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Everybody In, Nobody Out

Last week, I was in Washington, D.C.'s Union Station. The weather had turned cold and I couldn't help noticing what an inhospitable place it had become for the city's homeless and dispossessed. Once upon a time, anyone was allowed to be in the train station at any hour. Now, there were signs everywhere announcing that you needed a ticket to be there. Other warning signs indicated that you could only sit for 30 minutes at a time at the food-court tables, while barriers had been placed where benches used to be to make it that much harder to congregate, no less sit down.

With winter descending on the capital, all this struck me as particularly cruel when it came to those unfortunate enough to be unhoused. That sense of cruelty was heightened by the knowledge that legions of policymakers, politicians, and lobbyists — with the power to pass legislation that could curtail evictions, protect tenants, and expand affordable housing — travel through Union Station regularly.

When I left D.C., I headed for my hometown, New York City, where Penn Station has been made similarly unwelcome to the homeless. Entrances are closed; police are everywhere; and the new Moynihan terminal, modern and gleaming, was designed without public seating to ward off unwanted visitors. Worse yet, after a summer spent destroying homeless encampments and cutting funding for homeless services, New York Mayor Eric Adams recently announced that the city would soon begin involuntarily institutionalizing homeless people. Rather than address a growing mental health crisis among the most marginalized in his city with expanded resources and far greater access to health care, housing, and other services, Adams has chosen the path of further punishment for the poor.

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It's a bitter wonder that our political capital and our financial capital have taken such a hard line on homelessness and poverty in the richest country on the planet. And this is happening in a nation in which eight to ten million people lack a home entirely or live on the brink; a nation that reached record-high rents this year (with three-quarters of our largest cities experiencing double-digit growth in prices); that spends more on health care with generally worse outcomes than any other advanced economy; and that continues to chisel away at public housing, privatize health care, and close hospitals, while real-estate agencies, financial speculators, and pharmaceutical companies enrich themselves in striking ways.

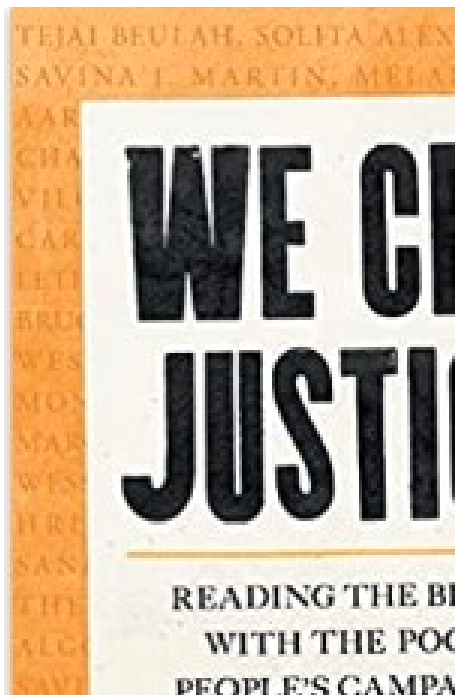
Walking around Union Station, I also couldn't help thinking about the administration's decision to end the recent rail strike by stripping workers of their right to collective bargaining and denying them more than a day of paid sick leave a year. The president claimed that breaking the strike was necessary to protect the economy from disaster. Yet little attention was given to the sky-high profits of the railroad companies, which doubled during the pandemic. The price tag for more paid sick leave for union workers was estimated at about \$321 million annually. Compare that to the \$7 billion railroad companies made during the 90 days they opposed the strike and the more than \$200 million rail CEOs raked in last year. In the shadow of such figures, how could paid sick leave during an ongoing pandemic be anything but a basic necessity for front-line workers?

The Deeper Meaning of Democracy

All of this left me thinking about the ongoing debate over American democracy, not to mention the recent Georgia runoff where Senator Raphael Warnock, even as he celebrated his victory over Herschel Walker, pointed to the negative impact of voter suppression on the election. Today, the rise in outright authoritarianism and white Christian nationalism in our body politic poses a genuine danger to the future health and well-being of our society. At the same time, a revived pro-democracy movement has also begun to emerge, committed to fighting for free and fair elections, the rule of law, and the peaceful transfer of power. But let's be honest: if we stop there, we cheapen the noble urge for a truly decent democracy.

