out. This was the test before President Truman ordered a 9,000 pound uranium bomb named “Little Boy” loaded onto a B-29 bomber. This was the trial performance before the same President, depicted in the movie as unctuous and arrogant, orders Fat Boy, a second plutonium bomb—prototype for today’s nuclear weapon—dropped on Nagasaki.

Though the movie can be slow, a three hour endurance test, its historical insights and gut-churning imagery compensate for its lack of likable characters, save for Lt. General Leslie Groves, played by a fun-to-watch Matt Damon as Oppenheimer’s Pentagon handler.

One of the most haunting moments juxtaposes in living color celebrations of the bombings, applause and accolades for Oppenheimer standing at the podium with the guilt-consumed scientist’s black and white visions of irradiated souls, skeletal remains, flesh turned to ash—all amid a cacophony of explosions and pounding feet, the death march.



Even more disturbing are the questions that tug at the moviegoer, who wonders, “Where are the Japanese victims in this film? Why are they missing from this picture? Why are they never shown writhing in pain, their lives and cities destroyed?” Instead, the human targets are seen only through the lens of Oppenheimer who imagines faceless x-rayed ghosts torn asunder in the burning wreckage, their skin, their flesh falling off their bones, their bodies disappearing into nothingness. The omission of the real victims in the interest of maintaining a consistent point of view may make sense from a filmmaker’s perspective, but not from the standpoint of historians and truth tellers. Writer-director Christopher Nolan could have shown us photos, authentic aerial footage of the Japanese, blinded and burned, before the final credits roll to remind us the horror is real, not just a Hollywood movie bound for several Oscar nominations.

In the name of truth the movie does, however, smash the persistent myth that the US had no other choice but to drop the atomic bombs to end WWII. Through dialogue, we learn Japan was about to surrender, the Emperor simply needed to save face; the point of irradiating Hiroshima and Nagasaki, targeting civilians in far off cities, was not to save the world but to show the Soviets the US possessed the technology to destroy the world, so better not cross the aspiring empire.

In closed door sessions, all filmed in black and white, we watch as crusading anti-communist politicians—determined to stop Oppenheimer from advocating for arms control talks with the Soviets—crucify their atomic hero for his association with members of the Communist Party, leftist trade unions and a long ago anti-capitalist lover who threw his bourgeois flowers in the trash.

When the McCarthyites strip Oppenheimer of his security clearance, it's a big "who cares" shrug for a movie audience weary of Oppenheimer's internal conflicts over whether science can be divorced from politics, from the consequences of a scientist's research. How can anyone with a heart want to continue this line of work? To hell with the security clearance.

The movie Oppenheimer is compelling and powerful in its timeliness, though one can't help but think it would have been exponentially more powerful had it been told from a different point of view, from the point of view of a scientist who opposed the death-march mission.

We see glimpses of a pond-staring fate-warning Albert Einstein, who in real life lobbied to fund the atomic bomb research only to later oppose the project. It could have been his story—or the story of one of the 70 scientists who signed a "Truman, don't drop the bomb" petition that Oppenheimer squelched, persuading Edward Teller, the "father of the hydrogen bomb" not to present Truman with the petition drafted by Leo Szilard, the chief physicist at the Manhattan Project's Chicago laboratory. The movie's reference to the petition was so fast, so quiet, so mumbled, the audience could have missed it.

If we are not careful, more mindful, more awake, we might miss our moment, our moment to avert another nuclear holocaust, this one a far worse nightmare in which five billion of the Earth's 8 billion people perish, either immediately from radiation burns and fire or in the months that follow during a famine in which soot blocks the sun.

The White House and a majority of Congress want to rush us, a sleepwalking populace into WWII with Russia, a nation of 143 million people, 195 different ethnicities and 6,000 nuclear weapons. For those, like the shameful editors of the Washington Post, who insist we continue to forever fund the proxy war, for those in high places who refuse calls for a ceasefire,

this movie reminds us of the existential danger we confront in a sea of denial, complicity and exceptionalism.

Despite campaigning on a platform of no first use of nuclear weapons, President Biden's Nuclear Posture Review echoes his predecessor Trump's approval of first use should our allies' interests be threatened.

CODEPINK activists are distributing flyers outside showings of Oppenheimer to invite stunned moviegoers leaving the theater in a daze to take action, to join our organization and amplify our peace-building campaigns, to ground the nuclear-capable F-35, to declare China is Not our Enemy and to partner with the Peace in Ukraine Coalition.

This is the movie, this is the moment, this is the time to challenge the euphemistic nuclear modernization program, to expose the madness of militarism that abandons urgent needs at home to line the pockets of military contractors gorging at the Pentagon trough. This is the time to demand a ceasefire and peace talks to end the war in Ukraine, to stop preparations for war with China, to finally pass legislation to ban first use, to take our ICBM's off hair trigger alert, to abide by our disarmament obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and to campaign for the US to become signatories to the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW).

Opposed by NATO—a huckster for nuclear proliferation—the TPNW has been signed by 95 state parties wishing to outlaw the development, deployment and use of nuclear weapons.

Unlike Oppenheimer, we can make the right choice; the choice that saves the human race from immediate extinction.

J. Robert Oppenheimer's Tragedy - and Ours

Lawrence S. Wittner

The July 21, 2023 theatrical release of the film *Oppenheimer*, focused on the life of a prominent American nuclear physicist, should help to remind us of how badly the development of modern weapons has played out for individuals and for all of humanity.

Based on the Pulitzer Prize-winning biography, *American Prometheus*, written by Kai Bird and the late Martin Sherwin, the film tells the story of the rise and fall of young J. Robert Oppenheimer, recruited by the U.S. government during World War II to direct the construction and testing of the world's first atomic bomb at Los Alamos, New Mexico. His success in these ventures was followed shortly thereafter by President Truman's ordering the use of nuclear weapons to destroy Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

During the immediate postwar years, Oppenheimer, widely lauded as "the father of the atomic bomb," attained extraordinary power for a scientist within U.S. government ranks, including as chair of the General Advisory Committee of the new Atomic Energy Commission (AEC).

But his influence ebbed as his ambivalence about nuclear weapons grew. In the fall of 1945, during a meeting at the White House with Truman, Oppenheimer said: "Mr. President, I feel I have blood on my hands." Incensed, Truman later told Assistant Secretary of State Dean Acheson that Oppenheimer had become "a crybaby" and that he didn't want "to see that son of a bitch in this office ever again."

Oppenheimer was also disturbed by the emerging nuclear arms race and, like many atomic scientists, championed the international control of atomic

energy. Indeed, in late 1949, the entire General Advisory Committee of the AEC came out in opposition to the U.S. development of the H-bomb - although the president, ignoring this recommendation, approved developing the new weapon and adding it to the rapidly growing U.S. nuclear arsenal.

In these circumstances, figures with considerably less ambivalence about nuclear weapons took action to purge Oppenheimer from power. In December 1953, shortly after becoming chair of the AEC, Lewis Strauss, a fervent champion of a U.S. nuclear buildup, ordered Oppenheimer's security clearance suspended. Anxious to counter implications of disloyalty, Oppenheimer appealed the decision and, in subsequent hearings before the AEC's Personnel Security Board, faced grueling questioning not only about his criticism of nuclear weapons, but about his relationships decades before with individuals who had been Communist Party members.

Ultimately, the AEC ruled that Oppenheimer was a security risk, an official determination that added to his public humiliation, completed his removal from government service, and delivered a shattering blow to his meteoric career.

Of course, the development of nuclear weapons had far broader consequences than the downfall of J. Robert Oppenheimer. In addition to killing more than 200,000 people and injuring many more in Japan, the advent of nuclear weaponry led nations around the world to enter a fierce nuclear arms race. By the 1980s, spurred on by conflicts among the major powers, 70,000 nuclear weapons had come into existence, with the potential to destroy virtually all life on earth.



Image by James Stencilowsky

Fortunately, a massive grassroots citizens campaign emerged to counter this drive toward a nuclear apocalypse. And it succeeded in pressuring reluctant governments into an array of nuclear arms control and disarmament treaties, as well as unilateral actions, to reduce nuclear dangers. As a result, by 2023 the number of nuclear weapons had declined to roughly 12,500.

Nevertheless, in recent years, thanks to a sharp decrease in citizen activism and increase in international conflict, the potential for nuclear war has dramatically revived. All nine nuclear powers (Russia, the United States, China, Britain, France, Israel, India, Pakistan, and North Korea) are currently engaged in upgrading their nuclear arsenals with new production facilities and new, improved nuclear weapons. During 2022, these governments poured nearly \$83 billion into this nuclear build-up. Public threats to initiate nuclear war, including those by Donald Trump, Kim Jong Un, and Vladimir Putin, have become more common. The hands of the Doomsday Clock of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, established in 1946, now stand at 100 seconds to midnight the most dangerous setting in its history.

Not surprisingly, the nuclear powers display little interest in further action for nuclear arms control and disarmament. The two nations possessing some 90 percent of the world's nuclear weapons - Russia (with the most) and the United States (not far behind) have pulled out of nearly all such agreements with one another.

Although the U.S. government has proposed extending the New Start Treaty (which limits the number of strategic nuclear weapons) with Russia, Putin reportedly responded this June that Russia would not engage in any nuclear disarmament talks with the West, commenting: "We possess more weaponry of such sort than the NATO countries. They know that and are always trying to persuade us to start negotiations on reduction. Nuts to them . . . as our people say."

The Chinese government, whose nuclear arsenal, while growing substantially, still ranks a distant third in numbers - has stated that it sees no reason for China to engage in any nuclear arms control talks.

To head off a looming nuclear catastrophe, non-nuclear nations have been championing the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). Adopted by an overwhelming vote of nations at a UN conference in July 2017, the TPNW bans developing, testing, producing, acquiring, possessing, stockpiling, and threatening to use nuclear weapons.

