

As Congress approves RFK to destroy public health, Jacobin says “Keep the booze flowing”

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Jacobin magazine, associated with the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), published a politically backward and reactionary article last week titled “The Case for Social Drinking.” In it, writer Ryan Zickgraf railed against reports that Americans’ alcohol use has significantly declined in recent years, a healthy trend.

Zickgraf, who owns and operates a small business that stages trivia games at pubs, begins his article by telling of how he witnessed a young man enter a bar alone. After having had “a few rounds of beer,” the man met others at the bar and is now a weekly patron of Zickgraf’s trivia event.

Stemming from this incident, Zickgraf builds an argument that alcohol use is a necessary component of a successful social life. He suggests that those who choose not to drink and risk catching COVID at a bar are sad and lonely “secular monks,” while those who do have friends, sing, laugh and are invited to join social clubs. Such is the fraternity house level of Zickgraf’s argument.

It expresses the insular and demoralized outlook of the middle class, pseudo-left base of *Jacobin* and the DSA. This outlook is alien to the social anger and militancy building up in the working class in opposition to the escalating attacks on jobs, social services and democratic rights by the fascist Trump government, and hostile to the class conscious, confident and disciplined response that the drive to fascism and world war requires from workers and young people.

On the day of Trump’s second inauguration, January 20, *Jacobin* published an article by Liza Featherstone that expressed a similarly demoralized outlook. Featherstone wrote:

As he returns to the Oval Office, we must find some way to keep from going mad... Personally, I try to avoid consuming the news after dinner, read novels before bedtime instead of absorbing more content blaring political doom (a habit I began in mid-2017 as a direct response to feelings of Trump overwhelm), and walk in the sunshine every possible day. Some of us should probably go to therapy, do fewer drugs or more (depending), make changes in our diets, acquire a pet, and spend more or less time with our families (again, depending).

This was followed by a series of articles preaching complacency and covering for the capitulation and complicity of the Democratic

Party and the trade union bureaucracy in the Trump administration’s drive to dictatorship.

“The Case for Social Drinking” is the latest piece from *Jacobin* in a line of attacks on public health combined with efforts to downplay the seriousness of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Zickgraf writes:

Stories like these of alcohol-aided serendipity increasingly sound like relics of America’s glory days. The COVID-19 pandemic froze social drinking at bars and house parties, and it has yet to fully thaw.

When it comes to public health, *Jacobin* holds positions that are indistinguishable from those of the far-right. In January 2022, after thousands of high school students in Chicago staged a walkout against the city’s unsafe plan to reopen schools, *Jacobin* published an article demanding the schools be reopened.

The statement parroted right-wing talking points that online learning is a greater danger to students than infection with a deadly and debilitating disease. *Jacobin* has also repeatedly endorsed Sweden’s “herd immunity” COVID policy, which was adopted worldwide as the grounds for forcing workers back onto the job in an environment where COVID was still widely circulating.

To the middle-class DSA layers like Zickgraf, the COVID pandemic is not a tragedy because of the 20 million people globally who have lost their lives. They are not concerned that millions of workers continue to develop long-COVID and have lost friends and family members to a preventable disease. For *Jacobin*, the great crime is that karaoke night was canceled.

Zickgraf briefly mentions and then immediately dismisses recent research finding that there are no health benefits to drinking alcohol, only risks. These findings include the revelation that alcohol directly contributes to more than 100,000 cancer cases and 20,000 deaths in the US each year alone. Former US Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy has called for warning labels to be added to alcohol bottles, stating the risk of cancer and other serious illnesses that have been scientifically linked to regular alcohol use.

These facts are undoubtedly a factor in the decision of individuals to limit or end alcohol consumption. With leading anti-vaxxer and conspiracy theorist Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. now

installed as US health secretary, millions are recognizing that there could soon be no system of organized public health and are taking proactive measures to protect their health and well-being.

“But, like it or not,” Zickgraf tells us, “alcohol is a major conduit by which Americans enjoy each other’s company in person.” It has “some drawbacks, but it also facilitates the face-to-face social connections that sustained all previous generations. We should take them however we can get them.”

