

DEMOCRATIC LEFT

Vol. XLI, No. 4, Spring 2014

*the magazine of the
Democratic Socialists
of America*

www.dsausa.org



Students, Workers Confront the Debt Crisis



**Exposing Euro Myths • Twitter Feminism
Latin American Socialisms • Immigration Reform**

Learning from the Past, Planning for our Future

By Maria Svart

Capitalism has entered a new phase. Regardless of whether it is a sea change or a shorter-term window of opportunity, new possibilities now exist to build a socialist left in the United States and greatly strengthen and expand DSA. Essentially, capitalism is losing the flexibility to repair the damage caused by its own failures. As a result, the system is losing the once unswerving loyalty of a sizeable and growing portion of the population.



Maria Svart

Despairing that the government is capable of applying sufficient stimulus, even former Treasury Secretary Lawrence Summers admitted recently that economic stagnation may be the “new normal” and could last for decades.

Compare Obama’s second term, in which food stamps and long-term unemployment benefits have been cut, to that of Franklin Roosevelt, when there were more than two million people in government jobs programs. Home Relief, Social Security, and the Labor Relations Act were passed. That was capitalism operating with great flexibility, allowing much of what popular movements demanded. Today, capitalists are straitjacketed by their own ideology and the reactionary political forces they helped to create: the Tea Party, rightist religious fundamentalism, neoliberal hedge fund billionaires, and right-wing talk show hosts, to name just a few.

This inflexibility has contributed to a drop in support for capitalism. The 2012 announcement that Barack Obama would shift to more progressive campaign language was a cynical, though frank admission that much of the Democratic electorate is to his left and that he couldn’t win without it. A November 2012 Gallup Poll was most revealing: 53% of Democrats said they

had a positive view of socialism. Among self-identified liberals, it was 62%.

Some dismiss these statistics, pointing out that many people believe Obama is a socialist. This misses the point. He isn’t, but we are. And socialism is now an acceptable word among millions of people in the United States. That younger people poll more positively toward socialism is not surprising, as many are in debt, underemployed or employed below their skill level, and 3.5 million are unemployed, a ticking time-bomb in the existing social order.

These new conditions of growing disillusionment, popular acceptance of the word “socialism,” and large numbers of young, educated, and underemployed people force us to revisit our organizational practices and review lessons from previous years. For example, to what extent do we still look to European social democratic welfare states as a model when they are rolling back benefits due to the same stagnation in the underlying capitalist economy that plagues the United States? Are there alternative models elsewhere in the world? How do we deal with the white backlash against even moderate social and economic gains won by people of color? How can we address the convergence of the two main international crises of worldwide unemployment and climate change? How do we continue to participate in campaigns that address day-to-day problems of education, affordable housing, or low-wage employment while creating an alternative socialist culture that envisions a very different and not-so-distant future?

The conversation has begun, both in these pages and in DSA chapters as we begin the process of rethinking our strategy. ❖

Maria Svart is national director of DSA.

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Cover art by Frank Reynoso

Talking about DL: An invitation to our readers

If you would like to participate in a discussion of this issue—and other issues—of *Democratic Left*, please email info@dsausa.org or call 212-727-8610 to join a phone discussion group.

Taking on the Student Loan Industry

By Elizabeth Henderson

On a wintry evening last December, about two dozen people gathered at Arch Street United Methodist Church in Philadelphia's Center City for the first general meeting of Strike Student Debt, a group that was co-founded by members of the local Democratic Socialists of America as part of DSA's Drop Student Debt campaign.

Seated in a circle, the attendees, who were mostly in their twenties, introduced themselves. Some had found out about the meeting through Strike Debt, the other co-organizer, an offshoot of Occupy Wall Street. But many of the people were there for one reason: they had student debt, they were pissed off, and they wanted to do something about it.

In the next two hours, they would share their stories, discuss loan repayment plans, and start to work together to take on the student loan industry.

One of the major goals of the Drop Student Debt campaign is to gain reforms that would ease the burden on student debtors and, in the long term, win free higher education for all. The campaign began in the spring of 2013, and at the DSA convention last October, delegates voted to make it the organization's primary national activist campaign for the next two years. Although it may seem like a young person's issue, the majority of people with student loans are over the age of 30—and 30% of all student-debt holders are more than 40 years old. Student debt affects not only parents who have co-signed loans or whose children cannot lead independent lives, but also affects society at every turn, as young debtors are forced to delay major life events like buying a house or having children.

Maria Svart, DSA's national director, notes that a crucial part of the campaign is to help people understand that student debt—along with increasing tuition costs and stagnant wages—is a direct result of neoliberal capitalism and the financialization of the economy and that “without investment in a full-employment public jobs program and a system of free public higher education, there really is no future for folks graduating today, or for future graduates. And they know it. We're organizing folks to say ‘enough is enough’ and demand change.”

Short-term reforms center on changes to the federal Income-Based Repayment (IBR) program, which went into effect in 2009. For low-income debtors, the program caps monthly student-loan payments at 10% of the borrower's discretionary income, which is calculated based on the

borrower's income and family size. For example, the payments of a single person with an annual salary of \$35,000 would be capped at \$228.

Currently, IBR participants have to pay no more than 10% of their income for 20 years, but only loans from public sources are eligible. Through the Drop Student Debt campaign, DSA has started a petition to pressure President Barack Obama to issue an executive order that would decrease the loan repayment period to ten years and would also make private loans eligible for IBR.

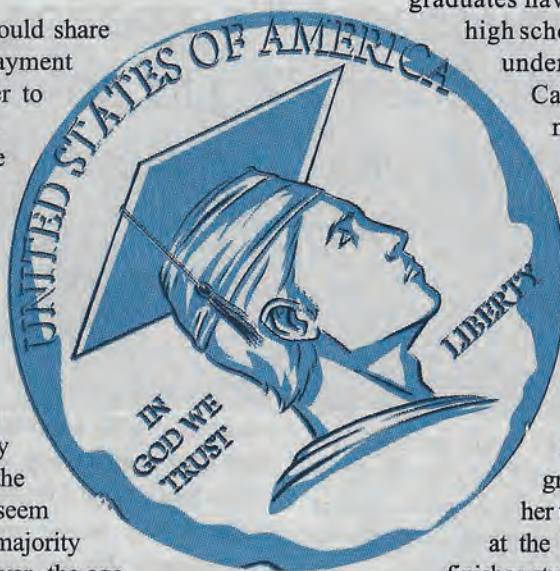
Thirty-seven million student-loan borrowers have outstanding payments, and even though college graduates have lower unemployment rates than high school graduates, they are all too often underemployed. Detroit DSA member Catherine Hoffman, though, doesn't need the latest statistics from the Federal Reserve to know that student loan debt is an albatross around her neck and that of her generation.