The treaty went into force in January 2021 and - though opposed by all the nuclear powers - it has thus far been signed by 92 nations and ratified by 68 of them. Brazil and Indonesia are likely to ratify it in the near future. Polls have found that the TPNW has substantial support in numerous countries, including the United States and other NATO nations.

There does remain some hope, then, that the nuclear tragedy that engulfed Robert Oppenheimer and has long threatened the survival of world civilization can still be averted.

How Congolese Students are Taking on Big Oil

Alexandria Shaner, Pascal Mirindi



Activists hold a rally of art and performance to launch a campaign that will mobilize resistance to oil extraction in DRC.

Student activists are traveling thousands of miles across the Democratic Republic of Congo to mobilize communities against the expansion of Big Oil.

Pétrole Non Merci, or Petrol No Thanks, is a national campaign to oppose the proposed sale of 27 oil blocks and three gas blocks, most of which overlap protected areas. Anglo-French oil company Perenco recently bid to buy the new blocks and would export the oil using the EACOP pipeline.

The campaign has a two-pronged strategy. First, they are mobilizing communities where the new oil blocks are located to build local power and hold of-

ficials accountable. Second, they are linking up with communities like Moanda, which have already been exploited and abused by Perenco for decades.

The traveling activists are building a self-organizing network to take nonviolent action throughout the DRC, with coordinated popular uprisings.

I spoke with **Pascal Mirindi**, a student at the University of Goma who is involved with Extinction Rebellion and LUCHA, a Congolese citizens' movement, about the campaign and their recent creative actions.



Pétrole Non Merci launch rally at Kituku Market – creating and sharing art to confront climate crises and mobilize communities

Could you tell us about the Pétrole Non Merci campaign and Extinction Rebellion at the University of Goma?

XR University of Goma is a group of Extinction Rebellion located in the eastern part of the DRC. It was created around 2020 by students and a smaller group of academics from the University of Goma. XR University of Goma has led many efforts ranging from the mobilization of local communities on the protection of the environment, to the protection of the Virunga National Park via the Fossil Free Virunga campaign, and efforts to hold the park's management accountable to its mandate and to local communities. Now, we have launched the Pétrole Non Merci campaign to oppose the proposed sale of 27 oil blocks and three gas blocks, most of which overlap protected areas such as Virunga National Park, coastal mangroves and peat bogs in the equatorial forest of the Congo Basin.

The idea of the campaign is initially to mobilize local communities where the oil blocks are located. We believe that only if we manage to build informed and empowered local communities, will it be possible to hold the ruling class accountable.

We have so far installed the groups of XR Rutshuru, XR Moanda and XR Bunia and we intend to install many more. Of course, the Congo is very large. It takes us a lot of time, but we are sure that we will get there, based on our growing momentum so far.

After having mobilized the population on the disadvantages of the fossil fuel industries on social, economic, political and environmental levels, and continuing educational exchanges on how to claim our rights through nonviolence, we plan to take action throughout the DRC. We will continue to organize coordinated popular uprising actions to say NO to the Machiavellian

plans of our leaders who still want to defraud humanity at the expense of their selfish interests.

You and other organizers of *Pétrole Non Merci* recently traveled over 3,700 miles to connect with the people of Moanda on the opposite side of the DRC. Could you talk about this journey and about what happened there?

Moanda is located on the west side of the DRC; it is the only maritime community in the country. Geological and geophysical work undertaken there between 1959 and 1982 led to the discovery of five oil fields. The intense research activity resulted in the identification of seven fields in 1976. At the end of 2012, the number of wells was estimated to be 235 according to official researchers. However, that number is contested by the local population who can show 800 wells.

Moanda is the only place in the DRC where oil is exploited. From the start of this campaign, we wanted to see for ourselves what oil exploitation would look like for communities if, once again, we add more blocks in the DRC. More specifically, we wanted to see how oil exploitation had been done by Perenco, because Perenco had just bid to buy other oil blocks.

From our arrival in Moanda, we were surprised to see that the Perenco offices were set up within a military camp. It has been impossible for the community to approach them. They are in their corner and the population is in their corner.

Moanda remains one of the world's poorest communities. Ninety-five percent of the local population and villages such as Kinkanzi, Sia Nfula, Kintombe and Kindofula are unemployed, despite the oil exploitation that has been taking place in their midst since the late 1960s.

Since the 2000s, Perenco has not managed to do anything to mitigate damage, let alone to share



Perenco oil wells and torches less than 10m from dwellings and roads in Moanda, DRC.

the profits of extraction with the community. No schools, no hospitals, no roads and not even the distribution of damage. There are oil flares behind the homes of the population. On our visit, we learned that there was a little girl who lost her life by oil flare when she was playing behind her house. She died on fire.

The production of agriculture has diminished, there is increased seasonal disturbance, the coconut palms at the edge of the river are dying off.

Nothing in terms of dialogue is done by the leaders or even the local managers of Perenco.

In short, it is because of all this, that the people of Moanda have agreed to accompany us in this battle. So together we will block the road to the fossil industry, starting with Perenco, which our political leaders try to falsely show as a positive example of oil exploitation. Through our collective participation in *Pétrole Non Merci*, we will ensure that the truth of Moanda's experience is known throughout the DRC and we can resist this exploitation in unison.

You and your fellow organizers have also traveled to many communities who will be affected by the sale of the new oil blocks. Would you tell us about the trip to Bunia and the founding of XR Bunia?

In Bunia and the communities around Lake Albert, we held exchanges with students from universities and other educational institutions about the Pétrole Non Merci campaign. The campaign not only aims to force the Congolese government to abandon the auction of these additional 27 oil blocks, but also to force the government not to link oil block 3 (near Lake Albert) with Uganda's EACOP pipeline, which is managed by the company Total Energies.

In Bunia and the wider province of Ituri, the debate has focused much more on the negative impact of oil exploitation on fishing, which is the main livelihood of tens of thousands of Congolese people around Lake Albert. In addition to destructive impacts on the ecology of the lake, the familiar impacts experienced by Moanda are also of concern — oil flares, bad air quality, acid rains, soil contamination, etc.

After more than two hours of exchanges and debates, the young people of Bunia decided to create a framework for exchange and organizing between themselves to continue after our departure, and thus created a local Extinction Rebellion group called XR Bunia.

After Bunia, we traveled 60 km on a dirt road to two more villages bordering Lake Albert, Kasenyi and Tchomia to seek further community exchanges. We spoke with a member of local civil society who had visited the Niger Delta in the past to understand the disaster of the oil exploitation project in Nigeria. We encouraged him to organize several sessions to explain to the whole local community the negative impact of fossil fuels.

We met with the fishermen of Lake Albert and discussed the negative impact of oil on the lake ecology and on climate change. The civil society of Tchomia has expressed their intention to establish their own local XR group. We are continuing to work to support them in their organizing.

In addition to setting up networks of local self-organizing groups, Pétrole Non Merci has organized some spectacular public demonstrations featuring art and performance. Could you talk about the event in the Kituku Market?

After the Kalehe flood in South Kivu this past May, we decided to organize a demonstration in the Kituku Market, the largest coastal market in the city of Goma. Many hundreds of people lost their lives in the flood, thousands went missing, thousands of houses were destroyed — around 50,000 people were affected in the flood zone without food, clean water, shelter or roads.

We took up this moment to launch the Pétrole Non Merci campaign in order to highlight that we are already suffering the effects of climate catastrophes and that this suffering will only increase if we do not stop the fossil fuel industry's expansion.

We can use artistic demonstrations to mobilize the population by connecting the negative effects of global warming, like floods and seasonal disturbance, to fossil fuels. It is easy for people to think that the effects of global warming can never attack Central Africa, including the DRC. No one ever thinks it will happen to them until an event like a major flood occurs in your community.

That's why we used art: We made paintings, dances and other performances to get people's attention, to get the message across, and to involve people in joining through their own expression. This has been an effective way to deeply impact and mobilize people, turning denial and grief into collective action.

Pétrole Non Merci, XR University of Goma, and our network of allies will continue our work mobilizing communities and empowering them through learning about climate change and about nonviolent resistance. This is just the beginning for us, building our power to say NO.

Which Side Are You On?

Steve Early

Work from home arrangements proliferated during the pandemic and became very popular among white-collar workers. They are now the subject of a tug of war between labor and management because high profile bosses—like Mark Zuckerberg at Meta, Elon Musk at Twitter, Jamie Dimon at JP Morgan Chase, and Andy Jassy at Amazon—have decreed that it's time to get back in the office.

Such mandates have triggered widespread resistance, even among workers without collective bargaining rights. At Amazon, for example, more than 20,000 employees signed a petition urging Jassy to reconsider his May 1 deadline for everyone showing up at least three days per week, with few exceptions. On May 31 in Seattle, more than 1,000 people walked off the job, for one hour during lunchtime, to protest this “harmful, unilateral decision.” Another 2,000 Amazon employees engaged in similar solidarity actions worldwide.

In the public sector, a work-stoppage earlier this year by 150,000 federal employees in Canada resulted in what three labor researchers call “important steps toward an ongoing work-from-home protocol.” These include “requiring that remote work requests be evaluated individually, not by group of employees, and the creation of joint employer-union committees in each department to oversee the future evolution of remote work practices.”

Another commentator hailed this Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) side agreement as a big win in the “on-going power struggle to determine who has the authority to define work conditions.” According to this observer, “remote work...is a front on which organized labor should give its all to secure better arrangements for all workers”

A CWA Campaign Issue

Within one major AFL-CIO union, there has been less unanimity that work-from-home/hybrid schedules are a good thing—and worth defending and extending.

In the Communications Workers of America (CWA), tens of thousands of members in telecom, the public sector, higher education, the media, and airlines all worked from home during the pandemic and got to like it. As a result, WFH became one important issue in a rare contested election for CWA national president.

That three-way race ended on Monday, July 10, in St. Louis, when 940 union convention delegates cast ballots on behalf of 360,000 members in the U.S. and Canada. They picked 71-year old Claude Cummings, Jr. a CWA Vice-President and civil right leader from Texas, who is now the union's first African-American president. Both Cummings and former NewsGuild organizer Sara Steffens—who was eliminated in the first round of voting but then backed Cummings in the second—pledged to defend WFH in new and old bargaining units.

