NEWS & LETTERS

Theory/Practice *'Human Power is its own end'—Marx*

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With AFL-CIO around, 'we need a union'

by B. Ann Lastelle

"We believe that the working people are the only force in the world today capable of changing present-day society and of evolving the forms and the shape of future society. Just as in 1936-37, the American working people found their own way, through the sitdown strikes, to industrial organization and the CIO, so they are searching today for the new political and social forms to fight the labor bureaucracy.... We see the labor bureau≠cracy as the last barrier to the full emancipation of the working class."

—Constitution of News and Letters Committees

A copy of our twelve-hour work and holiday schedule stayed in my tool box for over a month while management attempted to steal our time off to staff the production lines at last year's end. As I went over the schedule again and again with my co-workers, I thought, "We need a union." I also thought, "We are so weak because people don't keep track of their own business. They wait for someone else to do it."

The 16.3 million union members in the U.S. are 14.5% of the work force, the lowest level of unionization since the 1920s. Only 10.2% of private sector workers are organized. John Sweeney, President of the AFL-CIO, in 1996 announced his intention to raise $20 million for organizing. Yet my labor activist friends in the right-to-work South, where low-wage predominantly Black workers strug gle for union recognition and contracts, say they have seen not one penny of that money.

The distinction between organized and unorganized, however, conceals a deeper similarity, revealed by a

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Black World

Clinton in Africa— Why now?

by Lou Turner

"Why Africa? Why now?" is surely the skeptical response to President Clinton's 12-day trip to six countries in sub-Saharan Africa by anyone even marginally acquainted with the history of U.S. imperialist relations with Africa in the 20th century. The one thing Clinton's African adventure is not about is his public confessions of sorrow for slavery, sorrow for U.S. foreign policy which reduced Africa to a pawn of its Cold War rivalry with Russia, or sorrow for the backwardness of American attitudes towards Africa. Sorry, Clinton may be, but making the most significant trip to Africa by a sitting American president has nothing to do with confessing official sorrow for white supremacy. So why is Clinton in Africa, and why now?

READY OR NOT, HERE THEY COME

The story begins with the early 1996 trip of late Commerce Secretary Ron Brown to Ghana where he extolled Africa as the "last frontier for American businesses" to the plane load of corporate execs he brought with him. The plot thickens in March 1997 when a high-powered corporate policy forum on Africa convened by The American Assembly in New York City urges Washington to adopt a new "Partnership with Africa", followed by Hillary Rodham Clinton's trip to Africa shortly after and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's trip in December. In between these trips, Clinton previews his Partnership for Economic Growth and Opportunity in Africa at the June 1997 G-7 Summit in Denver. The real denouement comes, however, at the end of 1997 when the Southeast Asian economic collapse catches the capitalist world by surprise.

By the time Clinton and his entourage of 800 government, business, and media groupies descend on his African hosts who must stretch their already stretched meager budgets to accommodate the "historic journey," the U.S. Congress has scrambled to make a little history of its own with the passage of the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA). The AGOA mirrors Clinton's own Partnership for Economic Growth and

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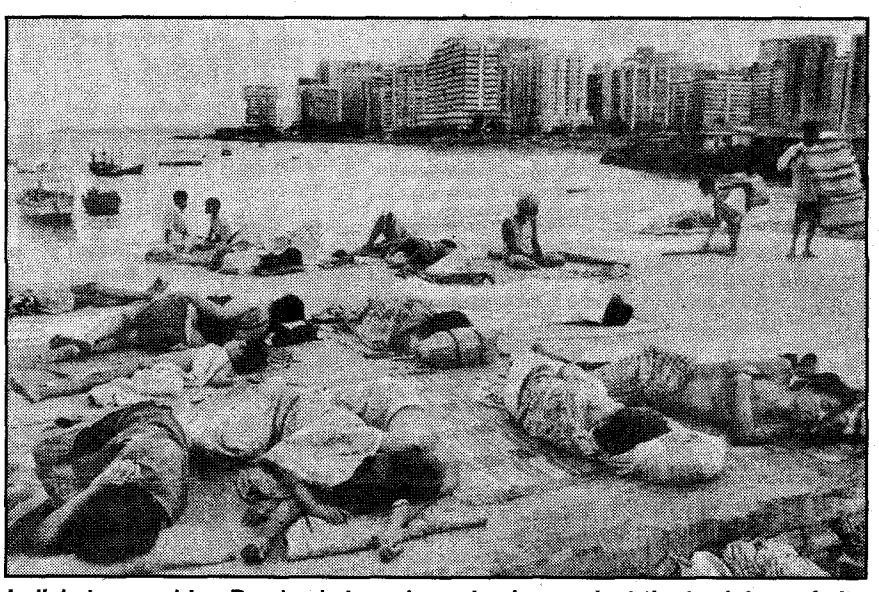
Right-wing BJP claims power amid deepening crisis in India

by Maya Jhansi



India's two worlds—Bombay's homeless slumber against the backdrop of city high-rise apartments and corporate towers housing India's new middle class.