“No matter who I talk to, I hear stories about people being over their heads in debt, and they aren't able to take that next step,” says Hoffman, who helped get the Drop Student Debt campaign off the ground. Hoffman is working toward her teaching certification in social studies at the University of Michigan. When she finishes student teaching, she will graduate with around \$50,000 in debt, which includes loans she took out for previous degrees that did not lead to jobs. “I'm living with my parents to save money,” Hoffman said.

National Push Back

From California to New Jersey, DSA locals and YDS chapters are taking part in the Drop Student Debt campaign. Members of the East Bay, Calif., chapter of DSA are working with a number of groups engaged in student and household debt activism, and they're educating people about the issue of debt. (See Keith Spencer's article on p. 5.) Deanna Wooten and Daniel Santiago of the YDS chapter at William Paterson University in Wayne, N.J., helped the group organize a Student Debt Teach-In last December and hosted a performance of “For Profit,” a one-man show about the for-profit educational industry in January.

The YDS chapter of the University of Alabama and DSA locals in Boston; New York City; Washington, D.C.; and Atlanta, Ga., have collected petition signatures. Boston



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DSA is also working with the local chapter of Jobs with Justice and other allies to organize student debtors.

Philadelphia DSA member Dustin Guastella noted that the campaign in Philadelphia took off when they started mobilizing people through tabling, coalition work, student debt speak outs, and educational panels.

“We learned that people were more radical than we may have thought. For example, at Temple University, students were actually more interested in talking about free higher education for all than they were about the nuts and bolts of the campaign. We’ve started to change peoples’ minds about how they think about higher education,” said Guastella, who graduated from Temple University last May with a degree in sociology and \$8,000 in public debt.

Wooten, of William Paterson University YDS, notes that through their work on the Drop Student Debt campaign, their chapter has recruited new members and built ties with the school’s faculty and staff. Her \$25,000 in student debt, though, has kept her from attending school this semester. “I may never finish my degree in political science or attend law school. It’s amazing how attempting to get an education can destroy one’s life and dreams,” says Wooten. “I don’t want what happened to me to continue to happen to students who simply want an education yet end up graduating with enormous debt and no job security.”

‘We won’t pay’

Back at Arch Street United Methodist Church, the attendees are engaged in one more group activity before the meeting draws to a close—it’s a role-playing exercise about student debt.

The organizers act out the role of various institutions that student debtors encounter—the university; the employment office; and, finally, Sallie Mae (the largest student-loan lender in the United States).

They collect a pretend diploma, a fictional job, and the amount of their monthly loan payment. One participant gets a job as a defense contractor for the government. The others are stuck with degrees in art history or English and jobs as baristas, dog walkers, and fast-food workers.

In the first go-round, none of the debtors are allowed to talk to each other. The second time around, though, the organizers lift the ban on working together. Slowly, the participants begin to talk with each other about who is to blame for their costly monthly loan payments and ever-increasing interest rates.

They form a circle around the organizer who is playing the role of Sallie Mae.

One participant starts chanting, “Sallie Mae! We won’t pay!” Others join in, until they are a unified group, chanting together. The challenge is to move the chants and the solidarity from role-play to real life. ❖

“I may never finish my degree in political science or attend law school. It’s amazing how attempting to get an education can destroy one’s life and dreams.”

Elizabeth Henderson is co-chair of Greater Philadelphia DSA and chair of the Drop Student Debt committee. Learn more about DSA’s Drop Student Debt campaign by participating in one of DSA’s upcoming webinars on Monday, March 31, 8 p.m. EST and Wednesday, April 23, 8 p.m. EST. Visit dsausa.org/calendar for more information and to RSVP.



Elizabeth Henderson

Calling Religious Socialists

If you identify as a person of faith and would like to be part of a renewal of DSA’s Religion and Socialism Commission, please get in touch with Maxine Phillips: maxine.phillips@gmail.com

**Sign the Petition
“Drop Student Debt”**
www.dsausa.org/drop_student_debt

East Bay Fights the Creditor Class

By Keith Spencer

There is an old one-liner that goes, “Buy this car to drive to work; drive to work to pay for this car.” Nowadays, a similar reasoning could be applied to college: “Take out loans to pay for college; go to college to get a job to pay off loans.”

Mountains of student debt change the purpose of college—from a time of intellectual exploration and cultivation of critical and humanistic thinking to career training. Student-loan debt—which doubled from \$55.7 billion (in 2011 dollars) in 2001–2 to \$113.4 billion in 2011–12—discourages students from studying any field that is not applied and encourages the perception of college as a private good rather than a social one. This attitude erodes democracy, which is predicated on having an educated citizenry capable of making informed voting decisions.

DSA is targeting student debt, which is a crucial part of a four-walled debt prison that traps us all. The image of a “debt square,” appropriately colored red, was adopted by the activist group Strike Debt, an offshoot of Occupy Wall Street, in 2011. The four corners symbolize student, medical, housing, and credit card debt, obligations that create virtual debt bondage for large numbers of people. Debt bondage—working in bondage to one’s creditor—stretches back to recorded history. In our own country, some estimate that almost half the colonists in what became the United States arrived as indentured servants who worked to pay off the price of their passage. But debt bondage wasn’t limited to ocean passage, and those whose crops or businesses failed or who suffered reverses could end up bound to work for their creditors until their debts were paid off. Sometimes, because of interest, this could mean their whole lives. Often, the debts of indentured servants could be passed on to their children.

Although indenture was outlawed by the 13th amendment, as Carnegie Mellon University professor Jeffrey J. Williams notes, students are, in effect, the new indentured servants. Public student loans will be forgiven upon death if there is no money in the estate to pay them, but private, unsecured student loans are one of the few types of debt that cannot be abolished even in death. Bankruptcy does not discharge either private or public student debt. Like the indentured servants of the colonial age, many young Americans will be legally

bound to assume the student debts of their parents if their parents’ estates do not leave enough to pay them off.