They argued that CWA would not be well-positioned to help more white-collar workers win bargaining rights and contract language on WFH if top union officials opposed remote work options. In contrast, the third candidate—CWA Vice-President Ed Mooney, a longtime telecom industry negotiator—was an internal critic of WFH agreements and objected to continuing one at Verizon. “Everybody liked work from home,” he acknowledged, in a May 15 candidate debate. But, according to Mooney, WFH has put “the companies in the driver's seat because they are aware our members like it so much.”

Taking that contested position, while also being dogged by accusations of personal misconduct, proved fatal to Mooney's candidacy. He lost to Cummings, in the run-off, by a margin of 59% to 41% among the delegates voting.

AT&T Worker Protest

Last September, it was thousands of AT&T call center workers who felt like losers when management ordered them back to work. According to Local 7250 President Kieran Knutson, his fellow customer service reps in Minneapolis had discovered that remote work "was safer, saved them money on commuting and childcare, gave them more time for rest and with their families and more control of their work space."

That's why Knutson and leaders of other AT&T locals launched a grassroots campaign aimed at keeping Work from Home (WFH) as an option at AT&T, the most heavily unionized telecom company. They organized protests and press conferences which drew national media attention in outlets like CBS Evening News, Fortune, and The Guardian. They collected 8,000 rank-and-file signatures on a petition demanding WFH as a permanent option for customer service reps and teleconference specialists, communications techs, and workers in other eligible titles. The pro-WFH petitioners also expressed solidarity with fellow CWA members who "do want to work at a central business location and support keeping that option as well."

In Knutson's view, this grassroots initiative "didn't get much support" from top CWA officials who negotiate with AT&T on agreements covering 70,000 workers around the country. Frustrated that the "union has gotten so used to a top-down model where leaders tell the members what's important," rather than the other way around, Knutson joined two ad hoc committees that challenged the presidential candidates on key issues, including WFH and, in Mooney's case, his alleged non-compliance with CWA's policy on "mutual respect.)



Union Strategy on WFH

Differences quickly emerged in their responses to questions posed during CWA's first ever CWA presidential debate on May 15, organized by Knutson's local and seven others (or a related candidate questionnaire that only Mooney ignored.) Cummings, a leading CWA negotiator with AT&T, reiterated his support for Local 7250's petition last year because he "recognized early during the pandemic that our members were enjoying WFH." Cumming also argued that more job flexibility can be achieved through periodic contract negotiations, so-called "effects bargaining," and "a strong mobilization effort for WFH during negotiations." The now-CWA president noted that rank-and-filers covered by WFH deals need a "strong and effective network" of "empowered job stewards." "

"Proper tools, training and education is essential to the success of this process," Cummings said. "Zoom membership meetings and quarter-

ly gatherings such as ‘Union Days’ that include educational programs along with outreach can help keep our members engaged and connected to their local unions.” While he served as CWA Vice-President and director of the union’s fourth largest district, Cummings own staff of organizers and reps worked from home and he reported no membership complaints about that.

Drawing on her background as a media industry organizer and negotiator, Steffens called WFH “a major quality-of life benefit, as important as pay and job security, for our members in jobs where it’s possible.” She argued that CWA should do more to “collect and share best practices for work from home, including model contract language on critical issues like new hire data and orientations, remote surveillance, equipment reimbursement and callback protections.”

To deal with the internal and external organizing challenges created by remote work arrangements, Steffens called for better national union “systems to support hybrid and home-based workers and units, including funding home visits, organizing blitzes, electronic membership cards, virtual union boards and other strategies to ensure that our union density and activism remains strong.”

Remote Work Skeptics

Former Pennsylvania Bell technician Ed Mooney took the most critical view of WFH. During the pandemic, the CWA staff directed by Mooney in the mid-Atlantic states was ordered to return to union offices long before their counterparts elsewhere did so, according to the CWA staff union. On work-from-home in telecom, Mooney told debate listeners in May that “the whole world is trying to figure out is this a ‘flavor of the month’ kind of thing for employers? Are they going to do it just to eliminate workers? Are they going pull them back and forth? So, when we go and bargain this stuff, we have to make sure we get protections.” He predicted much more “push and pull” over hybrid work schedules until “we get this to a spot where it’s mutually beneficial.”

Mooney defended his role in negotiations with Verizon over WFH last year. During those talks, other CWA bargaining committee members like Local 1400 President Don Tremontozzi had to overcome Mooney’s initial opposition—voiced during union caucuses— to extending remote work opportunities for Verizon customer service reps.

Then and now, Mooney’s questioning of WFH resonated not only with east coast Verizon locals, dominated by technicians, but also some rank-and-file radicals who belong to those locals. Echoing Mooney’s concerns, one long-time activist and fellow Labor Notes supporter told me that WFH “takes away our bargaining power, leaves people more atomized, and gives management too much control.”

Another Verizon tech in Pennsylvania described both an upside and a downside to his experience with “home garaging” during the pandemic. Most of his co-workers really liked not having to report to a Verizon garage to pick up and return their trucks on a daily basis. With no unpaid commuting time, he found himself “actually working an 8-hour day for the first time ever.”

On the other hand, the job of CWA stewards became much harder because the “organic organizing opportunities” created by work group meetings, before and after daily shifts, no longer existed. Face-to-face contact was replaced with phone calls and much more e-mailing back and forth, in response to questions about workplace issues, management policy changes, or the status of grievances. There was, he reported, a “loss of cohesion” that might undermine “strike capacity” in the future.

Three decades ago, I was similarly ambivalent. As a national union rep between 1980 and 2007, I had much first-hand familiarity with the workplace culture of telephone company service reps and the different (and more blue-collar) world of inside and outside “plant technicians.” I also

worked with cable TV and telco technicians in CWA and IBEW who had divergent views on “home garaging” many years ago. Most cable guys loved being able to take their trucks home at night and go directly to customers’ homes the next morning. Union-minded telephone techs wanted their co-workers to report to a central location every day, so they would have more regular contact with shop stewards.

After I helped a group of 1,500 customer service reps in New England get a first contract in the mid-1990s, it wasn’t long before the company now known as Verizon wanted to do a “trial” of work from home. One reason for our resistance to that proposal was the fear that collective action in newly organized call centers would be more difficult, if everyone was isolated at home and not working under the same roof.

CWA’s WFH Defenders

The availability of now well-tested new tools for communication, coordination, and membership participation—that were not available back then—has convinced me that greater union flexibility on this issue is absolutely essential. One local union leader who has been most persuasive on this topic is Don Tremontozzi, a former customer service rep, longtime Labor Notes supporter, and founding member of Labor for Bernie in 2015.

No stranger to union militancy, Tremontozzi has been involved in two major Verizon strikes, a local work stoppage at AT&T Mobility, and the nation’s longest walkout in 2014, a successful fight by 2,000 workers against contract concessions at FairPoint Communications that lasted 131 days. Tremontozzi’s fast-growing Local 1400 is based in New England and reflects the unusual occupational diversity of CWA nationally.

By the end of last year, its 2,700 members included customer service and sales reps in call centers or retail stores, media and manufacturing workers, soft-ware developers, data center staff, and local government employees. Tremontozzi also

helped nurture and support the Alphabet Workers Union, a self-organized group at Google, that grew to over 1,000 members while working remotely and now have their own newly-chartered Local 9009 in California, where the company is based.

According to Tremontozzi, rank-and-file participation in his local actually increased during the pandemic. Because bargaining sessions, committee meetings and general membership gatherings were conducted via Zoom, they attracted people who would not have attended in person, after working all day or all week in their previous work locations. Local 1400 continued to have exceptional success recruiting new members, including those working remotely while they campaigned for union recognition.

Tremontozzi believes that WFH “addresses a key quality of life issue for hundreds of thousands of workers we represent and even more we are trying to organize. In every contract survey, CWA members have told us to make this a key proposal at the bargaining table.” His experience butting heads with Mooney over the WFH extension at Verizon last year turned him into a supporter of Steffens’ candidacy, despite her non-telephone industry background.

Tremontozzi ultimately became her campaign manager and, after her defeat on July 10, urged other Steffens supporters to back Cummings in the run-off, insuring the latter’s victory over Mooney. When polled before the convention, AT&T workers in Minneapolis Local 7250 overwhelmingly backed Cummings. So WFH defender Kieran Knutson and other delegates from his local voted for the eventual winner in both rounds of balloting. Both Tremontozzi and Knutson hope that CWA’s unusual campaign debate over the future of work from home will contribute to more member-driven organizing and bargaining strategies in their own union and others, to the benefit of all workers.

Moving Away from GDP as a Measure of Economic Health

Bridget Meehan, Caroline Whyte

In this article, Z Staff member Bridget Meehan talks to Caroline Whyte, an ecological economist whose interests include financial system reform and climate justice. Caroline conducts research and advocacy for Feasta, the Foundation for the Economics of Sustainability. The discussion focuses on alternatives to GDP (Gross Domestic Product) as a measure of economic health and why alternatives are necessary.

Bridget: Could you tell me a little about Feasta, how it got started, its purpose is and its main projects?

Caroline: Feasta was founded in 1998 and basically it's a kind of an ecological economics think-tank. It does a few important things, to my mind. One is that it has always very consciously tried to be non-hierarchical. So it's not like a standard research institute where you get this clear hierarchy and chain of command, and so on. We're influenced by Sociocracy and try to make our decision-making reasonably efficient but also inclusive as much as possible. We try to get that balance. We don't always get it right but we try our best. And it's important to us that there isn't a CEO, for example, there isn't a big boss in charge of everything. We're a charity and we have a Board of Trustees because you have to have that in a charity. They keep an eye on our operations and make sure we're more or less following the mission and so on but that's about it in terms of hierarchy.

That makes sense to me because in Z we have a flat structure too. If you want a democratic organisation, the last thing you want is a hierarchy.