An alarming new development threatens India's long history as a secular and multicultural democracy which 50 years ago threw off the yoke of British imperialism: the coming to power of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The BJP, led by the Hindu nationalist, Atal Bihari Vajpayee who was sworn in as Prime Minister on March 19, 1998, is a right-wing party known for its neofascistic anti-Muslim ideology of *Hindutva* or Hindu fundamentalism.

A crucial factor which allowed the BJP to form a government was the failure of the Congress Party and the leftist United Front to come together and provide a secular alternative. For now, it seems that the Congress Party will forego challenging the BJP in order to rebuild itself around Sonia Gandhi, the Italian-born widow of Rajiv Gandhi. The United Front fared the worst in the elections, with its parliamentary standing dropping from 180 to 98 seats. Now, several parties from the United Front have abandoned it or split to join forces with the BJP. The ease with which these "committed" secularists have moved into the BJP fold shows their absolute bankruptcy.

The BJP's rise to prominence is phenomenal—in 1984, they won only two seats out of 543. Today, they and their allies hold over 250 seats. Surely, the devastating economic and social crises in India and the growing discontent of the Indian masses with the corruption and betrayal of the politicians has contributed to the BJP's unprecedented success.

TARGETED MINORITIES

Today, over 350 million Indians, some of the poorest of whom are Muslims who comprise the largest minority, live under the official poverty line. The literacy rate is an appalling 48% overall and 39% for women. Where the Indian constitution projected universal education for Indian children by 1960, today one in three children have never been to school, and anywhere from 17 to 100 million children are enslaved in brutal forms of child labor. For many women, outmoded marital practices, dowry deaths, sati, rape and violence still define the parameters of their existence.

In the face of the intractable crises in India, the BJP resorts to neofascistic scapegoating of India's minorities, and to militaristic denunciations of Pakistan and other foreign powers that supposedly threaten the "unity" of Hindu India. To the Hindu right wing, Dalits and other lower castes are as much of a threat to *Hindutva* as are the Muslims.

This election is not the first time that Indian political parties have enflamed communal tensions for their own electoral gain. The precursor to the BJP, the Jan Sangh, was part of the reactionary Janata Party government that ousted Indira Gandhi in 1977. The Congress Party itself instigated anti-Sikh riots after Indira Gandhi's assassination by a Sikh bodyguard that led to the deaths of over 3,000 Sikhs and the flight of 50,000 out of New Delhi.

Never before, however, has a party defined by narrow nationalism and religious fundamentalism come to power in India. In 1992, the BJP in collusion with Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sanghatna (RSS), the militant Hindu nationalist organization responsible for the murder of Mahatma Gandhi, led mobs in the destruction of a 400-year-old mosque in Ayodhya which they claimed to be the birthplace of the Hindu god, Rama. Over 3,000 people, mostly Muslims, were killed in the riots that swept India in the aftermath. Though apologists claim that communal

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Nurses and patients win at Kaiser

Oakland, Cal.—"We took on a multibillion-dollar corporation and we won!" This was the sentiment of most of Kaiser-Permanente's 7,500 RNs and their supporters when on March 25, on the eve of their seventh strike against the giant northern California HMO, the California Nurses Association (CNA) announced a tentative agreement. The nurses had been working without a contract since January 1997 when Kaiser demanded a six-year wage freeze for some nurses, a 12% wage cut for others, and many other take-aways.

Instead the nurses won a 12% wage increase over the next four years. More importantly, a committee of 18 RNs, chosen by CNA and confirmed by Kaiser, will spend half their time investigating patient care issues. The nurses, who are fighting a daily war on the wards and in the clinics over staffing levels, were unwavering in their determination to have some control over the quality of their own work. The nurses have shown the way and reawakened the power of labor to break new ground against capital's drive for permanent restructuring.

After a strike last April when over 90% of all union workers came out in a massive show of solidarity with the nurses, AFL-CIO President Sweeney initiated a "strategic partnership" with Kaiser. But many workers in other Kaiser unions, community members, the UAW, the United Mine Workers and the Teamsters who had won a victory at UPS stuck with the nurses.