Almost half the country lives beyond its means and owes more than \$10,000 per person in personal debt (not even counting cars and mortgages). This makes us a debtor nation or creditor society, but whatever you call it, creditors have the upper hand. And to a creditor, basic human rights—to education, health and housing—are private goods that we must spend a lifetime paying for.

We can see the end game by looking at Detroit, where the state, under right-wing governor Rick Snyder, appointed an unelected manager who chose to pay off creditors—rich financial institutions—before paying the pensioners and city employees who spent years working for the city. Similarly, in the 2008 and ongoing financial crisis, the U.S. government bailed out banks—creditors—over people who suffered from their predatory actions.



Photo: James P. Massar

Resisting

In the Bay Area, a network of debt activists has been fighting across multiple fronts to educate about the issue of debt. The East Bay DSA chapter is involved with a number of groups related to student and household debt activism, including Strike Debt and East Bay Solidarity Network. One of the main goals of debt activists is to illustrate how personal and institutional debt connect. Speaking recently in Berkeley, Strike Debt activist and New York University Professor Andrew Ross blasted the double standard for banks and people: “Banks take out loans which they are never expected to repay, whereas individuals are held responsible and pressured to repay or suffer consequences.”

The power of creditors is also used to promote privatization. Financial institutions fought for and won the Orwellian-named Postal Pension Reform Act of 2006 that would artificially bankrupt the United States Postal Service (USPS) by requiring prepayment of pensions for 75 years into the future. East Bay DSA has been closely involved in the struggle against privatizing the Berkeley Post Office. Protesters, including many DSA members, camped outside the beautiful Art Deco building in downtown Berkeley, leafleting passers-by and encouraging them to activism. Their efforts

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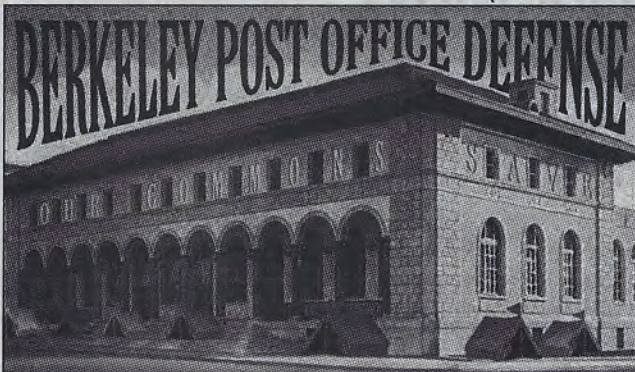


Image: Sandy Sanders

and those of others around the country have paid off. In response to public and union resistance, Congress

blocked the immediate sale of USPS buildings. The fight against debt is difficult to wage.

We live in what Ross calls a “creditocracy”—a society in which the money-lenders possess the power and their ideology goes unquestioned; hence, activists must work to fight the shame that comes with having debt, encourage openness about one’s debts, and point out the hypocrisy and immorality underlying the logic of the creditor class. ❖

Keith Spencer is the executive editor of PopFront, a left coast political magazine. He has also written for Full Stop and Dissent. He lives in Oakland, Calif., and manages the Facebook page for national DSA.



Keith Spencer

YDS Hosts Outreach Conference

More than 100 students and young adults from 22 colleges and high schools across the country attended the Young Democratic Socialists outreach conference in New York City over the Presidents’ Day weekend. This year’s theme was “Beyond Capitalism: Activism and Ideas for the Next Left.”

The conference began on Friday night with a plenary on “New Directions in Feminism” that was attended by more than 130 conferencegoers

and community members. Featured speakers were writer and activist Mikki Kendall and DSA national political committee members Peg Strobel and Amber Frost. Plenaries for the rest of the weekend included sessions with DSA vice chair Joe Schwartz and honorary chair Frances Fox Piven on an introduction to democratic socialism and DSA honorary chair Steve Max on “Why We Organize.” A longer report is available at ydsusa.org. ❖



Photo: Marcel Gretzschel

Eurocrisis: Exposing Myths to Find Solutions

By John D. Stephens

Beginning in 2008 and deepening in 2011 and 2012, five countries in the European periphery—Portugal, Ireland, Greece, Spain (unflatteringly known as the PIGS)—and, to a lesser extent, Italy, experienced deep economic crisis. All five countries are members of the Euro area, known as the Eurozone. That they share a common currency is both one source of their crises and a block to one solution. The crisis was (and is) deepest in Greece, as government budget deficits reached 16% of gross domestic product in 2009 and total government debt climbed to 134% of GDP the same year, well beyond the limits prescribed by the European Union Stability and Growth Pact (SGP).

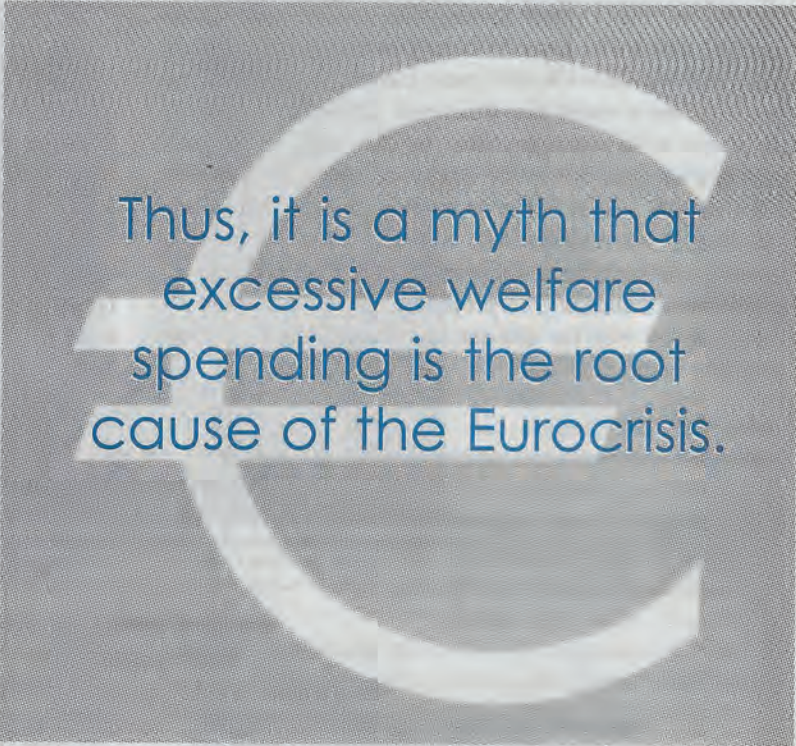
Myths and Real Causes

As a condition for bailing out the Greek government with loans, the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank forced it to slash government spending and government employment and sell off government enterprises, such as ports. Northern European members of the Eurozone (Austria, Germany, Benelux, and the Nordic countries), led by Germany, backed this austerity, but this “solution” was based on the assumption that the cause of the crisis was profligate government spending. Indeed, this claim that excessive social welfare spending was the root cause of the problem was echoed in the international financial press. It is a false analysis.