It's trying to live the way you want the future to be. Sometimes it's a challenge and sometimes it's actually brilliant. I think on balance it's really great.

But, what we do [in Feasta] is to look at the economy in a way that's really different from the standard, the mainstream. We're assuming that there are hard limits to resource extraction and that you can't just keep expanding and expanding and expanding production, which we'll be talking about later when we talk about GDP. So, we need to find ways we can fit within the [natural] limits and make sure everybody has a decent dignified life and have what they need, both in terms of social needs as well as physical needs. It's finding that way of living, or that balance, that's really important for us at Feasta.

We have a two-track way of doing things. We encourage discussion among everybody, where we hold open events about how the economy should be, what's the vision for the economy, and so on. Right from the start, we've had lots of events and workshops, conferences. And we also published a lot as well; there were a few books at the beginning but we don't do as many books now because we have the impression that people don't read that kind of book so much anymore, they tend to get their information from the Internet. So we do a lot online, videos of events and podcasts which are really interesting I find. We also have a kind of a consensus about a few things – over the years there's a few things we think are super important but they can change, they evolve. But for a lot of the details, we don't have a consensus; we just say this is what so-and-so thinks and there's no fixed Feasta line.

Feasta was started by four people; unfortunately two have passed away and of the other two, one of them isn't involved anymore and the other is not so active. So, it's mostly other people from the founders and the baton's been passed on in a way. We have a group of hardcore people in Ireland but we also have people in other countries, which I find really helpful. The work I'm doing is about 50% focused on Ireland and the other 50% focused more broadly. I find that super interesting, looking at the relationships between Ireland and the wider world.

Just getting that diversity of people as well is good. Living on an island can be very isolating and you can become socio-centric when you don't get an infiltration of new ideas and people so as it's good to have that diversity and be more international.

One thing we've done in the last few years is that we've been able to support some people from the Global South, some youth from Brazil, Pakistan and India, to go to the COP climate summits and have a platform there. They get shut out of these big international summits, which are very corporate. The corporations get in no problem, the conferences are dominated by these powerful people with big voices and then the people who are actually affected by the policies are shut out. We weren't telling them [our funded delegates] what to say; they have their own things to say. We had help with some of the funding from the Irish Environmental Network, which we really appreciated, and it was great to have that opportunity. And it was educational for us because we could learn from the experiences of the people who went. I'm hoping we can keep working together and deepen the relationship we have with them.

GDP Alternatives: The National Well-being Index and the Dashboard

I wanted to ask you about Feasta's research into alternative ways to measure progress, to measure economic health other than using GDP. I know you have the National Well-being Index

(NWI) and I wanted to find out what the rationale was for devising this and why you think it's important to target GDP specifically?

Those questions tie into the whole issue of what is progress, what do we actually want from the economy and we measure if a society's doing well. I'm sure you know that since the end of the Second World War more or less there's been more and more of an obsession with GDP. It of course is a measure, a statistic, an aggregate of data about different kinds of production and different sectors of the economy and they're all brought together and given a monetary value which is GDP. There's a convention, an international UN convention, about how it's calculated. Ever since the beginning, I mean you couldn't make this up, even the economist who came up with it always said to be really careful, that this is not a measure of welfare, this is not a measure of quality of life and that you always have to ask what's growing and is this a good thing and should it be growing? But GDP has become this catch-all idea of what's progress and modernity. It does measure something, it measures a certain kind of economic activity but part of the problem is that it doesn't even measure all the important economic activity and it leaves out a lot of important things. It leaves out housework, it leaves out a lot of care work, things that aren't paid; the things that just 'happen'. There's that tradition of thinking where certain things that are invisible are left out and you don't notice them or factor them in.

And then meanwhile, things are left out which are negatives like environmental damage, and that's a really huge. Even things like road accidents, they can show up as positive in GDP because they stimulate the economy – you have to replace the car; you have to give people health care which costs money but that makes GDP go up.

It's the perversity of our economic system, really.

It's just crazy. There's basically two ways, I think, you can approach this – they're both useful in



trying to counterbalance this. One of them is the approach of what we in Feasta call the National Well-being Index and it's a derivation of something called the Index for Sustainable Economic Welfare, ISEW. The nuanced detail of it [National Well-being Index] actually came from Germany originally where some of our colleagues in the university in Heidelberg have been working on a German version of the Index which they call the National Welfare Index. A small group of people in Feasta took it [the German Index] and adapted it to an Irish context.

It's a little bit frustrating for them, partly because some of the Irish data isn't there. The Central Statistics Office in the South [of Ireland] has difficulty at the moment with recording some things so the Index isn't as comprehensive as the German Index and it has things missing. But basically the idea is that you make an attempt

to price various things and this is where it gets a little controversial because, of course, there are certain things you can't put an accurate price on; you can fudge it and you can do your best but it's not perfect. And there are there are philosophical questions too about whether it's a good idea to try and price everything.

Like whether you should have a monetary value on caring for your children or caring for a parent or sick relative.

Exactly, and this is why I said there's two ways that complement each other for dealing with the GDP problem. One way is this way where you're literally producing an alternate Index that gives everything a price and is trying to show more accurately what's really going on in terms of the value of what's happening in the economy. I think that's actually really helpful in a lot of

ways. That's actually helpful for people who've been trained, like conventional economists and so on, to only think in terms of price and they just can't see outside that frame. And it's a stark way to show the limitations of GDP because you can put the two graphs [GDP and the alternate Index] on top of each other to see the difference. We have some good material like that and the German folk have great material. So, from that point of view it's a really useful communications tool. It does also have limits because you are on the shaky ground of putting a price on childcare [for example] and also the environmental damage which we have to be very careful with because then it can turn into this thing of, oh well, if we can afford to pay for it then who cares if we damage the environment. So, it's a balancing act but it's still worth doing.

But then the other approach I was talking about is what they call the dashboard approach, where we're not trying to price everything but we're saying these twenty-or-so things are super important and we're going to measure them to see how they're doing. For example, having things like climate change, we can measure the PPM, the emissions. For things like income we can measure the proportion of people in a situation where they're really precarious economically. I think that is a much better measure than just saying what the average wealth of a household is because that doesn't tell you anything about equality or who's getting what.

Nowadays there's more interest in dashboards and the nice thing with dashboards is that you're not trapped into trying to price everything. They can be used for budgeting by governments because they can see visually that [for example] there's a very high level of mental health problems in this area compared to other places. Dashboards map it out. It's a communications tool again, but maybe a little more nuanced in the sense that you're not trying to monetise everything; you're just using it as a way to inflect.

Is it like giving you snapshot of certain situations

at that time, a visual snapshot, where according to the reading on the dashboard, there's a particular problem? You don't need to get any more scientific about it; it's enough to know that maybe there's something you need. It also counters that very formula-focused approach that classical economics uses.

Exactly, and there's more and more interest in that [dashboard approach]. The government in the South in Ireland has a framework it uses. It's got some problems, it's not perfect, but in Feasta, as part of the Environmental Pillar, we've been talking to the people who are working on it in the Department of the Taoiseach [Prime Minister].

Do they listen? Do they take on board what you say or some of what you say?

Yes, it's interesting actually. For one thing, I think they're understaffed. There are three of them and they've got this huge job and I think they're hearing different things and they're trying to juggle it and make sense of it all. And they're civil servants so they can't come out with anything political, they can't come out, for example, and say we totally agree with you on that. But we want to keep the discussion going and we feel like it's worth trying.

The thing is, we [Feasta] are not alone. For example, Social Justice Ireland are working a lot on this [GDP alternatives] and also in other countries, there are loads of people working on this issue of GDP. Governments and the civil servants are very influenced by each other in different countries. So, when they have contact with each other, there's a lot of peer pressure that goes on.

That must make a difference because they can't just write you off if there are others saying the same thing and you're not a lone voice. It shows that there's an international movement around this issue.

Exactly, but like I say, in Ireland we have this dashboard. The most famous one is probably in New Zealand. They started working on theirs about ten

to fifteen years ago and it's improving but it's still not perfect. When the Labour government took over there about five years ago, they started using it to influence their budgeting decisions. At the beginning it was only a tiny amount, like 2% of the budget, but now it's growing. What ended up happening was that more money went into child welfare and those sorts of things. So it's really quite progressive and I think it has a potential, but you have to be careful because it could be sidelined.

In Ireland, hardly anyone knows about it. I think people need to know about it and they need to be asking questions about it and critiquing it. A lot of the politicians either haven't heard of it or they think of it as this very marginal thing and don't realise the potential it could have. Obviously some of them don't want to change things anyway but for the ones that do – and I think this could move us onto discussion about the Left – I think sometimes it's misunderstood. And usually they're called Well-being Frameworks, at the moment the buzzword is well-being. We've taken that on in Feasta. We talk about well-being; we talk about Donut economics as well. But there might not be a single perfect word to describe what we're after. Well-being might work, it might be okay. But the trouble is some people think it means self-care, which is important, don't get me wrong, but they think it's yoga or whatever.

Key components of the National Well-being Index

There can be confusion or different ideas about what is meant by well-being in this context, for sure. So, I'd like to drill down a bit more into the National Well-being Index you mentioned earlier, and the key areas it focuses on as compared to what GDP focuses on.

There are twenty indicators altogether. I could just pull them up and list them off but I'll talk about the most interesting ones. Like I said before, there's housework which they've attempted to give a value to. There's private consumption but it's a bit different from the way GDP measures consumption

because it's weighted according to income so it's to convey how unequal society is. So, that's really important. Then voluntary work is another one because that's a big positive in a lot of ways and that doesn't get factored in at all; it's just taken for granted. And a huge one is environmental damage, and getting a handle on it in financial terms. That effort is always going to be flawed but it's at least something and can be used as a communications tool. I think those four are the really important ones. The others, we could go through the whole list but...

No, it's okay. You're talking about the things that are basically ignored right now under the GDP system but that are so crucial to how we function as a society and how we protect the world around us. Caring, volunteerism...

