

Letters from our readers

2 July 2009

On "Take the profit out of health care"

In all the discussions of health insurance there is something I have never seen discussed—which makes me suspect there is no sincere interest in getting us all insured. Since socialists are a no-nonsense bunch, here it goes:

If I have health insurance and my neighbor next door—or down the street—does not, what good will my health care do me if something like an epidemic hits and he/she is not cared for? The virus or bacteria isn't going to say, "oh, excuse me, I see you have health insurance therefore I won't attack you." If my neighbor picks up a pathogen—lets say he cannot afford a visit to a physician to see if he has the flu—the virus can come right down the block and bite me before I even suspect that it is in the neighborhood! So I can pay for health insurance through the nose and the teeth—and still wind up in the cemetery!

Also, what if this so-called "swine flu"—or some variation of it hits the cities on the coasts? If we all don't receive equal quality of medical treatment, having health insurance won't save our necks! It is only when we are all treated when we feel ill that we can "catch" a disease presence and do something about it! Everything else is just a pipedream! Or a 1918 repeat!

Patricia R
Nebraska, USA
29 June 2009

Absolutely correct. It is drug companies and health care that caused GM's, and in reality the Big Three's, demise in North America. In terms of wages, GM's problems cannot be linked to any recent exorbitant wage gains by auto workers. The Japanese assembly plants that came to the US more or less matched the wages of the Detroit Three in order to avoid unionization.

Turn to total compensation (wages plus benefits), the cost problem is clarified. Such costs have in fact grown relatively rapidly. But the driving factor in this escalation of costs wasn't primarily the gains negotiated in collective agreements. Rather, it was the extraordinary increases in costs for the same benefits. Inflationary pressures, in other words, didn't come from auto workers but from the drug companies and private health insurers providing and profiting from these benefits. (This is more generally confirmed in a recent report by the President's Economic Council of Advisors, which notes that once health care is excluded, the growth in overall worker compensation is surprisingly flat.

Rising health care costs affect prices and sales. But if all companies faced the same costs, no company would be relatively disadvantaged. It is because the US health care system is overwhelmingly private that the impact of achieved benefits is so uneven.

Though Canada's health care system avoids this disadvantage, because the Canadian operations are integrated into the higher cost US

operations, the US problem is also a Canadian problem.

Pensions are a slightly different matter. Unlike health care, they are paid out of a stand-alone fund. Company payments are invested in stocks and bonds, and as long as the payments continue and the returns generated are high, there is no problem. But what seemed adequate during the stock market boom of the 90s changed quickly and dramatically when at the same time that GM was increasingly less able to set aside new monies, the returns on the assets in the pension funds collapsed. Relative to GM's falling workforce and shrinking market, the burden of both health care and pensions was all the greater.

For workers, this dependence on their employers for health care and pensions—as opposed to receiving them from the state as a right—pushed them toward lobbying governments to support these corporations and, alongside this, vulnerable to government or corporate calls for concessions. Moreover, in trying to gain public support for their dilemma, auto workers found themselves relatively isolated since most workers didn't get such benefits. It once could be assumed that the largest corporations would be around forever, and so pension promises were safe. That era—eclipsed by the intensification of competition over the past quarter century—is gone. Even the biggest private companies can no longer guarantee workers their benefits.

When considering what might be done, certain perspectives on the crisis lead to confused, if not harmful, strategies—i.e. put emphasis on "trade reciprocity," where foreign-based corporations are accessing overseas markets, their home markets should in turn be opened. This sounds fair enough, but it misunderstands the nature of globalization. If Asian markets were in fact opened, this would do nothing for North American jobs. The auto companies would still be unable to ship from the US and Canada and be competitive with Asian wages. On the other hand, if it is made easier for companies like GM to invest in Asia and organize their parts flows across that region, this would be beneficial to GM—but hardly a solution for US and Canadian workers.

As always,

Frans
Thailand
29 June 2009

On "Marx and Darwin: Two great revolutionary thinkers of the nineteenth century"

I was present at the lecture and found it interesting and uplifting.

The breaking down of different religious, philosophical and quasi-scientific groups was an important part for me. The point I really took home was the subtle undermining of evolutionary theory in UK schools. That the national curriculum has no mention of evolution.

It had an interesting and lively discussion afterward that broke off in different groups, which really gave a sense of vitality and earnestness. I welcome more of the same.