There is no question that the Greeks were living beyond their means. In the three years prior to the 2008 crisis, Greek government deficits averaged 6% of GDP, double the SGP limits, while government debt averaged 115%, almost double the 60% limit prescribed in the SGP. By contrast, the Spanish and Irish governments ran budget surpluses in those years, and their total government debt was well below the SGP limit. Moreover, the Nordic countries—Sweden, Denmark, and Finland—who are three of the only four EU members that have never breached the SGP, are the really big welfare spenders in the European Union. Thus, it is a myth that excessive welfare spending is the root cause of the Eurocrisis.

What, then, are the causes of the crisis? The first is the financial crisis in the United States, which spread to Europe because of open financial markets. In the first three decades after the Second World War, the so-called “golden age” of growth, many advanced industrial

countries limited cross-border financial flows, in such ways as capping the amount of money that could be taken out of a country or limiting the purchase of stocks by foreigners. These capital controls were gradually eliminated in the 1970s and 1980s. In the years prior to the crisis, the housing and construction sectors in Ireland and Spain were booming, and foreign funds flowed into those countries. This led to a huge buildup of private debt. Spanish and Irish banks borrowed abroad to invest in booming housing and construction. When the bubble burst, the banks were left holding a mountain of debt that they did not have the resources to cover, not only in residential housing but also in commercial building and real estate. Many banks in both countries failed, and the governments were forced to bail out the banks. Government debt then soared, especially in Ireland. Thus, speculative investment and bad decisions by private investors were a second component of the crisis.



Thus, it is a myth that
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Third, the low-interest-rate policy of the European Central Bank fueled overheating of the economies of Spain, Greece, and Ireland. This policy was appropriate only for the core of the EU—Germany and France—which had very low growth rates early in the decade. Overheating pushed up wage rates in the construction sector, which spilled over into the rest of the domestic

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economy, making manufacturing wages internationally uncompetitive. The normal corrective for such a situation is devaluation, which lowers domestic labor costs by lowering the value of the national currency. Such a solution was and is impossible because Spain, Greece, and Ireland are part of the Euro area.

Finally, the Eurozone is not what economists term an "Optimal Currency Area" (OCA), an area in which it makes sense to have one currency. Economic cycles are not synchronized across the Eurozone as they are in an OCA, making macroeconomic policy appropriate for some of its members but inappropriate for others.

For comparison, the United States is also not an OCA, but the American political economy has other features that make up for it. First, labor mobility is high, so that workers move from depressed regions to booming regions. This does not happen in the Eurozone, despite radical differences in unemployment levels and the absence of legal barriers to labor mobility. In 2011, youth unemployment was 44% in Spain and under 10% in Austria, Germany, and the Netherlands, yet there was no significant movement of Spanish youth to these countries. Second, in the United States, the tax system, social security, and unemployment compensation systems act as automatic stabilizers in that more income, social security, and Medicare taxes are collected from the booming states and more unemployment, welfare, and food stamp transfers are paid out in the depressed states. Despite the fact that U.S. social policy is miserly, these transfers are significant, whereas no such transfers exist in the EU. Indeed, one long-term solution for the Eurocrisis is to create such transfers. The proposals are not for common social policy but for low-interest loans that depressed countries could draw on.

Solutions

In the meantime, the northern European countries, led by Germany, continue to push austerity for the crisis-ridden countries. Austerity can work for the northern European countries, which generally run trade surpluses and can export their way out of economic recessions, but it is not a solution for the European periphery (other than Ireland), because these countries usually run trade deficits. They must recover on the basis of demand generated domestically, and this requires increasing government spending, which violates the current SGP limits and, without left-wing governments in power, is not even on the agenda. The truth is that the biggest beneficiaries of the Eurozone have been the northern European exporting countries, because the common currency prevents appreciation of their currencies, which, before introduction of the Euro, would have undermined their competitive situation. Political leaders in northern Europe know this, but do not acknowledge it to their electorates. Although it is understandable that the northern Europeans are reluctant to bail out Greece, a country riddled by corruption, pork-barrel politics, and bad economic management. Spain, by contrast, is a well-governed political economy that deserves the help of those who have benefited from the Eurozone economic arrangements. ❖

John D. Stephens is a professor of political science and director of European studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is the author or co-author of five books, including Development and Crisis of the Welfare State (2001) and Democracy and the Left: Social Policy and Inequality in Latin America (2012), both co-authored with Evelyne Huber.



John Stephens

Democratic Left

(ISSN 1643207) is published quarterly at 75 Maiden Lane, Suite 702, New York, NY 10038. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY (Publication No. 701-960). Subscriptions: \$10 regular; \$15 institutional. Postmaster: Send address changes to 75 Maiden Lane, Suite 702, New York, NY 10038. Democratic Left is published by the Democratic Socialists of America, 75 Maiden Lane, Suite 702, New York, NY 10038. (212) 727-8610. Signed articles express the opinions of the authors and not necessarily those of the organization.

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Democratic Socialists of America share a vision of a humane international social order based on equitable distribution of resources, meaningful work, a healthy environment, sustainable growth, gender and racial equality, and non-oppressive relationships. Equality, solidarity, and democracy can only be achieved through international political and social cooperation aimed at ensuring that economic institutions benefit all people. We are dedicated to building truly international social movements—of unionists, environmentalists, feminists, and people of color—which together can elevate global justice over brutalizing global competition.

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Will the Pink Tide Lift All Boats?