Yeah, and the environment as well because again, it's all around us and we're so reliant on it, we need it and yet it's literally invisible when it comes to measuring it.

Our economic system doesn't even factor it in.

And that brings us to this whole subtopic of why is it considered so important and how can it be taken off its throne. I think a lot of it has to do with the way money works and the financial system, banking, all of that. And it's a funny thing because a lot of politicians and civil servants understand intellectually that there's a real problem with GDP. I mean, it's hard to not realise that. If you even look at it a bit you can see there are problems. And loads of them [politicians] have gone on record saying that they know GDP isn't – they wouldn't say we mustn't pay any attention to GDP – but they very often they say we need to have other things, we need to include other measures that should complement GDP. That's one way it's often put.

But actually, I don't know if you're aware, there are more radical elements creeping in, even into more mainstream politics. For example, the Secretary General of the UN, Antonio Guterres, just recently he came out with some interesting comments about GDP. In the last year or so he's been saying things

that are basically what we're saying, that using GDP as our main measure is destroying the environment, we're in huge trouble, this is really dangerous, we've got to change the way we're measuring progress. And in fact, the UN is actually in the process of changing the definition of GDP. It's like this long process they started a couple of years ago and it'll go on until 2025 and they're bringing together people in different countries.

The process is rather opaque; but there'll be periods apparently where people can feed into it and give opinions. So Feasta's hoping to be able to jump in and say a few things. But they're actually revising their definition of GDP. Now, I've no idea what will happen with that, whether it will go in a good way or not. From what Antonio Guterres said, I think he himself recognises intellectually that there's a real problem.

But there's the intellectual and then there's the emotional, and I think for a lot of people it's very hard. Say, if you're a central banker and you're really in the system and you don't want to scare investors away from your country; you're scared that if you say something in public like, well, infinite growth is physically impossible, then all the big companies will say, oh jeppers, and go and put their money somewhere else. So you keep kicking the can down the road.

In political circles as well as economic circles, they latch onto GDP because it's understood and makes their job easier. It doesn't need explained. Whereas, when you're trying to introduce something new, that's hard and it takes a lot of courage and tenacity.

Well, you've got Bhutan which has the Gross National Happiness Index and it has done some good. People laughed at first but now they're not laughing as much because it is doing some good. But that's just one little teeny country and I don't think it's all that dependent, from what I understand, on foreign investment and it's got a fairly sound economy. But then you get a country like Ireland which has this vast amount of foreign direct investment, and plus there's the whole taxation [issue].

Being a tax haven, Ireland doesn't want to move away from GDP and scare off all the tax evaders. But it leads me onto talking about the uptake from those on the Left, politically, although we did talk a bit about this earlier. Sometimes you expect to have allies among other like-minded groups or political parties but then you realise that for some reason or other, whatever their agenda is, they're not your ally at all. I'm wondering what kind of the support you get from political parties and others on the Left.

I don't have a quick easy answer to that question but I'll tell you a few thoughts. I think sometimes from where we're at, where we're talking about things like limits and boundaries and planetary boundaries, it can sound almost dictatorial or almost like we want to deprive people in some way. There is such a thing as eco-fascism; it really does exist, as I'm sure you know, so there is that strand. Even the Nazis, Hitler was big into nature. So, sometimes the way this [subject] is talked about can sound really bad. And some of the people who are into limiting consumption come across as really misanthropic; it's like they just hate the human race.

It's as though some of them don't mind that maybe two billion people will have to die in the process; they're like, yeah, that's okay. They obviously don't see themselves as one of those two billion. And discussion on this subject can exclude a lot of people too who are just trying to get on with their lives and pay the bills. The language might not be very relatable to their lives. More widely, this can be the case when you're trying to create something for change, for a post-capitalist society, you can be in your own bubble and not even reaching people who you want to win over.

Which is why having real discussions is so important. That's a big part of why we [Feasta] try to do that; participatory discussions are so important. I've noticed that there can be a little bit of a lack of reflectiveness on the Left about things like income and standard of living. With the whole idea of standard of living, there's a feeling that the average



Photo by Markus Spiske on Unsplash

person needs more, and that's really understandable and justifiable especially when there's a lot of pressures, so I can see where that comes from. But it's almost like there's no real plan; it's just saying we need more and more and more. I think sometimes it can be a reaction to what's happened to people that they just want to compensate for that with more stuff. You see it even in the ILO, for example, they want to increase worker standards of living and there's no limit, it's like they should just increase and increase. That's fine but what happens if your grandchildren aren't going to have enough resources because they've been used up.

So, sometimes there seems to be a lack of reflectiveness in the way that's thought about and just talking about it in-depth really helps, discussing what's the actual goal, what do we really want from all this stuff and busyness and so on. I think there's again a justifiable sense of, and a need, for justice and fairness and balance; if you see wealthy people living in this very extravagant way, it's absurd to then say everybody else should live very simply and humbly. There needs to be a system where people can't get away with private jets and all this awful excess.

Any kind of post-capitalist economy would have to address that and make sure that could never happen, no matter what contribution you make to society that the mechanisms should not allow you to amass that kind of wealth. But you're hitting one of those really tricky areas and it's again going into the nuance.

There's been really interesting research where a couple of groups in different universities have come up with similar figures, and they estimated that by 2050 if the whole world population – which would be a bigger population than now – if everybody had enough to live a basic but dignified, decent life, that this could be done with roughly 40% of the energy we use now. 40% and that's with a greater population than we have now in the world; with much less energy everybody's needs could be met. I find that fascinating.

Moving beyond GDP and capitalism

That research is really powerful because it gives people hope that it [moving away from capitalism] can be done without everybody having to go live in a cardboard box and starve to death. I'm conscious of time, so I wanted to get your thoughts on moving beyond capitalism. Personally, I don't believe we can tweak it to make it better, and I don't believe we can dismantle it in time to deal with the climate crisis. At the same time, I don't trust capitalism to deal with the climate crisis in a just and fair way. So, while we're making that transition beyond growth and the climate crisis, we also need to be making that transition from capitalism. I wanted to get

your thoughts on that, whether you think an alternative to GDP is only the starting point, or whether you think we can achieve the goal of a sustainable world where everybody lives a decent quality of life without all that damage to the environment, and we can do that within a capitalist system.

Well, if we're defining capitalism as a system that requires expansion where these big entities own and have capital; and you've got corporations with shareholders and they have the goal where they need to maximise their profits causing a dynamic of expansionism where they have to keep producing more and more; and there's an ideology where rich people are glamorised and we're bombarded with ads that make it look like spending lots of money on junk is going to make us wonderfully happy and serene; and of course, a total disregard and downgrading of inequality as a problem or even where saying if you think it's a problem means you're jealous; I think all of those things, they're not compatible. We have to get rid of all of that.

The vision or the goal of maximising profits is a huge problem and something needs to be done. It's not enough to expect them [capitalists] to voluntarily change because even with the best will in the world – say if there's some CEO who genuinely wants to change their company's mission – it's so easy to be sidelined or to be undermined. There's so much greenwashing, so much manipulation and gaming of things, so there needs to be the same rules for everyone. And that all ties it with, for example, in Feasta where we're very into the idea of phasing out the supply of fossil fuel gradually in a way that's as fair as possible. If you do that and there's an actual hard limit on the supply of fossil fuel and it's gradually phased out, then you can't have things like private jets; that would be impossible. Having the same rules for everyone is really, really important. We can't have a system where some are allowed to have unlimited wealth. It's just not compatible with what needs to happen.

I view Participatory Economics as an economic model with the ability to make happen the economic changes you talked about. But is there any particular model or ideology that you think would be better than what we have now in terms of the profit-seeking motive and the excess of wealth and inequality?

I guess I like as an overall framework, I do like the Well-being idea because it's looking at lots of different things as being important and necessary and worthwhile to pursue. And then also Donut economics because that's got a balance, a dynamic balance, I like that idea; it's an economy where things are moving and changing; it's not just sitting still and there can be interesting things happening but you're not damaging the environment and you're not compromising people's needs. I like that sort of model. It's very basic but I like the idea of balance and harmony. I think it's something we tend to enjoy as humans; we like games of balance. Feasta is part of a project, for example, where we're talking to some artists and hoping that they'll help us to think about ways to visualise how the future could look and what the economy could be like. It's exciting and we're looking forward to seeing what they come up. But I don't have a model in the sense of a worked-out costed model where everything is numbered.

Well, you've outlined the principles you'd like to see in an economy, the values and outcomes, and what you don't want, and that's a good start. Capitalism is such a big thing to try and tackle because it's so embedded and we really have been sold the propaganda message that there's no better alternative. The idea of breaking it down and replacing with something credible is enormous.

Yeah, exactly.

Well, we can probably end it there. I've really enjoyed the conversation and I want to thank you for taking the time to talk.

Students Step Up

Michael Albert

Roughly ten weeks until U.S. students will trek back to school, including college. What's coming to NYU, Wisconsin, SF State, MIT, Howard, Pepperdine, Morehouse, Purdue, Loyola, Pace? What's coming to Drake, Kansas State, Rutgers, Boston University, University of Chicago, Duke, Berkeley, Florida, Kent State? What's coming to Reed, Bucknell, Colombia, Vanderbilt, Austin, Evergreen, Concordia, Yale, Jackson State – and all the rest?

Will students scale ivy walls and prowl campus corridors seeking change. Will students create tumult, turmoil, tension, and resistance? Will students evidence rejection and initiate revolt? That's what ought to arrive this Fall. It's what we can all hope will arrive. But will it?