It's precisely when our governing ideals are under ever more intense attack that you should ask what we mean by invoking democracy. Do we mean an electoral system shaped by the will of the majority? If so, given growing voter suppression tactics, our

system is already a far cry from any democratic ideal. Or do we mean more? In fact, shouldn't democracy mean more?



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For me, a democratic society means that everyone, including the poor, has a say in how our lives are lived and workplaces organized. It's a society in which the homeless *aren't* criminalized, the health of workers *is* protected, and people *are* treated with dignity by a government of their choice. And I truly believe that, when you strip away the partisan rhetoric and political spin, this is a vision shared by a majority of Americans.

In response to Mayor Adams's encampment sweeps this summer, one homeless man interviewed by the *Guardian* offered this explanation: "Fascism works like that — as soon as there's a tightening of the belt or any sort of shift into harder times, that fascist and oppressive elements within countries will immediately try to attack the most vulnerable." So how do we fight such an emboldened threat and the dangers faced by those at greatest risk among us?

I certainly don't have the full answers to such questions, but a partial solution, I suspect, lies in building a pro-democracy movement attuned not just to elections (and the legal fights that, these days, regularly go with them in Congress and state legislatures), but to the needs and dreams of everyday people. And that would require a willingness to reach into communities that have all too often been forgotten or abandoned and earnestly follow the leadership of the people who live there.

Permanently Organizing the Unorganized

At this time of year, some communities celebrate *Las Posadas*, re-enacting Jesus's birth in the humble city of Bethlehem. Though many of us have been taught to imagine that birth as a moment of tranquility, there is, in fact, great hardship and conflict at the heart of the nativity scene. Indeed, Jesus was born in a time of tremendous violence and injustice. In the days leading up to his birth, a militarized police force had pushed migrant people back to their lands of origin so that the authorities could demand taxes and tributes. The local ruler had sent out spies to ensure that his authority wasn't challenged and, lest anyone dare to do so, had ordered thousands of young Jewish boys murdered. Amid that swirl of state-sanctioned violence, Mary and Joseph were driven from their home, forcing Mary to give birth in a small, dirty manger. Jesus, in other words, was born homeless and undocumented in the land of empire.

During *Las Posadas*, communities from the Bronx to Los Angeles retell that story, highlighting the gentrification of neighborhoods that's pricing out the poor, unjust immigration policies that are unfairly separating families, and a housing crisis that's left millions in need of — dare I use the word? — stable living quarters during the holidays. Included in the social critique that lurks behind *Las Posadas* is the belief that everyday people should have the right to determine the course of their own lives, rather than be pawns to the machinations of the wealthy and powerful.

In Texas and New Mexico, the Border Network for Human Rights celebrates Christmas among the thousands of families it's been working with for the past 20 years. Fernando Garcia, its director, has taught me much about organizing among the poor and dispossessed, offering a vision of "permanently organized communities." At the heart of the Border Network's vision is the idea of organizing an enduring network of connected families living in that part of our country. As for its focus, as Garcia explains it, "Whatever issue they feel that they need to tackle is the priority."

Building durable and lasting organized communities, especially among those most impacted by injustice, is something a pro-democracy movement should take seriously indeed. In fact, it's one place where, all too sadly, we lag behind the forces of authoritarianism and white Christian nationalism. In many poor communities, politicized reactionary churches and parachurch organizations are already well practiced in providing not just political and theological messaging and training, but material aid and a sense of belonging to hurting people. Those concerned with justice and inclusion would do well to follow suit. In the coming years, movements dedicated to democracy and our economic

flourishing need to invest time and resources in building permanently organized communities to help meet the daily needs of impacted Americans, while offering a sense of what democracy looks like in practice, up close and personal.