Latin American Socialisms and their Discontents

By Jared Abbott

In what is often called a “pink tide,” left-leaning governments have come to power in Venezuela, Chile, Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Bolivia, Paraguay, and Ecuador. Some commentators break these countries into the “good” left (Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay, Argentina) and the “bad” (or Andean) left (Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador). According to this interpretation, the former camp has strengthened democracy and produced robust and sustainable economic growth while at the same time increasing social inclusion and decreasing inequality. The latter camp has chipped away at hard-won democratic gains through populist tactics and doled out vast sums of cash (paid for by income from natural resources) to political supporters in an effort to consolidate power in the chief executive. Other observers critique what they see as the half-measures taken by countries such as Brazil to address socioeconomic inequality and sociopolitical exclusion and view the “Andean left turn” as a genuine advance in democracy (and toward socialism) on the grounds that it places socioeconomic inequality front and center in those countries’ policy arenas and has begun to develop a more robust, participatory form of democracy in those countries.

This either/or analysis obscures more than it illuminates. Both models have attractive and unattractive components and both models face similar crises that threaten their ultimate sustainability. To understand these realities and the future prospects of left-leaning governments in the area, let’s look at one country from the moderate, social-democratic left (Brazil) and one from the radical, nominally socialist left (Venezuela).

Mixed Legacies

Venezuela, under Hugo Chávez’s Bolivarian Revolution and now under Nicolas Maduro, has decreased inequality among its citizens but has been characterized by government-sanctioned political discrimination, extraordinary concentration of power in the hands of

the president, highly inefficient and non-transparent government spending, and dramatic increases in crime. Efforts to reduce the country’s dependence on oil income (which accounts for some 95% of exports and more than half the government’s budget) and to increase its domestic production of basic goods to alleviate its dependence on imports have largely failed in the face of an overvalued Bolívar (which makes Venezuelan exports less competitive), strict currency controls, and high inflation (which reached more than 50% in 2013).

At the same time, poverty in Venezuela has plummeted from 54% in 2003 to 24% in 2012. Unemployment declined from 17% in 1998 to 6% percent in 2012. There has been a dramatic increase in per capita social spending, a marked decrease in illiteracy, and increased access to higher education and health services. Income inequality has decreased. The Venezuelan government has also undertaken significant, if not always highly effective, efforts to increase the scope of both participatory and economic democracy in the country. For instance, the government has pumped serious resources into the development of worker cooperatives and has encouraged and facilitated the transformation of small-to medium-sized capitalist firms into worker-owned/worker-managed enterprises. More than 30,000 local direct-democratic “communal councils” have been set up to give ordinary citizens the opportunity to participate in decisions about the allocation of funds for local development projects.

The Brazilian story is similarly mixed. Like Venezuela, it has made major advances in key social indicators: The administration of Luís Inácio “Lula” da Silva expanded the *Bolsa Família* (Family Purse) program, which provides small but very significant cash assistance to the poorest Brazilians. The program has reached 11.4 million households, helping to decrease poverty in Brazil by more than 30% between 2000 and 2010. The scope of Social



Lula (l.) and Chávez (r.) instituted reforms that their successors must deal with.
Photo: Gustavo Ferreira/MRE

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Security has increased from 45% of workers in 2002 to 51% in 2010, and the minimum wage rose by 67% between 2003 and 2010. The increased minimum wage in turn raised wages throughout the economy, which led to a rise in payments to pensioners and unemployed Brazilians.

Brazil has also made advances in participatory democracy. Prior to Lula's election as president, his Workers' Party (PT) pioneered a process of mass citizen inclusion in decision-

The Venezuelan government has also undertaken significant, if not always highly effective, efforts to increase the scope of both participatory and economic democracy in the country.

making processes around the allocation of municipal funds, known as participatory budgeting. Although their levels of success vary by city, and relatively few exist, studies have shown that these assemblies can lead to more equitable allocation of public resources and to higher levels of citizen participation in public decision-making processes (particularly among the most marginalized populations in Brazil). Lula's government also introduced tens of thousands of public policy management councils for direct citizen input in government policy development.

Despite these very promising trends, Lula and his hand-picked successor, Dilma Rousseff, embraced a "neo-developmental" strategy that awkwardly combines neoliberal monetary and fiscal policy with targeted conditional cash transfers. This strategy stalled much-needed reforms in tax policy and land rights, and it has limited the government's capacity to provide adequate assistance to its badly underfunded public health and education systems. These problems signal a basic unwillingness on the part of the nominally social democratic PT to force the Brazilian super rich to contribute their fair share in the construction of Brazilian social democracy. Finally, despite a proud history of opposition to corruption, the PT, which holds only 18% of the seats in Congress, resorted to vote-buying on a large scale to ensure legislative majorities.

Erosion of a Democratic Promise

One year after the death of Chávez, Venezuela is being governed by a leader who lacks the charisma, political

skill, and legitimacy that allowed Chávez to hold the Bolivarian movement together. On top of that, the country remains mired in political hyper-polarization between the government and the opposition. It suffers from extremely high inflation that has produced exorbitant consumer prices and widespread shortages of basic consumer goods, and has an oil industry that is not operating at full capacity even as the country looks at a massive fiscal deficit. And, it remains dependent on oil revenues.

Although the situation in Brazil is not as dire, last summer the country experienced unprecedented mass protests that stunned the Brazilian political elite. The protesters were in the streets for many reasons, but chief among them was dissatisfaction with what many saw as the state's unsatisfactory rate of progress in improving the provision of social services and improving living standards. Brazil remains one of the most unequal societies in Latin America (ranked number four), even as its citizens have sharply higher expectations than their parents.

The Brazilian government's ability to maintain, let alone expand, its current rate of social provision depends upon a propitious international economic climate that is unlikely to continue. Additionally, the PT's electoral support is based more on evaluations of past government performance rather than on any strong political or ideological commitments. These factors suggest that a serious economic downturn could put an end to the government's delicate balancing act of sustaining relatively high levels of public spending in the context of a neoliberal economic program.

In short, neither the moderate social democratic nor the socialist-radical-democratic route may be viable in the medium-to-long term. Both models have bucked the decades-long trend of savage neoliberalism across the continent and provided a much-needed source of inspiration to the world. But can they continue?

Without stronger autonomous social movements capable of deepening democracy and pushing these governments in a more socially inclusive and democratic direction, as well as more rational economic policies that can decrease dependence on the vagaries of the global economic system, neither option provides a viable model of a post-neoliberal and/or post-capitalist future. ❖

Jared Abbott is a graduate student in political science at Temple University, president of AFT Local 6290 (the graduate student teaching assistant union), and a member of DSA's national political committee. As we went to press, political turmoil in Venezuela was in the headlines. Check the Democratic Left blog for updates and analysis.