Flash back, way back, so far back, all the way to May 1970—just yesterday. Richard Nixon announced the invasion of Cambodia. What was already intense campus unrest dramatically escalated. The national guard shot to death four students at Kent State University. Campuses erupted. Two were killed and twelve wounded at Jackson State. About 2,000 students were arrested in the first half of May 1970. Campuses were declared in a state of emergency in Kentucky, Ohio, Michigan, and South Carolina. At least a third of the nation's nearly 3,000 colleges had strikes. Over 80% of all colleges and universities had protests. Approximately four million students and 350,000 faculty members actively participated in strikes. Buildings were shut down. Highways were blocked. Campuses were closed. Nixon's Scranton Commission reported that roughly three quarters of all students supported the strikes. Pollsters reported that within campuses alone over a million people claimed to favor revolution and called themselves revolutionaries. In early 1971 the New York Times reported that four out of ten students thought a revolution was needed in the United States. This upsurge and the civil rights and then the black power move-

ment, the women's movement, the antiwar movement, and the youth rebellion behind it all, together threatened the very fabric of society and thereby helped to end a war as it twisted the country's mentality inside out and upside down. Racism was under siege. Sexism was in retreat. Suburban culture was tottering. A gigantic war machine was slowed. Even capitalism had cracks. But the desire to attain a better world did not last sufficiently long or grow sufficiently wide and deep to replace Washington's White House and Wall Street's corporations which, instead, went on producing domination and greed. Capitalism's institutional persistence slowly eroded and even devoured Sixties aspirations for solidarity and self management. "We want the world and we want it now. Now!" We didn't get it.

Flash forward to this coming September. Imagine students back on campus. Do they discuss courses to take? Ways to hook up with new guys or gals? Upcoming athletic seasons? I'd be surprised if not, but will students' also focus on war and peace? On global weather, water, and plastics? On why calamities afflict the poor so much worse than all others? On why there are poor at all? Will students on campus focus on why life in the world is so much less than it could be for the starving, the raped, the bombed, the unemployed, the heat-melted, the high-water-rising-drowned, and for those who work at jobs that rob dignity, stifle creativity, and subject souls to stupefying rule by others? Will students on campus talk about having no time to live, no space to be humane, and no meaning beyond the next crappy, cursing dollar? Will the main topic for students on campus this Fall be an envisioned future that is spiritually, emotionally, sexually, intellectually, ecologically, and also materially liberating? Will it be how they are going to win that envisioned future consistent with their working hard for everyone else to get there too.

Imagine students asking why their curriculums pro-



duce ignorance about international relations on top of ignorance about market competition's violations of solidarity, sagacity, and sustainability. Imagine students deciding that enough is enough. Devils in command no more. Enough sadistic suicidal corporate commodification.

Maybe one particular student wears a funny hat and has a history of being aloof, but now shouts out grief, desire, hope, and anger. Perhaps another student looks as straight as a Pepsi commercial and has her high school class's most likely to have a million friends diploma, but suddenly sings about how to upend masters of the universe. Maybe another student speaks, shrieks, or paints about floods drowning people's hopes and about a rising tide of people's compassionate creativity lifting people's prospects. Maybe yet another student will write about resurgent racism and sully sexism, and about combative communalism and fierce feminism and their time finally coming. Maybe students will hum new tunes, sing new lyrics, and rally, march, sit in, and occupy—all while waving a big, solid fist and creating a

living, breathing community of respectful mutual aid in place of dismissive mutual recrimination. Maybe a few, and then more, and then so so many students will reach out in ways that pull still others in and never in ways that repel others away.

Imagine that students don't just send emails to their friends and allies, don't just tweet and TikTok others, but actually enter dorms, knock on every door, and initiate long talks. And then do it again, and again. Imagine they listen closely. They communicate clearly. And they patiently present carefully constructed arguments that address not only war, racism, sexism, poverty, and all the nightmarish patterns that afflict our lives, but also positive prospects that they prefer for on campus and for off.

Imagine students consciously and methodically earmark fraternity and sorority members, athletes, readers, writers, and scholars for conversation, incitement, and recruitment. Imagine they see their campuses as places from which to churn out activists. They see no higher calling than to make cam-

pus-wide critical dissent and innovative construction begin, accelerate, and, like a dream too long deferred, explode.

Imagine students school themselves outside the narrow bounds of their colleges' borders and thereby envision an alternative to cutthroat competition and insular isolation. Students who teach themselves to describe a better alternative. Students who inspire others with their vision. Students who regularly refine their vision, and formulate and implement paths to reach it.

Imagine that students, by the new year, share many views and much spirit. Imagine them angry and also hopeful, sober and also laughing. They meet in dorm hallways and dining areas, on ball fields and in bedrooms, to form campus organizations, or, even campus chapters of a larger encompassing national community of organizations. Imagine the latter is called students for a democratic society—a new SDS—or maybe it even morphs itself to transcend its past and look forward to become, say, students for a participatory society, or even students for a participatory world where each chapter chooses its own local name. Dave Dellinger SPS, Emma Goldman SPS, Malcolm X SPS. And for that matter, Rosa Luxemburg SPS, Emiliano Zapata SPS, Ella Baker SPS, Eugene Debs SPS. And so on.

Imagine, in short, that students rise up with information, relentless focus, and inspiring abandon. Students become angry, militant, and aggressive, even as they also keep foremost in their expanding minds mutual concern and compassion.

Imagine all this tumult pumps into the already nationally growing U.S. dissent against war and economic injustice, against global ecological nightmare, and against ubiquitous anti social violence. Imagine aroused students knocking on everyone's doors and pushing into neighborhood associations and union gatherings and church cells as a growing youthful branch of movement activism willing to break the laws of the land and push thoughts and deeds into revolutionary zones. Students who sing, dance, march, and law-break up a howling storm of desire

and intent.

That youthful energy and insight is something the antiwar movement, the labor movement, the movement for gender and sexual liberation, and the movement against racism and fascism—the movements for local and worldwide rights and against environmental suicide, the movement for consumer rights and against corporate commodification, the resurgent labor movement for dignified work, and the movements for equity and against profit seeking market madness all need.

Successful campaigns for change all need, require, and indeed must have youth.

So imagine that young people, with time, energy, heart, and mind, discern that they are being coerced by society most often to become crushed victims, sometimes to become passive abettors, and occasionally to become active perpetrators of society's injustices.

Imagine students seek more and other than to be bent by society's pliers. Imagine they hunker down for the long haul. They equip themselves much better and orient themselves much more wisely than my generation of the Sixties ever did. They are smarter, more strategic, more persistent.

Imagine students not only reject statist regimentation and war, corporate alienation and greed, patriarchal sexism, ageism, and gender repression, and tribalistic sectarian inter-community racism and nationalism, but also carry their feelings of rejection into positive advocacy that undertakes innovation to bring to campuses not only small sub communities of dissent and rejection, but campus-wide communities of joyous and sustained commitment to positive vision. Being left, being radical, being visionary becomes synonymous with being caring, being right, and being true to self and others. That would be a ticket to a new world for everyone. That would be a ticket much better than old style graduation into a morally decrepit world all around us. This trip will be long. But why not step up now?

Of course there are obstacles. There's massive media misinformation. There's habituated personal passivity. There are campus rules, and there is state repression. But look around. Society is headed for hell. Such reasons to not step up, to not rise up, ought to seem comparatively insubstantial next to today's injustice much less it's suicide trek toward environmental disaster. But perhaps some other obstacles impede all the above stepping up.

First, there is doubt about winning and even about there being anything to win. There is doubt that a better world is even possible. And, even if technically possible, doubt that we humans can attain it. And, second, even if humanity could attain it, there is doubt about personally having anything to offer by way of helping that struggle. What can be done to overcome all these doubts? Develop and share immediate flexible demands and tactical plans. Orient choices of and sustain commitment to immediate flexible demands and tactical plans. Develop and share vision for better schools and even for better society. Develop and share vision for the new world we desire and for strategy to birth it. Develop and share answers to the very fair question, okay, what do you want? Yes, all of that.

More, isn't a related but subtly different obstacle to campus tumult, turmoil, tension, and resistance a considerable level of campus defeatism, depression, and aloofness? A kind of mindset that runs away from politics, that runs away from activism? A feeling that politics and activism are alienated, boring, and acrimonious realms that drain already overstretched and highly precarious lives? Isn't this obstacle that many many students are not only unconvinced by activist formulations, but to preserve their own sanity they don't even want to hear from "the left." They often agree with "the left" but want to avoid "the left." They want to ghost "the left." They even energetically run from "the left." What can "the left" do to overcome this obstacle to its own growth?

Perhaps "the left" can engage with young people via socially uplifting activities? Perhaps can directly address the actual feelings that block communication? Maybe a youthful surge able to grow and persist, to



diversify and deepen in the various ways necessary to flourish will need to be a kind of home for students, a nourishing and not a hectoring environment. Perhaps it will need to be an exciting, welcoming, inspiring destination that people want to seek out and not a place they want to emotionally and socially avoid. Perhaps right up with offering vision, strategy, and program, "the left" needs to offer a patient, caring home, and not a frazzled, contentious, emotionally draining, denigrating jail of a different kind.

If all that, then perhaps back to college, and back to high school too, will indeed include tumult, turmoil, tension, resistance, rejection, and revolt. Perhaps it will more centrally feature than ever before vision-based, multi-focus, multi-tactic, strategically sustained movement that embodies humor, heart, mutual respect, support, and aid.

Perhaps it will liberate humanity and save our planet. Perhaps it will tell passive teachers of passivity there's a new movement on campus. The old ways are over. You too, step up or step aside.

Imagine that.

It's Not That Hard to Solve Homelessness

Sonali Kolhatkar

California is home to Hollywood and Disneyland, sun and sand, and... nearly one-third of all unhoused people in the entire nation. Compare this to the fact that 12 percent of the nation resides in the Golden State and it becomes clear that there is a serious problem of housing that undercuts the Left Coast's liberal reputation.

An extensive study of the state's struggle with homelessness by the Benioff Homelessness and Housing Initiative at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) paints a detailed picture of the problem, and it's not pretty. Homelessness is thriving at the intersections of racism, sexual violence, overpolicing, and more. The report's authors explain, it "occurs in conjunction with structural conditions that produce and reproduce inequalities."