As the threat of yet more political turmoil and escalating violence looms, isn't it time to break through the isolation that so many people feel with a new sense of collective power? Which brings me to a larger point: in order to build a pro-democracy movement capable of contending with the influence of authoritarianism and bad theology, we need to leave progressive bubbles and silos and commit ourselves to organizing the unorganized — and following their lead.

The newly launched Union of Southern Service Workers (USSW) offers a helpful template. The USSW emerged from the Fight for \$15 movement and a long history of Southern organizing. Calling for “community unionism,” it intends to link labor struggles to community life, while supporting workers as they fight for justice.

Awakening the Sleeping Giant

Before the Covid-19 pandemic first began spreading across the fissures of racism and poverty in our society, not to speak of the current crisis of inflation and impending recession, there were already 140 million Americans who were either poor or a \$400 emergency away from poverty. Those numbers have only grown. Some poor people are already politically active, but many aren't — not because the poor don't care but because politics-as-usual doesn't speak to the daily stresses of their lives.

There is, in other words, a sleeping giant out there that, when awakened, could shift the political and moral calculus of the nation. Were that mass of poor, impacted people to begin to believe that democracy could mean something real and positive in their lives, watch out. Should that happen — and, as Frederick Douglass once said, “those who would be free themselves must strike the first blow” — you could end up with a pro-democracy movement that would be unstoppable.

Almost five years ago, I helped launch the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival alongside Bishop William J. Barber II, president of Repairers of the Breach, as well as my colleagues at the Kairos Center, and thousands of directly impacted people, community organizers, and religious leaders. Our core theory of change, drawn from our study of history, is that the most transformative movements in our national storybook have always relied on generations of poor, deeply impacted people coming together to help lead a national change for the better.

Part of our analysis is that poor people nationwide could become a transformative voting bloc if only politics were more relevant in their lives. In 2021, the Poor People's Campaign released a report on the impact of poor voters in the 2020 elections. It showed that, contrary to popular belief, poor and low-income people made up a remarkably sizable percentage of the electorate (and, surprisingly enough, an even larger percentage in battleground states). Looking at racial demographics among such voters, the report found that turnout was significant, whatever their race. Given the total vote share for Joe Biden and down-ballot Democrats that year, the data even challenged the notion that poor white voters were a crucial part of Donald Trump's base.

Today, our electoral system has become gridlocked and increasingly gerrymandered to empower minoritarian rule at the expense of the will of the majority. Thanks to that, it can often feel as if the country is evenly split on issues ranging from healthcare, housing, and jobs to abortion and environmental protection. But non-partisan polls continue to reaffirm that the majority of the country supports more economic, racial, and gender justice. Results from ballot measures in the midterm elections reflect a similar reality, whether it was people in various states voting to protect the right to abortion, passing higher minimum wage laws, or expanding Medicaid.

And contrary to what too many of our politicians and the media that support them claim, this country can indeed afford such widely popular and deeply needed ballot measures and policies. In fact, as Nobel Laureate Joseph Stiglitz wrote in his award-winning *The Price of Inequality*, the question is not whether we can afford housing, healthcare, paid sick leave, living wages, immigrant rights, and more; it's whether we can afford not to — especially since failing to address the people's needs weakens our democracy.

In fact, right before the midterms and the beginning of the holiday season, retired professor of humanities Jack Metzgar wrote at Inequality.org: “Because the wealth of the wealthy confers both economic and political power, we cannot adequately defend democracy if we go on allowing our economic oligarchy a completely free lunch... Next time you hear a politician say ‘we’ can't afford something that clearly needs doing, just stop a moment and think — about what a wealth tax on a very small proportion of Americans could accomplish.”

Indeed, it can be done! *Si, se puede!* After all, isn't this the true story of Christmas? So, this season, when you listen to Handel's Messiah, attend to the words about lifting from the bottom up: “Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill made low; the crooked straight and the rough places plain.”

As 2022 comes to a close, this is where I draw hope and inspiration.

This column is distributed by [TomDispatch](#).

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