Jared Abbott

Book Review

Shut Out and Turned Off

By Beth Cozzolino

Coming Up Short: Working-class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty, by Jennifer M. Silva
(Oxford University Press, 192 pp., 2013)

What does it mean to come of age in the neoliberal era? For working-class young adults, the traditional markers of adulthood—understood in this book to be “leaving home, completing school, establishing financial independence, marrying, and having children”—seem increasingly out of reach. Through interviews with 100 working-class men and women (50% male and 50% female), Jennifer Silva asserts that they construct privatized narratives of adulthood that reflect the privatized culture around them. Silva’s interviewees, aged 24-34, were defined as working class if their father had not gone to college. Some 60% were white and 40% were black.

Silva argues that their experiences of betrayal by institutions, family members, and significant others force working-class young adults to learn to value “self-sufficiency over solidarity.” As she describes their experiences, she illuminates some key roadblocks to organizing working-class young people.

Contemporary global capitalism has allowed firms to embark upon a “*privatization of risk*” (emphasis in original), shifting the burdens of potential illness, unemployment, and other unforeseen calamities onto employees. Not only are their employment situations precarious, but the weight of these risks discourages working-class young adults from embarking upon stable relationships—“commitment, rather than being a hedge against external risks of the market, becomes one demand too many on top of the already excessive demands of the post-industrial labor force.”

One of the major betrayals that Silva’s respondents face comes from the institution of higher education. Having heard all their lives that college would help them, they took out significant loans for school but were unable to finish, too often dropping out saddled with student-loan debt but no degree.

So far, no *Democratic Left* reader will be surprised by Silva’s analysis. She ventures into more speculative waters when she asserts that the increasing prominence of folk and pop therapy (what she calls the “mood economy”) gives working-class youth a therapeutic lens through which to make sense of their precarious lives.

It functions in tandem with the forces of neoliberalism to privatize one’s happiness and personal narrative. For, “just as neoliberalism teaches young people that they are solely responsible for their economic fortunes, the mood economy renders them responsible for their *emotional fates*”(emphasis in original).

Narratives of overcoming past traumas such as addiction and toxic relationships replace markers of adulthood such as establishing a home and financial independence. Individuals “learn to see their struggles to survive as morally right, making a virtue out of not asking for help; if they can do it then everyone else should too.”

Through encouraging individuals to take responsibility for their own emotions, the mood economy “privatiz[es] happiness,” making it a product of individual will rather than structural circumstances.”

In 1972, in *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, Jonathan Cobb and Richard Sennett mapped a similarly bleak terrain for the working class. Silva pays tribute to this earlier study, but insists on “the hidden injuries of risk,” in a culture where family, unions, fraternal organizations, churches, and other mainstays of working-class community have fractured under the stress of privatization and economic duress.

By demonstrating just how far neoliberalism penetrates our psyche, Silva answers the question of “why young people who would seem to benefit most from social safety nets and solidarity with others cling so fiercely to neoliberal ideals of untrammelled individualism and self-reliance.”

Unfortunately, Silva allows little room for the possibility that working-class people may still be living meaningful lives and having fulfilling relationships. The misery and loneliness that she attributes to her respondents appear overwhelming. One wonders how they manage to get up in the morning if their lives are so lacking in pleasure or connection.

Still, Silva is right to remind us that working-class young adults, and by extension many middle-class young adults, “need new definitions of dignity and progress that do not reduce their coming-of-age stories to a quest to manage their emotions and . . . be content with insecurity and loss.” As social justice activists, it is our responsibility to create these narratives and build a solidarity that would provide security for all. ❖

Beth Cozzolino is a doctoral student in sociology at the University of Texas at Austin. She is a former co-chair of YDS and former president of Temple University YDS.



Beth Cozzolino

Twitter Feminism and the Next Wave

An Interview with Mikki Kendall

By Amber Frost

Any attempt to map the contemporary landscape of popular feminism would be difficult, but these days, much of the action of the feminist zeitgeist is on Twitter, a social media website that limits users' posts to 140 characters a Tweet. Two Twitter conversations last year—Mikki Kendall's "Solidarity is for white women" and Suey Park's "Not your Asian sidekick"—involved thousands of participants who questioned the dominant discourse of feminism.

Twitter can be disorganized, chaotic, and sometimes volatile, but it's reached an audience that might never have considered feminism as a larger concept. Kendall, who was a keynote speaker at the winter 2014 YDS conference, is one of the most high-profile "Twitter feminists." She is also a writer who has contributed to such publications as the *Guardian* and *Salon*, where she analyzes topics ranging from police brutality to austerity to abortion.

Amber Frost: Popular feminism is going through a very public (and contentious) split—a break between liberal feminists and the more radical or social-justice-minded feminists. What about the political or social climate do you think accounts for this schism?

Mikki Kendall: The split itself isn't really new, it's just more visible because of social media. And because social media aren't invitation-only or closed door, the good and bad things are always accessible. The split is a problem that may actually get addressed now, because there is no hiding that it is going on.

AF: The United States is now witnessing a failure of the "politics of representation," the idea that a few people from underrepresented groups will pave the way for the upward mobility of said groups. For example, many believed that Barack Obama's election would translate to gains for all African Americans. But the everyday lives and material conditions of most black people are plummeting. Meanwhile you still have liberal feminist writers championing a Hillary Clinton 2016 run, as if a woman president will translate to improving the lives of regular women. How do you think we can work to correct these kinds of misconceptions?

MK: One of the things we have to address is this myth that we're post-racial or post-sexist. Society has internalized more bias than commitment to equality, and it shows in how often liberal interpretations of equality ignore the fact that we're not all seeking the same goals in the first place. Being equal to an oppressor so I can also be oppressive isn't on my "to-do" list.



Mikki Kendall spoke at the YDS conference. Photo: Alexis Wright-Whitley.

AF: Though Twitter has given a voice to so many smart, insightful women who would otherwise be left out of larger political conversations, a lot of people have difficulty finding outlets for activism where they can plug in. How can social media help people link up with organizational and community work?

MK: They should reach out to local organizations that address the issues that matter to them. If no local organization exists, it might be worth it to talk to people online for pointers to places offline or tips on creating the groups that they want to see. Community organizations need to use social media and participate in the conversations happening online in order to drive support to their causes offline.