Contrary to the popular perception that good weather fuels voluntary homelessness and consists largely of transplants from out of the state, the report points out that 90 percent of the unhoused had been living in California when they lost access to housing. And, three-quarters continue to remain in the same county.

The problem also manifests in systemic racism, with Black and Indigenous people overrepresented among the unhoused compared to their populations. More than a quarter of all unhoused people in California are Black, and yet only 5 percent of the state's overall population is Black.

Homelessness also fuels sexual violence that disproportionately impacts unhoused LGBTQ people and women. More than one-third of transgender and nonbinary people experiencing homelessness reported being victims of sexual violence, while 16 percent of cisgender women did so as well.

And, nearly half of all the study's participants (47 percent) report being harassed by police. Law enforcement routinely subjects California's unhoused population to violent police raids, dehumanizing searches and seizures of property, forced relocation, and incarceration. The unhoused are disproportionately criminalized by a system that pours a significant amount of tax dollars into policing rather than into affordable housing. Increasingly, cities are simply making it illegal to live outdoors, as if criminalizing homelessness will magically make the math of housing affordability work out.

The UCSF report is neither the first, nor will it be the last one to explore the extent of homelessness in California. And while it makes clear how serious the problem is, the main question remains: how to solve it?

There are several policy solutions put forward including rental assistance in the form of housing vouchers, an exploration of shared housing models, mental health treatment, and even a progressive-sounding monthly income program. But these are merely metaphorical band-aids being applied to a gaping, bleeding wound. None of them address the fundamental reason of why there are more than 171,000 people without housing in California.

Interestingly, the UCSF study's main author, Dr. Margot Kushel, honed in on the core issue in an interview with the San Francisco Chronicle when she said, "We have got to bring housing costs down, and we've got to bring incomes up... We need to solve the fundamental problem—the rent is just too high."

This is a nationwide problem and California is merely on the front lines.

So, how to bring housing costs down? The federal government sees a shortage of homes as the problem, treating it as an issue of supply and demand: increase the supply and the price will fall. But there is no shortage of housing in the nation. There is a shortage of affordable housing and as long as moneyed interests keep buying up housing, building more won't be a fix.

Since at least 2008, hedge funds have been buying up single-family homes and rental units in California, throwing a bottomless well of cash at a resource that individuals need for their survival and pushing house prices and rents out of reach for most ordinary people. This too is a nationwide phenomenon, one that was extensively outlined in a 2018 report produced by the Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment (ACCE), Americans for Financial Reform, and Public Advocates.

That report makes it clear that Wall Street hedge funds see housing as the next frontier in profitable investing. Once these funds buy up homes and apartments to rent out, they cut the labor and material costs associated with maintenance, and routinely raise the rents.

And why wouldn't they? Their bottom line is profits, not safe, clean, fair, affordable housing. In 2000, the average American renter spent just over 22 percent of their income on housing. Today that percentage has jumped to 30. Hedge fund landlords are likely celebrating their success at getting "consumers" to fork over a larger share of money for their "products."

The only way to stop hedge funds from taking over the housing market is... [drumroll] to stop hedge funds from buying up homes. To that end, the ACCE report calls on local municipalities and state governments to offer tenants the first right of refusal in purchasing homes, along with appropriate supports, and then offer nonprofit institutions like community land trusts to have the second right of refusal to purchase. It also calls on the federal government to "not incentivize speculation,

or act to favor Wall Street ownership of housing assets over other ownership structures."

The other end of the problem is that incomes are too low. According to Dean Baker at the Center for Economic and Policy Research, the federal minimum wage ought to be \$21.50 an hour in order to keep up with the rise in productivity. But it's not. It's a horrifyingly low \$7.25 an hour. And while nearly half of all states have pushed that wage floor far higher to about \$15 an hour, it doesn't come close to what's needed. Even the few dozen cities that have forced the minimum wage past their state requirements don't get to \$21.50 an hour.

Yes, individual incomes are rising because of worker demands on employers, but they are not keeping up with inflation. And even though government officials admit that rising wages don't fuel inflation, the Federal Reserve sees rising wages as the problem, countering them with higher interest rates.

Putting together these pieces of the puzzle, one can only conclude that our economy is designed to keep ordinary Americans living hand to mouth, running on an endless treadmill just to keep from falling into homelessness.

The rent is too damn high—to cite affordable housing activists—and wages are too damn low. That is the nutshell description of an economy that is simply not intended to center human needs.

Passing laws to prevent hedge funds and other large businesses from buying up homes and apartments and raising the minimum wage to at least \$21.50 are hardly radical ideas, but they offer course corrections for an economy that is running roughshod over most of us. Rather than tinkering at the edges of the problem and putting forward complex-sounding solutions that don't actually address the root of the issue, wouldn't society be better served by redesigning our economy to make homelessness obsolete?

The Right Got It, But When Will the Left Get It?

Hugo Rangone

Alarm, the far right is advancing! More than three years ago (30 April 2019), the BBC News website reported: “Traditional institutions are horrified by the emergence of forces that in many cases use rhetoric strikingly similar to that of the darkest era of recent Europe”. Now barely overshadowed by the conflict in Ukraine, the alarm bells are still ringing: “The far right is advancing!” echoes much of the political and media spectrum. And the possible drift of this rise is not to be underestimated. For their part, the longer the horrified leaders have taken turns at the helm of power, the greater the dismay and surprise at such an unfortunate anomaly, unexpected and sudden, like a bolt of lightning in a cloudless sky. But the predictable cynicism of these traditional institutions and the press in their service is not the problem, or at least it is the part of the problem that we do not and cannot influence: pretending is part and parcel of their function as CEOs of capital. And it would be naïve to expect honest self-critical reflection from the establishment, which would place at the root of this rise the frustration and hopelessness in which the social order they themselves defend and maintain has plunged a good part of humanity.

The problem is on this side, on the anti-capitalist left. It seems that the urgency for solutions to the seriousness of the problems afflicting the world is clearer to the depoliticised masses than to the leaders and parties of the left themselves, with few exceptions. Growing unemployment; forced migrations; real or induced insecurity; armed conflicts; geopolitical disputes; instability; undeniable imbalance of natural processes due to human action; uncertainty or scepticism about the future are some of the problems on which the right structures its reactionary discourse and its “simple” explanations, easy to digest and repeat for the depoliticised

masses. This unshaven right wing thus offers a hope whose falsity is evident, but not to those who have come to repudiate politics and all that it represents: the realm of lies; of accommodation; of manipulation. Seduced by hearing quick and drastic answers to real and serious problems, groping, hand in hand with their own enemy, they choose the emergency exit that leads to the abyss in the belief of escaping from an unbearable present. The left, for its part, is careful with form. With a few honourable exceptions, it continues to be gripped by the defeat of the socialist project symbolised by the dismemberment of the former USSR. Neither those within the left camp who suffered this implosion as a regrettable defeat, nor those who welcomed it as a confirmation of their critical positions, dare to imagine and propose a radical break with the established order. Instead, they insist on proposals that do not take their feet off the plate. Candidates are put forward who propose such and such improvements to what already exists, always within the framework of what is permitted. Is it possible to think of reversing hopelessness with proposals such as “representing women and young people; being paid like a teacher (the legislative allowance) and rotating positions”? One would think not. Instead of taking advantage of the few media spaces that present themselves when there are elections to expose the reasons for the unviability of the capitalist system, its inherent contradictions, the inevitability of its crises, hunger and wars included, they opt instead for these lukewarm ambiguities. Except for those who practice this form of “moving towards socialism”, it is clear that two or three or so legislators do not have the slightest chance of changing the course of history: the goal of becoming the third or fourth political force looks, considering the circumstances and to put it mildly, very modest indeed. It is not by patronising those who shout against communism

and showing ourselves to be “civilised and trustworthy” that we will contribute to our goal, if it is still to end capitalism. History is full of lessons regarding the outcome of such “realism”.

Are there objective conditions for a revolution on a planetary scale? There are plenty, some of them enunciated above. And the subjective conditions? Not only are they completely absent: as we have seen, it is the right wing that is advancing. Is it possible to reverse the situation? The left-wing press is trying: pointing out the calamities provoked by rulers of all kinds; denouncing the capitulations of the trade union bureaucracies; making a permanent account of its own participation in marches, assemblies, popular pots, mobilisations and other partial struggles. A necessary task, but repeated identically to itself regardless of the results becomes an automatism only significant for its protagonists. For their part, intellectuals and academics are also trying to do their part: with theoretical developments on the classics of Marxism; with critical analyses of the current reality; with participation in debate forums; in social networks. This work is also essential, but we are seeing that it is not enough: resignation, scepticism and then the right wing are advancing. And time is running out.

However, one thing is clear to anyone who dares to look at it: the anti-system imposture of the right is telling us that it is precisely there, in this radicalism and in this daring, which in them are simulated and false, that these growing masses are nevertheless looking for a way out: for big problems, big solutions. Instead of tearing our hair out over the “unusual” advance of the right, let us on the left take up this radicalism and this anti-system boldness.

Back in 1968 there were the great days of protest, jointly led by workers and students, which went down in history as the French May. Perhaps its best-known slogan, which is still remembered today, was “Let’s be realistic, let’s ask for the impossible”. A bold slogan, which generated much enthusiasm and support. Today, however, in the light

of the time that has passed, it can be seen that the key to its failure, as an attempt to radically change reality, was already in germ in the slogan itself. Because implicit in this “let’s ask” was the recognition that there was a place where decisions were made, that is, a place of power, and at the same time it was assumed that this place was occupied by another. Today we cannot make the same mistake: at a time of a planetary crisis of multiple aspects, including the ecological one, which could have no return, the slogan that is being imposed is “Let’s be realistic, let’s do the impossible”.

Revolutionary general strike?

From what we have just said about the kind of dominant subjectivity and the kind of politics proposed by left organisations, a revolutionary general strike would seem to be out of the question even in the boldest dream.