Vincent
London, UK

27 June 2009

On “Australia: Former treasurer Peter Costello quits parliament”

It seems every paper down in Australia is cheering the “greatest treasurer in Australian history.” By what standards do we define great? By building a giant government surplus while national infrastructure decays and living standards of the average citizen plummet? That is how we define great economic management? It doesn't take a genius to see just which audience the papers are targeted at. They are there to cheer the victory of the business classes and to keep the common people duped. The easiest way to control a society is to control what they see and know. Reading about the story of the Dollar Sweets strike shows how. Why did the workers abide by the court system and not show it as the tool of the capitalists it was proven to be? The mainstream media will never allow for these truths to be shown and so the people are kept in chains by the system they follow. The real “national heroes,” as they tell us, are the people like Costello who exist solely to serve the insatiable greed of business.

One can hope that one day men like Costello and his supporters are remembered as demons of a more barbaric part of human history, though it will not happen so long as the media keeps people in the dark. Perhaps the time has come for the WSW and other organisations to find ways of getting their messages into the mainstream to a larger audience, to break the stranglehold the media has on the minds of men and women.

Michael
Australia
25 June 2009

On “Coal mine blast in Indonesia kills at least 32”

This story outlines in essence the reasons for the collapse and destruction of the British mining industry. As an ex-miner and a striking miner through the '84-'85 miners strike, it is clear the need for the unity of the international working class. The contempt that capitalism has for working class families is clear. In countries like Sumatra, it is easier for the capitalist class to exploit workers to the full, unlike in the more advanced countries of Europe and America—as working conditions and health and safety regulations are a little more stringent, and are likely to be more adhered to. But to keep to these stringent measures costs money and cuts into the profits of big business. The only international collaboration the capitalists have is where they can go in the world to make the most money they can, even if it means that workers have to go into dangerous, methane-filled mines to achieve this.

Malcolm B
UK
24 June 2009

On “*The Twilight Saga: Shimmering vampires who drive Volvos*”

Thank you for reviewing this. I love vampire movies. So I went to see *Twilight*...horrid. Not a vampire flick really, but a mewling, mushy teen soap opera. Sure, core eroticism is part of the genre—one thinks of Coppola's “*Dracula*”—but this thing was pure sap.

And the quotes from the book you cite: pure drivel. To read even one line is to understand there is no artistic value or intent here or even a decent respect for the craft of writing. I think of *1984* where Julia works in the Fiction Department where this crapola is cranked out by machines for the benefit of the “proles.” Orwell, as usual, is right again.

The question you raise, which is a serious one, is: How has this

thing managed to get traction with so many, not just with lovelorn and confused pubescents? Whatever the answer is, overall I'm sure it's not a good thing—part of the continuing and never-ending dumbing-down of our culture.

Rob M
24 June 2009

One thing the reviewer of the *Twilight* film seems to have missed from the review is the cloying and bizarre subtext that permeates the books and film—that is, the estrangement from human sexuality and utter hatred of real romance. This isn't just an escapist fantasy; it is considered right-wing Christian anti-sex propaganda. The author herself is a fundamentalist Mormon and has admitted as much in various interviews.

The funny thing is that I suspect that the sheer lunacy of the whole exercise is one of the things that gives the series its charm. The great vampire novels were written by people who were playing at the fringes of sexuality in a world saturated with Christian sexual hypocrisy. If anything, *Twilight* represents a return to the Old School, after years of genuinely knowing and postmodern takes on the horror genre.

Conor McV
Belfast, Ireland
24 June 2009

Your review of *Twilight* is quite funny and appropriate—except for its peculiar hatred of pop culture. Now that is very problematic.

Let's take the Harry Potter example. Throwing Harry Potter into the same pot as nonsense like *Twilight* or *Eragon* is entirely misguided. The Potter films are certainly nothing amazing (and the later ones are simply dreadful), but the novels are an entirely different matter. They feature excellent writing and a story with considerably more depth and complexity than most novels one comes across these days. They engage their subject matter seriously and with real thoughtfulness—and it's hard to accuse them of escapism when they prominently feature racism, the negative role of the media and government torture. They are anything but bombast and glitter and pure escapism.

Not everything that is popular or enjoyable must therefore also be shallow—the enemy is not popular culture, but superficial popular culture. Do remember: Shakespeare was also popular culture, as was Dickens. If you dismiss out of hand everything that is popular, you end up like Theodor Adorno—elitist and reactionary.

Jonas K
24 June 2009



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