AF: I recently read a request from a black feminist that white women quit asking her to "decode" her Tweets for a white audience. How do we keep the lines of communication open on Twitter, while still emphasizing the need for internal discussion among groups?

MK: I find those requests a little bizarre. Marginalized people aren't generally online to teach random strangers. They're online for the same reason as anyone else: entertainment, talking to friends, an outlet, whatever. And while some folks are willing to teach, it makes more sense to

Continued on page 13

“listen” to the conversations happening online so you know the context and the content instead of approaching strangers and expecting them to give you their time and attention.

AF: You’ve written about quitting your “safe” government job and starting your career as a writer. Women writers, like all writers, but especially those who are activist-oriented, are in a strange position. Their voices are being sought, but they are expected to write without being paid. Suey Park comes to mind. The *Huffington Post* offered her space to cover Asian American issues, but neglected to tell her the work would be unpaid. Even *Jezebel*, a “women’s publication” that was, at one point, promoted as a pop culture blog informed by feminism, pulls content from its readers’ personal blogs without paying them. Often, writers don’t seem to care; they’re just excited to be “mainpaged.” Do you think the exploitation of women’s intellectual labor is influencing our relationship to popular media?

MK: Yes. For a lot of people, the attraction to mainstream media was a platform and a paycheck. To have work out there (sometimes without your name) for the benefit of other people’s pockets and careers is a hard pill to swallow, especially when you can just start your own blog and although you probably won’t make as much as someone at a mainstream publication you’ll still make more than nothing. And if the intellectual labor of women isn’t in mainstream media but can be accessed via social media, then the idea of mainstream is going to be redefined anyway.

AF: In October, when you wrote about the government shutdown, you included the phrase, “It’s Not Getting Better” in the title, referring to the precariousness of the social safety net and vital social welfare programs. Are you optimistic about the people’s ability to fight austerity when even Democrats are voting for cuts?

MK: I think that it is obvious that austerity measures don’t work. Just look at what’s happened in Greece. But, the question is whether or not we’ll succeed at fighting austerity measures before things get that bad here. I hope so.



Amber Frost at the YDS Winter Conference. Photo: Alexis Wright-Whitley

AF: Pew polling always observes the tendency of African Americans to give the highest priority to economic issues. However, the discussions on the biggest feminist blogs, even when they address race, so rarely cover poverty, class, or capitalism, instead focusing on cultural issues and internal dynamics. Why do you think this is and how do you think we can orient the discussion toward the sexism and racism of our economy?

MK: People talk about what they experience. It’s like the idea that the patriarchy is a monolithic structure with all men actually being equal in their ability to shape society. And obviously that’s not true. The same goes for poverty. The African American community has long experienced higher rates

of unemployment, and for a lot of employed middle-class commentators, poverty is a concept not a reality. Opening the floor to people who are actually experiencing economic oppression is going to be the easiest way to change the tone and focus of these discussions.❖

Amber Frost writes for the blog [Dangerous Minds](#) and is a member of the national political committee of the [Democratic Socialists of America](#). Mikki Kendall is co-founder of the [Hood Feminist](#) blog and co-runs [The Angry Black Woman](#) blog.

Calling All Feminists

If you are interested in socialist feminist work around women and poverty or if you want to learn more about forming a DSA or YDS team in April for your local fundraising bowl-a-thon of the National Network of Abortion Funds, which provides direct assistance to poor and low-income women who couldn’t otherwise afford an abortion, write to info@dsausa.org.

Immigration Activism

Interviews with Eliseo Medina and Alma Lopez

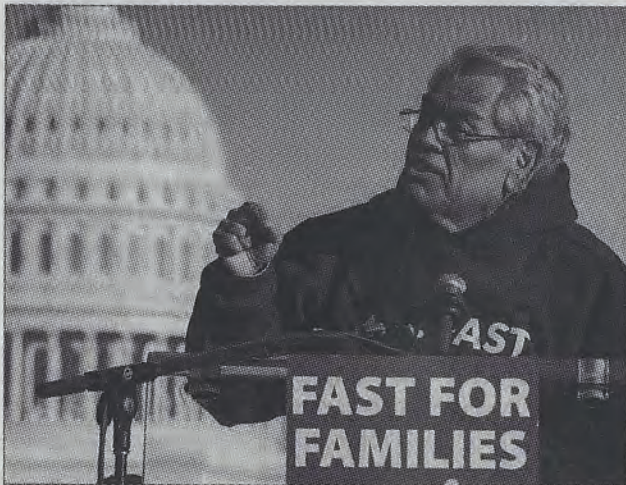
By Duane Campbell

As talk of immigration reform dominated the new Congress, Duane Campbell conducted separate interviews with DSA Honorary Chair Eliseo Medina (former secretary treasurer of SEIU) and immigrant rights activist Alma Lopez. Excerpts appear below. For a full transcript, visit the Democratic Left blog: www.dsausa.org.

From November 12 until December 2, 2013, Medina and hundreds more participated in a Fast for Families, setting up tents on the Washington Mall to engage the nation and Congress in issues of immigration reform.

In late January, a group of Dream Activists called for a “practical legislative solution for immediate relief for families, even if it doesn’t include a special path to citizenship” and urged supporters to engage in an aggressive campaign for a presidential executive order to end deportations of family members of U.S. citizens.

In the interviews below, each activist explains the need for broad coalitions and public education. —Ed.



Eliseo Medina at a Fast for Families rally. Photo: SEIU.

Duane Campbell: What did the Fast for Families accomplish?

Eliseo Medina: It was one of the most exciting, transformative, and spiritual events I have participated in in many, many years. Our goal was to reach out and explain to America the moral crisis facing this country, because people are dying every day on the border, and thousands of families are being broken up by our current immigration policies. The fast and the support demonstrations put immigration reform back on the national agenda.

DC: What can progressives and DSA activists do to help?

EM: I would say to fellow DSAers, “We have to understand that this is not only a Latino issue. This is the civil rights movement of our times. This is your chance to get involved. The immigration fight is everybody’s fight. The civil rights movement [of the fifties and sixties] created a whole new dynamic in this country, and so can this. This is our moment. This is the time to get engaged.”

Our focus now will be a congressional tour from the end of February until the end of April. We need you to help with the bus tour to congressional districts and to organize community meetings. Go to the web page Fast4Families.org for talking points and for how and where to help.



Alma Lopez, an activist in Sacramento, talks about activism by young people.

Duane Campbell: How has your own viewpoint developed as you participated in the immigrants’ rights movement?