Workers in other Kaiser unions were hoping that, for bargaining leverage, the nurses would hold out until their own contracts came up in November. However, on March 17, as the nurses prepared their seventh strike action, Kaiser and Local 250 SEIU announced a new three-year contract already. The contract, purely an economic package of raises of 3% per year for the next three years, was reached after only two negotiating sessions. Local 250 President Sal Rosselli proclaimed that the "Kaiser partnership, though in its infancy, is effective."

In this case the truth was told by Kaiser management spokesperson Lila Peterson who said, "We wanted to get through the wages issues and not have an acrimonious situation like with CNA." At this stage, Kaiser management welcomed the opportunity to settle with Local 250's 15,000 Kaiser workers on purely economic issues. The nurses and their allies in other unions have been uncompromising in their fight for quality. Unlike the hierarchical AFL-CIO, the CNA is an autonomous fighting union that is more in touch with the daily struggle over staffing in today's health care workplace. Service workers know we can thank the recent strike actions called by nurses for Kaiser's supposed beneficence.

We welcome the extra money, but Local 250 union officials insult our intelligence when they think we can't see any further than the extra money in our paycheck. Before Sweeney's "strategic partnership," Owen Marron of the Alameda Central Labor Council was one of the loudest exposing Kaiser's declining quality. After the line became "Kaiser is a quality care provider," he started lecturing the nurses that quality care was not a winnable issue.

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ON THE INSIDE

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International ♀'s Day: 'Hegelian dialectic is the story of my life'

Editor's note: This talk was given on International Women's Day.

by S. Hamer

International Women's Day was set aside in honor of the thousands of women who marched and rallied in the streets, who died to demand recognition and protested against the inhumane working conditions and unjust treatment of us as individuals and as working women. This day represents women struggling in solidarity to be recognized and treated like human beings, and to declare solidarity with all unorganized women workers.

My presentation tonight is about how working women like myself have struggled and fought to bring about a change in the mind, because without a change in the mind, you cannot make a change in the world.

Woman as Reason

In the South we as Black women struggle just to have a voice. Rosa Parks initiated the whole Black revolution in the South in 1955 by refusing to give her seat to a white man. Fannie Lou Hamer, who lost her job in 1962 when she tried to exercise her right to vote, became one of the Civil Rights Movement's most eloquent spokespeople as a founder of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. But still as women they were treated as the exception. Women in the Delta, especially Black women, have struggled to this day to be looked upon as women and treated with dignity and respect, and have demanded equal rights. This day we celebrate to send signals that our fight as women will continue until we uproot this exploitative, sexist, racist society.

Mississippi is one of the poorest states in America. Before Delta Pride Catfish, the only source of income was the little money you received from welfare or chopping cotton in the fields. I'm going to tell you a story of my journey. It's a struggle of the mind. I'm talking about my mind and many of the other women I work with.

In **Marxism and Freedom**, by Raya Dunayevskaya, I read that the Hegelian dialectic is the story of the mind's fight through many different stages, trying to reach to freedom. That is the story of my life, too.

WHEN WE WERE ON WELFARE, we were in a degrading situation, because they gave you barely enough to live on. They harassed you and checked your home and found out if a man lived with you, just to give you this little money to live on. When we heard about the jobs at Delta Pride, we had the illusion that when we got off welfare and went to the factory it would totally change our lives.

But when we went to the factory, they harassed us, worked us all day. We had carpal tunnel syndrome that crippled women in the plant. This was the life at Delta. So it wasn't a progress up scale. In a sense it was just as bad as welfare. Then we knew we had to say no to this degrading production system and the racism and sexism that came with it. So you see, we had to give up the illusion that becoming production workers would make us free. And then we had to start the fight all over again.

We organized Delta Pride so we could gain dignity and respect on that job, and have benefits to safely take care of our families. But then came the first contract negotiation, which didn't give us the justice we were seeking. It had too many gapholes which the company could use to their advantage. But the worst part was how the contract was negotiated: through upstairs, underhanded deals. We had a negotiating group. But they had the union officials and the company officials. They would put us downstairs in one room and they would stay upstairs in another room and negotiate what they wanted.

We had the illusion that if we got a union, it would totally change our lives. But we learned that unless the union is each and every member standing up and fighting together, it won't make us free. Just like becoming workers didn't make us free, becoming a union member with the thought of someone leading us to freedom didn't make us free either.

