

Letters from our readers

12 September 2009

On "Obama on Labor Day: Hollow promises of economic recovery"

I'm sure that the disconnect of this event with the real-world experience of the American working class was duplicated at other union-oriented functions across the country. Here in the LA/Long Beach port area, the Harbor Labor Coalition held its annual Labor Day march and picnic. Union officials speechified one after another, offering the attendees an unending stream of economic nationalism, triumphant self-congratulation over Obama's election, praise for the Democrats alongside blame for everything bad on the Republicans, pleas to support health care "reform"—and not a word about the ongoing wars against Iraq and Afghanistan. At least not from the ones I heard.

Nor was any connection made between the wars, the bank bailouts, the auto industry/UAW double cross, the economic abandonment of California, attacks on democratic rights and education, etc., and the Obama administration. The mantra was that we need to elect yet more Democrats.

And of course, there were calls for solidarity, though not, for instance, with Japanese workers, whose bosses were taking advantage of "unfair" tariffs for American cars. Jell-o is more solid than the *mélange* they were dishing up.

I could be wrong, because I hadn't been to one of these events for several years, but it seemed like attendance at the event was down, and folks left earlier than usual.

Lary M
California, USA
9 September 2009

On "Los Angeles Board of Education approves expansion of charter schools"

Thank you very much for this article on charter schools. I've been following with very much interest the developments inside public education. So far it's been very frustrating. One of the public schools in danger of being taken over by private operators is where my partner teaches. If a charter school does take over her school, my partner could be fired from the school. The charter school could decide to keep her, but without the same pay and without the same benefits that she currently has as a public teacher.

I agree completely that blame for the state of public education in the country should be placed on Obama, and in California blame should also go to the governor. However I would also add that the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) union leadership should take some of the blame.

AJ Duffy, the president of UTLA, and the UTLA leadership has almost done nothing to fight back against the attacks on teachers by both the state and the ongoing attacks by charter schools. As a matter of fact, the UTLA president, instead of organizing, talking to teachers about fighting the school board decision to give away 250 public schools to the private operators, the UTLA leadership now is asking teachers to except and welcome the decision by the board to give away public schools to charter schools.

Unfortunately, some of the blame for the position in which the LA teachers find themselves must also be shared with some "progressives"

and socialists—such as the International Socialist Organization (ISO) and the group Solidarity. These groups active in UTLA have—whether they believe it or not—helped AJ Duffy and the whole UTLA leadership lead the teachers into a blind alley. These groups, far from encouraging teachers to organize separately from the UTLA leadership, have instead consistently painted AJ Duffy as someone teachers should listen to and trust. Even now, after the UTLA leadership backed down and refused to go ahead with the one day "strike" that was being organized to defend teachers contracts. Both ISO and Solidarity are also supporting the UTLA leadership in accepting some concessions—according to them "to save jobs and reduce class sizes."

I believe that is still possible to win and to mobilize teachers against the attacks from the state and from charter schools. However, you must first want to win, and unfortunately the UTLA leadership does not. Therefore we need to organize independently of the union bureaucrats, and we need real working class leadership.

Thank you,
Luis R
California, USA
9 September 2009

On "The historic decline of Japan's Liberal Democratic Party"

Peter Symonds gave us an economic history of Japan since 1945 in his analysis of the LDP's fall. Since I use WSWS regularly, I expect other sites to follow WSWS practice in their blogs. As a rule, other sites avoid WSWS practices when they attempt any sort of analysis.

Frequently I must go to Wikipedia and other online encyclopedia to find out what caused an event covered by other sites. Few writers at other sites may be called scholars in the Trotskyist tradition, and that is patently obvious when one uses other sites.

Thank you Comrade Symonds and WSWS for your Trotskyist scholarship and analysis of Japan's election and the fall of the LDP.

Larry L
Pennsylvania, USA
9 September 2009

On "Obama addresses public school students"

Barack Obama. One is compelled only to release an endless sigh of discontent for this man. Yet again the public, and moreover the world was compelled to "believe the hype" surrounding the 44th president of the "land of the free"? Only confusion can prevail when contemplating whether Mr. Obama can make a difference in these perplexing times. The Marxist in oneself can see through the foggy haze of the pro-capitalist agenda of the whole American political system, as well as recognizing that no matter what the colour of your skin is or how well you can deliver a speech, the same contradictions and injustices in the capitalist society still exist. At the end of the day, the Obama administration will walk down the same cobbled road on which every other administration that has come before it has.

Derek R
Scotland
9 September 2009

On "Defending historical truth"

Thank you for a most illuminating review of Rogovin's monumental book on Stalin's purges. This is an important book and should receive the widest readership possible, particularly in these times when the capitalist oligarchy is engaging in its own version of purging the public's memory, "disappearing" history, and using strident demagoguery to inflame group against group, instilling fear among the working class and bringing the financial system down around our ears. This is a time when the ruling classes are using every tactic at their disposal to cling to their wealth and power. Chief among these are war and the threat of war, along with the militarization of society, illegal spying on citizens, and the use of the media as a mass propaganda machine. Many of these tactics are similar to those of Stalin, albeit using the threat of "socialism" to intimidate a population ignorant of what socialism represents.

It is unfortunate that the people who most need to read and understand this history will not do so. Rogovin's book is one that should be taught in every history course throughout what remains of the educational system. But the takeover of education by commercial interests is already making sure that the young learn nothing and that teachers become less and less able to teach anything but rote test replies with no context or understanding required. The destruction of the public educational system is a part of the armory of an elite that will brook no challenge to its hegemony in every sphere of human existence. And the challenge always comes from people who have learned their history and how to think critically and independently about the world around them.