Alma Lopez: I have seen that there are many groups with different perspectives. I’ve had to rethink my position on how to advocate for people, and I’ve concluded that educating and empowering people is the best way, rather than me trying to tell people what should be the best position.

We in Sacramento are planning a couple of acts of civil disobedience (CD) in the near future to tell the public how very important this issue of immigration is. I think that CD is a powerful way to educate the people. If we do it properly, we can frame the message in such a way that even the folks who are anti-immigrant understand.

DC: Some advocates, such as the folks in the Fast for Families in Washington, made a point that they are talking with very broad segments of the population, they are building the broadest possible coalition.

AL: We are also doing both. We are focusing on educating the Latino community about policy effects and their rights, and we are reaching out to the broader community. We are developing informational packets, including one on the positive impact of immigrants here in our state. ❖

Duane Campbell has worked on immigration reform issues for more than 30 years. For a fuller transcript of this interview and to stay up to date with immigration reform, check the Democratic Left blog at dsausa.org.



Alma Lopez

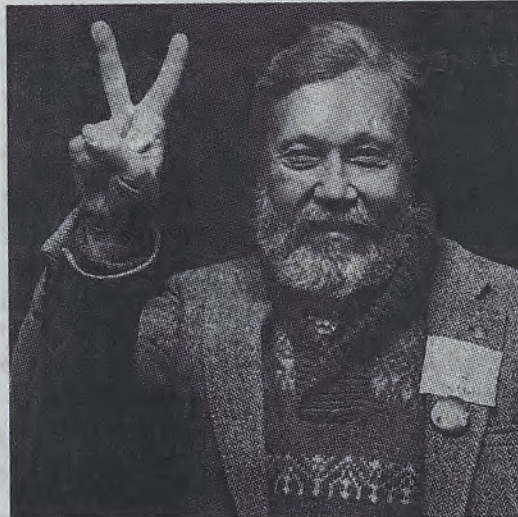
Niilo Emil Koponen, R.I.P.

March 6, 1928 – December 3, 2013

By Dick Farris

During an open mic period at the Alaska Democratic Party state convention in 1994, an elderly Native woman known as a healer who could see auras looked up at Niilo Koponen and said, “My lord, you are surrounded by a white light.” The rest of us may not have been able to see the light, but we knew that Niilo, who died in December, was not only surrounded by it but brought it to every endeavor he undertook. Alaska’s governor ordered flags flown at half-mast to honor him.

A larger-than-life figure both in stature and achievement, Niilo was a husband, father, homesteader, educator, legislator, friend to many, and a lifelong democratic socialist. He was born to Finnish immigrants who lived in a Finnish housing cooperative in the Bronx. In 1944, the teenage Niilo heard Norman Thomas speak and was inspired to help organize a Young Peoples Socialist League chapter. He studied civil engineering at Cooper Union and worked in a shipyard with his father.



Niilo Koponen Photo by Brian Allen, 1980s.

Always an organizer, Niilo was active in grassroots politics, whether it was with the Alaska Party or the local fire and rescue organization. The list is extensive, but he was especially proud of helping to found the Greater Fairbanks Teachers Credit Union, the first credit union ever accredited in the State of Alaska. It opened its doors with \$32 in a metal cash box in September 1959 and today has more than \$100 million in assets. He served in the Alaska state legislature for 10 years.

Asked in 2006 how he developed his socialist philosophy, Niilo replied, “We are taught in society that if we do what is best for the individual, it is best for the community. I realized how false this was and reversed it to, “If I did what was best for the community, it would be best for me.” ❖

Dick Farris is a DSA member and activist in Fairbanks, Alaska. Another version of this piece appears on the DL blog. Readers who want to leave a comment for the Koponen family can go to <http://koponenalaska.wordpress.com>.

You don't have to be rich to leave a legacy to DSA

Don't think that only the rich can leave a meaningful legacy gift to a cause. Do you have an insurance policy, pension benefits, a retirement account, a will or a living trust for which you can designate DSA as a beneficiary?

You can keep DSA alive through a bequest. A sentence in your will or living trust can help promote DSA's work and our socialist values:

“I give to the Democratic Socialists of America, Inc., 75 Maiden Lane, New York, NY 10038 [insert cash amount, or percentage of your

estate, or 'all'] or its successor organization to be used for general purposes.”

Setting up a will or trust usually requires help from an attorney. Many legacy gifts, such as those listed above, do not. This notice is not intended as legal advice, which should only come from an attorney.

Your legacy gift to DSA can make a difference to the future of the socialist movement.

If you do designate DSA as a beneficiary, please let the DSA national office know so that we can thank you.

Books by DSA Members

Our members think, act, and write. Once a year we will be happy to provide a listing of books, either self-published or otherwise by DSA members. Because we're catching up, we're listing books from the past few years. Most can be found on the Web. —Ed.

Cytrynowicz, Hadasa: *Waving to the Train and Other Stories*, Blue Thread Press, 2013; translated from the Portuguese by DSA member A. Gordon.

D'Agostino, Brian: *The Middle Class Fights Back: How Progressive Movements Can Restore Democracy in America*, Praeger, 2012.

Kornbluth, Morris: *FRAN: Her Story*, CSBA Press, 2013 (It has been chosen as a promotional item by the American Parkinson Disease Association).

Markel, Norman: *The Politics of Conversation: Towards Democratic and Compassionate Conversations*, Lulu Marketplace, 2013.

Pelz, William A., *The Eugene V. Debs Reader: Socialism and Democracy*, Merlin Press, Spring 2014.

Schulman, Jason, ed.: *Rosa Luxemburg: Her Life and Legacy*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Schultz, David: *American Politics in the Age of Ignorance: Why Lawmakers Choose Belief Over Research*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, and *Election Law and Democratic Theory*, Ashgate Publishing, 2014.

Stone, Jack (with Joe McCraw): *Unemployment: The Shocking Truth of its Causes, its Outrageous Consequences and What Can Be Done About It*, Trafford Publishing, 2009.

Young, Quentin (with Steve Fiffer), *Everybody In, Nobody Out: Memoirs of a Rebel Without a Pause*, Copernicus Healthcare, 2013.

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Yes, I want to join the Democratic Socialists of America. Enclosed are my dues (includes a subscription to Democratic Left) of:

\$65 Sustainer \$35 Introductory \$20 Low-Income/Student

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