Let us for the moment, however, do the exercise of imagining it: in times of globalised capital, an equally globalised strike. Unlike all strikes, this one will not be accompanied by any demands: we will not ask for the impossible, we will do it. The strike will not be driven by such and such demands. There will be no demands whose satisfaction will end with the strike: the purpose of this strike will not be to obtain improvements of any kind or to denounce few or many of the iniquities of the system. The function of this general strike will be none other than to completely paralyse the functioning of the system. To generate such a breakdown that, after the foreseeable, multiple and unsuccessful attempts to restore normality, governments will have no choice but to leave power. More precisely, when the very notion of power, in its character of domination, has been replaced by a grimace of impotence, a mere gesticulation empty of meaning. Only when there is no one left in a position to give orders, and no one in a position to carry out those previously received, will the strike be lifted, but in the new conditions established by a project previously conceived, developed and obviously oriented towards socialism.

Back to the present

It is a proven premise, not only in the field of political action, that success is often preceded by failure many times over. That one must persevere. Thus, patience was one of the outstanding traits of and by great revolutionaries such as Ho Chi Minh and Che. But under this necessary premise there is also often takes shelter an unproductive recurrence, a repetition of methods that, in the light of the results, should be critically reviewed. This is the case with the usual logic of the left (even when it assumes the need for internationalism) when it comes to the struggle for power: it invariably involves construction and development on a national scale. But today the degree of development of the instruments of capitalist intervention make it impossible to have any illusion that anti-capitalist and socialist processes can be initiated and sustained within the borders of national states: they are either co-opted by capital or aborted by legal fraud or directly by armed intervention. This classical logic of the left has become obsolete, it is necessary to think on a global scale, the same scale that encompasses the class enemy.

While it is true what was described at the beginning with regard to the dominant type of subjectivity, it is also true that groups are constantly emerging in different parts of the world with multiple and diverse demands and proposals with a progressive content, in opposition to the regressions proposed by the right. Disperse and unconnected, with no explicit directionality, they nevertheless share a common trait: the weariness of an unsustainable, undeserved, unjust reality, and the desire to change it. However, just as they emerge, many dissipate or decay, probably in part due to the wear and tear of permanent street action, generally in the context of repression. But it is also possible to conjecture that the lack of a projection that would allow them to transcend the limited condition of petitioner, of demanding, plays a decisive role in this inconsistency. Many of these groups or movements, when they do not disappear, tend to drift towards forms of incorporation into the structures of the system. Even with the best of intentions, it is not uncom-

mon for them to end up being swallowed by the establishment. Alongside this, the functioning and reproduction of the system is increasingly dependent on technology: computerisation and robotisation of the processes of production, trade and management have been generalised and deepened now by the effects of the pandemic. Industrial production; fishing; agricultural production; transport; energy production and distribution; banking; stock exchange operations; communications; port and airport operations; trade are some of the activities and tasks that the system concentrates in the hands of a few operators, thereby creating as many vulnerabilities.

The concurrent existence of active nonconformists and dispersed operators of nodal centres of the reproductive apparatus of the system, and the dual membership of a fraction of the working class in these groups enable the question: What if it were possible to initiate some form of globalised coordination of those who deploy this dual membership?

In saying active non-conformists, it goes without saying that we are not thinking, as is *de rigueur* on the left, of dismissing anyone who does not know The Manifesto by heart. What we are thinking of here is not to add acolytes to a sect, nor to establish with precision the borderline between reformists and genuine revolutionaries, nor any of the tasks that party lefts usually take on with such zeal and such poor results: we are only trying to imagine ways of destroying the capitalist social order and going for socialism. All those people and organisations from different latitudes who express, in one way or another, the rejection of the consequences of this criminal and suicidal system called capitalism would serve this goal. Regardless of whether or not they explicitly adhere to this or that political party or social organisation, it would be enough that they realise that this form of society is no longer acceptable, that a radical change is essential, and that they are willing to contribute their efforts, in order to become part of the process of radical change that humanity and so many other forms of life urgently need.

Where to start?

If, as we conjecture, not only the French May but also the current attempts are diluted by the lack of an action-oriented project, and therefore of the necessary organisation to carry it out, these two elements should be at the starting point.

For example, an orienting project and at the same time organising element could consist of collective work dedicated to imagining and designing a structure of production and distribution that instead of being governed by the “laws of the market” is based on the real needs and capacities of the social whole; in which private ownership of the means of production has been completely socialised and in which decisions are in the hands of the consumer producers themselves through their own non-hierarchical organisations.

Why such a task? Certainly not as an academic exercise or to present to the United Nations or any other body of power to ask for the implementation of such a change. Not to “ask for the impossible”. Instead, it would have a double function: to provide the groundwork for a collective work that would involve, through various activities aimed at assessing local realities in terms of needs and capacities, neighbours; neighbourhood leaders; activists and organisations of different kinds: social, trade union, political, cultural, etc.; and at the same time to contribute to the essential information base for a first draft of this programme which, we said, should already be conceived and awaiting that hypothetical revolutionary general strike to open the way for it.

If, at the same time as promoting this kind of localised survey of productive capacities and consumption needs as massively and extensively as possible, contact were established with the active non-conformists who also operate key points of the apparatus of reproduction of the system, with the general strike and the new project of society as a horizon, perhaps conditions would be created so that the revolutionary general strike, so much talked about in theory, would begin to have the conditions for realisation.

But how to take a first step? It is obvious that such a move will not happen spontaneously. How to start? In other words, how to begin to put together an initial group willing to collectively consider the idea, to debate it, to reformulate it, and then to initiate contacts with people and organisations from different parts of the world? For this starting point, intellectuals (and the publications that disseminate their writings) who assume themselves to be Marxists and who, for the sake of coherence, take into account that statement in the Theses on Feuerbach: not to stop at interpreting the world but to set out to transform it, could play a crucial role. The active involvement of such comrades could be the key to taking this first step, given the influence they exert on part of the militancy, and at the same time would be a major contribution to constructively criticising the initiative.

What we are only sketching out here could, predictably, be regarded as a sign of pure voluntarism. Those who do so are absolutely right: up to now, consistently, well-known Marxists usually conclude their analyses and developments by affirming, as Rosa Luxemburg had already warned, the necessity of revolution as the only way out of the return to barbarism. These are perfectly grounded developments, and the necessary revolution is invoked with emphasis and conviction. And that is all. Then, each time on a lower and lower rung, we continue to wait for the combination of objective and subjective conditions, which, compared to the speed with which the general crisis is expanding, is tantamount to sitting at the door waiting to see the corpse of our enemy pass by. It will certainly happen, but we will not be sitting there to see it: we will go together.

Predictably, too, the parties and intellectuals who for years have held the keys to the revolution will find these lines hardly, if at all, worthy of a gesture of disdain. It would not, of course, have the support of any of the various existing “real” Internationals, which, in the light of their respective realities, should not imply much practical impact.

So, just as the Bolsheviks disregarded theoretical constraints and “voluntarily” pushed forward the

socialist revolution in a backward country, we could allow ourselves a similar audacity.

Of course, such a collective action would require a planning and coordination effort whose magnitude is only comparable to the size of the historical rupture it could mean. This only justifies the effort. In particular, it would be necessary to foresee the mechanisms for supplying basic subsistence inputs to the entire population for the duration of the strike, and until the socialist economy reaches a sufficient level of functioning through the organisation of the consumer producers themselves. Various alternatives could be devised to solve some of the difficulties which can easily be imagined to arise. By way of example, the problem of force: there is no need to claim on the role that weapons play in preserving a certain order of things on the part of their beneficiaries. Logically, processes that have attempted radical, revolutionary changes have therefore also had to resort to arms. Now, in the present conditions, if we were to accept that the only way to defeat the capitalist order is to confront armed power on a global scale, we would already be defeated. Karl Marx said: "It is true that the weapon of critique cannot replace the critique of arms, that material power must be overthrown by means of material power, but also theory becomes material power as soon as it takes hold of the masses. And theory is able to seize the masses when it becomes radical. To be radical is to attack the problem at the root. And the root, for man, is man himself". Then, for example, from these nodes of control in the hands of an organisation of internationalists against capitalism and for socialism, it would be possible to demand the surrender of arms and equipment by the personnel of the armed and security forces as a condition for the unblocking of their salary accounts and their inclusion in the temporary supply distribution lists.

Collecting and processing such a mass of information on a planetary scale would undoubtedly be an enormous task. However, given today's communication and data processing capabilities, it is entirely feasible: back in the 1970s, with computer resources far inferior to those available today, Salvador Allen-

de's government in Chile implemented the so-called Synco Project, which aimed to explore the possibilities of socialist production planning, a project that was obviously aborted by the military coup.

Having overcome complexities and setbacks impossible to foresee, which could only be discovered and resolved through practical action, now came the key moment, the moment that would give meaning to all the previous effort: the strike. Now, in times of globalised capital, an equally globalised strike. A planetary strike, capable of multiplying the classic general consequences of any strike by taking advantage of the new vulnerabilities of the system: when, in previous times, would it have been possible to imagine and provoke that, on those huge electronic boards that cover the walls of the dens of speculation and plunder called stock exchanges, an immutable and rigorous number zero would be displayed for each item, to mention just one example? Or that the investment banking registers where the great expropriators of other people's labour keep the fetish of their booty, to mention another example? Or that the gigantic container transports, whose contents are only intended for the valorisation of capital, stop sailing the oceans with their cargo of replacements for the goods of programmed obsolescence and get stuck in the harbours?

As we acknowledged above, these lines may have no more substance than that contained in an optimistic and delirious dream. It may also be that the boundary imposed by "sanity" is too narrow to find a way out of this delirious and decaying world. Unless self-delusion is practised, there is no doubt that the days of humanity's future are numbered, with or without the advance of the ultra-right, and that the "progressive" solutions that believe they distinguish between a bad, "neoliberal" capitalism and a good, productive one with a human face are part of the false illusions that have brought us to this point. In any case, if the proposed boldness had the effect of stimulating the imagination of other paths to the defeat of the regime of capital and the construction of socialism, the attempt could be considered justified.