THEN CAME THE 1990 STRIKE. The women at Delta went out on strike not just because they wanted extra money or extra holidays, but just because they wanted to have rights to go to the bathroom, which were taken from us. In the first contract we negotiated those rights. In the second contract the company came back and said: "For the last three years women have been abusing this bathroom right. They go when they want to go; they stay as long as they want to stay. We're going to start letting you women go at 12:00 during your lunch hour." That's what sparked the 1990 strike.

Through that strike a source of solidarity was brought about, because women, men, and groups all over the world came together in solidarity to make a difference. Connecting to the day we are celebrating, that's what solidarity is all about: standing together to change whatever struggle and fighting for that. We learned through this victory that we could demand the dignity and respect we deserve as working women. But how do we teach the unorganized? Why didn't they learn from our struggle? I know it goes deeper.

Fear is still real for us in Mississippi. I've constantly talked about America's Catch and the struggles we've been going through there. They've had three elections that resulted in defeat. They are harassed, mistreated, fired; they are surrounded by unionized plants that have made a difference. But the fear is so deeply rooted. You don't even have to be a worker; you just have to be Black. Look what happened to the **Jackson Advocate** last month. This newspaper supported us when we were on strike and now their whole office was fire bombed.

We need to overcome both the illusion and the fear. The only way we can do this is through the struggle of the mind, developing the idea of freedom and organizing to make it a reality.

Women Worldwide

by Mary Jo Grey

ON INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY...

In **ALGERIA**, where hundreds of women have been among those massacred by fanatic Islamic fundamentalists since 1992, more than 500 women, some pictured above, courageously rallied in the capital demanding government changes in the retrogressive Family Code.

* * *

At a women's assembly in Mazar-i, a town in northern **AFGHANISTAN** controlled by factions opposed to the Taliban movement which has relegated Afghan women to virtual slavery since taking over in 1996, **IRAN'S** highest ranking woman official, Masourreh Ebtekar, vice president of environmental affairs, pledged support saying: "Your sisters in the Islamic Republic of Iran are attentively listening to your suppressed cries." Women's rights activists in other countries, led by European Union humanitarian commissioner Emma Bonino, also dedicated International Women's Day to their Afghan sisters, urging foreign pressure on the Taliban.

* * *

Thousands of women and men marched in **SPAIN** protesting sex bias and domestic violence.

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Feminists in **POLAND** were heckled by anti-abortionists and pelted with eggs and potatoes.

Latina celebration

San Francisco—In the heart of the Mission district, the Latino section of town, the International Women's Day (IWD) celebration featured two Latinas.

Maria Elena, a Zapatista supporter, focused on the way this society (capitalism, though she didn't name it as such) creates individuals who are extremely isolated from each other. Yet people are thirsty for contact. The Zapatistas, she said, are far away, fighting for dignity and humanity. The way to show solidarity is for everyone to fight for the same cause wherever you are. We need to fight the powerlessness we feel in the face of the system every day, not just on occasions like IWD.

She concluded by saying that the Zapatistas' masks are not just to help conceal their identity from the police. They are meant to symbolize that each is not "just" an individual, but a representation of everyone. It was a very concrete re-creation of Marx's 1844 statement that "the individual is the social entity."

Theresa Azucar spoke about the fight her daughter, Theresa Cruz, has been waging against the justice system. Theresa Cruz is a battered woman, in prison for attempted murder because she confided in a male friend that she was abused and that friend shot her abuser. Theresa Cruz's mother and her children have been fighting to get her released. Their tireless activity and testimony caused the California legislature to enact a law that allows the Board of Prison Terms to consider effects of abuse when deciding about an abused woman's parole. Theresa Cruz is not asking for pity. She is demanding justice. She and her children have suffered enough from her abuser and the system that kept her in prison for over seven years.

This International Women's Day celebration showed several dimensions in Latina women's struggle against the alienation in the society. **—Urszula Wislanka**

For more on International Women's Day, see p.11

AFSCME not helping

Washington, D.C.—Conditions for the custodial workers, most of them Black women, who clean the government buildings here are the same as last month (See "Capital equal pay battle," **N&L**, March '98). We still face discrimination, less money than the men for the same work and more work put on us. AFSCME was talking about a rally on Equal Pay day in April. Other than that, nothing else has changed.

We don't picket but we need to get something done because the working conditions are getting absolutely horrible. Now the bosses are threatening us, saying: "You think that's bad? You just wait, it's going to get worse!" It seems to me that something could be done about it, but evidently I'm wrong because the union isn't doing anything. I don't know if it's because we are fighting the Architect of the Capitol.