I will promote this book as far and wide as I can. Thank you again for your excellent review.

Carolyn
San Francisco, USA
9 September 2009

On "Michigan: Oakland University seeks court order to break professors' strike"

Many thanks to the WWSW for covering the ongoing job action at Oakland University, Rochester, MI. As a full-time adjunct professor and member of the OU AAUP, I'd like add a few clarifications:

First, faculty negotiators are careful not to use "strike" language. The term "job action" is more accurate at this stage, they tell us, because it buys negotiating time before the Michigan law which expressly forbids strike action by K-12 teachers comes into play. The fact that public universities are in a gray area—not K-12 instructional institutions, but nevertheless "public"—promises wiggle room for all sides. Thus, whether or not the job action constitutes an "illegal strike" remains an open legal question for now.

The administration on the other hand is exploiting ambiguity in a different way. Today, September 9, in a press release to the OU community, President Gary Russi writes, "For the benefit of students who have been deprived of instruction they expect and deserve, the university on Tuesday requested that the judge order members of the Oakland University chapter of American Association of University Professors back to work after faculty negotiators walked away from the table early Tuesday."

The first half of the sentence is true enough, but did faculty negotiators "walk away from the table"? The AAUP negotiators insist they did not walk away from negotiations, though an eleventh hour bombshell proposal from the other side would have given them just cause. They merely left the table to make copies of documents in the nearby copy room. When they returned, OU negotiators were leaving themselves. If these reports are reliable, this kind of press release strategy remains a negotiating trick—a fallacious appeal to literal rather than intended meaning.

To accuse the AAUP of bad faith bargaining by means of coy "Who's on first?" wordplay may win the PR battle of the day, but it hardly

respects students or faculty, much less the gravity of the contested issues. In any case, Judge Sosnick did not order faculty back to work as of Wednesday morning.

In the same press release: "We are pleased that Judge Sosnick saw the urgency of this situation and encouraged that he recognizes the importance of getting students back in the classroom as soon as possible," said Oakland University President Gary Russi. Notice, these are not Judge Sosnick's words, but the administration's heresay. Once again, the appearance of propriety in lieu of substance.

As the WWSW reported, the real issues at stake are: OU's long-standing tradition of shared governance; faculty copyrights over intellectual property and patents; non-discriminatory health care, fair wages in keeping with OU's actual fiscal health; disclosure of corporate liaisons with other institutions that stand to impact the learning climate of the university well into the future. Here, I'm speaking of the partnership with the Beaumont School of Medicine. These are qualitative concerns; they should not and cannot be reduced to sound bites.

Fortunately, students are wonderfully supportive. Yet, it's clear that others who oppose the job action hold some peculiar ideas about the lives of professors. Most recognize that we meet with students in the classroom and spend numerous unseen hours grading papers, preparing lectures and keeping abreast of academic research. What is less known is the ways in which our labor burden has increased without commensurate pay. Like countless workers in Michigan, America, and across the globe, we experience increasing responsibilities, decreasing wages, and less control over our work lives.

For those interested, here's a partial list of faculty duties on which our wages, promotions, and reappointments are based: Curriculum development and content; Directing dissertations and theses; Supervision and mentorship; Guest lectures and presentations; New course design; Innovations in teaching methods; Assessment of teaching objectives; Securing grants and private funding for research; Publishing scholarly books, monographs, book reviews, articles in professional journals; Guest editorships; Oral presentations at professional meetings; Public performances; Software implementation and development; Inventions and patents; Art exhibitions; Membership in professional organizations; Reviewing works of peers; University committee service; Department committee service; Community Service; Professional development.

Thanks again for your diligent reporting on the crisis at OU.

Respectfully,
Patricia T
Michigan, USA
9 September 2009

On "Obama's poll numbers plummet"

Let us note that the Democratic health policy plans Obama has endorsed include mandating purchase of health insurance, with annual fines for noncompliance. There will be reimbursement of part of the cost, but only on the next year's tax return, as a refundable credit; people who are now uninsured will be out substantial amounts of money while they wait. And no one will get all of the cost reimbursed; the uninsured will be expected to find funds for up to 12 percent (under the House of Representatives plan) or 13 percent (under the Baucus plan) of their gross annual income in their already strained budgets. The health insurance industry will gain thirty million new customers who can't legally say, "No, I'm not buying, your rates are too high." And the irony is that this is being sold as a strike against special interests for the benefit of the uninsured!

Now, I'm a free market libertarian, so I detest mandates; I would like to break the link between employment and health insurance, and have people pay all noncatastrophic medical costs out of pocket, without the insurance companies getting a share. But my friend who's a green activist is equally appalled, because what he wants is single payer, and this isn't remotely like single payer. It's basically keeping our current bad system going with

only minor changes. In fact, that seems to be Obama's stated agenda; his speech mentioned both free market and single payer approaches and rejected both. I doubt we agree on much, but I hope we agree that this disastrous and abusive proposal deserves to fail.

William S
California, USA
10 September 2009

On "Britain: The strengths and limitations of Banksy's 'guerrilla' art"

Great, thoughtful piece. There is an immaturity to his work, but, as you correctly note, that's no reason to write him off entirely. I think that he's probably one of the most truly "revolutionary" artists of our time and has a certain eye for situations that if he were to have a little more faith in himself could make him a truly great artist. I mean, you can easily see why anti-imperialist youth, for example, are really drawn to him. He may be silly at times, and he may be a bit cynical, but no one could make the case that he's stupid.

Nick P
10 September 2009



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