We don't have a contract. We just won the union election in August. But it seems like management won't even negotiate. The members are getting frustrated, they are ready to get out, they don't see any change. We've got to fight with management and the union too! We feel like our union dues are being taken but we're getting nothing in return. They got rid of the one organizer we had who showed signs of improvement.

I haven't heard from the National Organization for Women (NOW) since the rally last month. I joined them last year and sent them a thank-you note for supporting us with the rally, but I haven't heard anything from them since, not a word.

—Hazel Drews, President, AFSCME Local 626

Review: Fanon and feminism

T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting. ***Frantz Fanon: Conflicts & Feminisms.*** *Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998.*

Tracy Sharpley-Whiting's new book on conflicting attitudes of feminists to the Martinican revolutionary philosopher Frantz Fanon is sure to stir up new controversies regarding the value of Fanon's writings for feminism. We cannot afford to allow anti-Fanon feminist arguments remain unchallenged, she shows, if we are to work out a radical humanist vision for today.

Sharpley-Whiting addresses writings on Fanon by three groups: those she calls "liberal Euro-American lit-crit feminists"; Algerian nationalist feminists, some participants in the Algerian 1954-62 liberation movement, as was Fanon; and radical Black feminists in the U.S. She is most sympathetic to the third group, which has drawn heavily from Fanon in constructing women's liberation unseparated from Black liberation.

She is most critical of the first group, whose postmodernist critiques revolve largely around Fanon's treatment of Martinican writer Mayotte Capécia in his 1952 **Black Skin, White Masks**. Most of these commentators, Sharpley-Whiting argues, have not read Capécia for themselves, but simply attack Fanon's critique of a Black woman writer. Taking Fanon's analysis out of the context of his study of the psychic alienation of the Black colonized in relation to the white colonizer, they erase Fanon's revolutionary critique of the Antillean colonized subject who attempts to be recognized as fully human by trying to assimilate the colonizer's culture (p. 34). Such analyses pit feminism against Black liberation, she insists.

ALGERIAN FEMINISTS, on the other hand, are directly concerned with national liberation, but ask why Algerian women in the 1954-62 national liberation movement failed to win equality after independence. They question whether nationalism might be inherently incompatible with women's liberation. Marie-Aimée Helie-Lucas, founder of Women Living Under Muslim Laws, accuses Fanon of "mythmaking," insisting his writing on women freedom fighters does not confront their subordination before or after independence.

Sharpley-Whiting's response to Helie-Lucas and several other Arab feminists becomes a fascinating jumping-off point for considering Fanon's "profeminist," radical humanist vision. Her analysis hinges on his warning in **The Wretched of the Earth** about "the pitfalls of national consciousness."

She connects Fanon's warning to his concern with "national consciousness" that is an "all-embracing crystallization of the innermost hopes of the whole people." The new government must "guard against the danger of perpetuating the feudal tradition which holds sacred the masculine element over the feminine," Fanon cautions (quoted p. 64). Sharpley-Whiting compares his warning to Sojourner Truth's criticism of Frederick Douglass as "short-minded" when he favored Negro men alone winning the vote after the Civil War, as analyzed by Marxist-Humanist Raya Dunayevskaya.

SHE LINKS FANON'S prescient warning to his analysis in **A Dying Colonialism** (the "mythmaking" discussion) about women freedom fighters and the profound transformations they generated. As women reinvented themselves as unveiled revolutionaries, there was "'a new dialectic of the body of the revolutionary Algerian woman and the world,'" Fanon wrote (quoted p. 70). This "new dialectic" profoundly affected the Algerian family, in which the woman "'literally forged a new place for herself by her sheer strength'" (quoted p. 72).

Sharpley-Whiting makes an exciting contribution to the Marxian concept of revolution-in-permanence—a phrase she uses—by pinpointing Fanon's attempt to capture philosophically that moment at which Algerian society was in the process of becoming something new, a moment tragically rejected by Algeria's post-independence leaders. Although she does not discuss the Hegelian dialectic of negativity, she shows how Algerian culture's transformation was emerging from **within** the revolutionary process, not from an outside colonial power which tried to force modernity on the colonized for its own purposes.

Feminists cannot afford to fall into their own "pitfalls" by relegating Fanon to the dustbin of history. This is especially imporant today, when Algerian women fighting fundamentalism are once again engaging Fanon's dialectic of self-transformation. **—Laurie Cashdan**