The level of complacency defies description. Zickgraf’s position is that regardless of the known harm that alcohol causes, drinking should be encouraged because it’s the “American way.”

Stop asking questions and just get drunk. Maybe then you won’t worry so much.

Zickgraf’s ideas will be enthusiastically received by the \$250 billion-plus alcohol industry, which is no doubt concerned by the drop in sales. The year 2024 saw a decline in national alcohol sales of about 3 percent. In an attempt to offset the decline, alcohol corporations have increased their marketing spending and are shifting from a focus on TV to digital forms of advertising, where they are more likely to reach Gen Z.

In a manner typical of the pseudo-left, Zickgraf tries to disguise his right-wing and subjective approach with radical-sounding phraseology and historical absurdities. The importance of drinking, he claims, is that it creates more avenues to discuss socialism. You can’t have “socialism without the social,” he writes.

In a section titled “Rum and Revolution,” Zickgraf argues that bars and taverns have throughout history played a key role in the development of revolutions. He writes that taverns were often meeting places of the American revolutionaries, declaring, “If not for the bar, Americans could possibly still be subjects of a British king.” The American Revolution, the product and conscious expression of a century of Enlightenment thought and culture, was, according to the DSA, fueled by drinking.

No need for Thomas Jefferson or Robespierre. Citizens committees, declarations of independence, the Rights of Man, Continental Congresses, political programs, principles, soviets? Why bother when a few pints will do?

Contrary to Zickgraf’s asinine and ahistorical remarks, the encouragement of alcohol abuse has long been a tool of oppressing classes to keep the oppressed down. During slavery, masters and overseers would push liquor into slaves’ hands on harsh working days to suppress resistance.

In the development of the labor movement, widespread alcoholism was a cancer on efforts to build unions and other workers’ organizations. Zickgraf includes in his article a quote from Eugene Debs on his opposition to Prohibition in America that is completely ripped out of its actual context. In a completely dishonest manner, Zickgraf attempts to associate his own views with those of Debs, ascribing to the great American socialist positions that he did not hold.

Debs did oppose Prohibition, in effect nationally from 1920 to 1933, but on the grounds that it was an undemocratic overreach by the national government and that legislation alone would not end the curse of alcoholism.

While not opposed to an occasional drink, Debs was a fierce opponent of drunkenness and encouraged workers who struggled

with alcoholism to give up drinking in order to be more effective in the class struggle. Workers’ committees and unions demanded discipline, organization and levelheadedness against attacks from the state and company thugs, he argued.

He insisted that the problem of alcoholism was rooted in the exploitative social conditions of capitalism and could be solved only by the overthrow of that system by the working class. In 1916, he wrote:

The point I sought to make was that vice and crime flow from social conditions and that it was vain to cry out against these results and condemn the individual victims of vice while supporting the system productive of these evils...

Socialize the liquor business, take out the profit, and let it be controlled by the state, as socialism proposes, and there will be a summary end to the evil but never through prohibition legislation.

Similarly, in the course of the Russian Revolution, the early Soviet government banned alcohol completely for a period in its campaign to sweep away the backwardness of the Tsarist regime and organize the Red Army.

As the Trump administration carries out sweeping attacks on all the social gains won by the working class over the last century, similar discipline, seriousness, and revolutionary organizing will be required to beat back the fascist threat. The task of building powerful new organizations of class struggle is urgent and cannot be approached casually, and certainly not drunkenly.

If young people are looking clearly at the situation and coming to the conclusion that the answer to the political crisis cannot be found at the bottom of a bottle, then we welcome them with open arms. The task now is to take up a study of history, join the International Youth and Students for Social Equality and fight to build school, neighborhood, and factory committees in defense of democratic and social rights.

Organize the working class in preparation for a counteroffensive against deportations, the Trump dictatorship, and the capitalist oligarchy! Fight for the defense of public health, democratic rights, and the expropriation of the billionaires! That is what the present period demands.

As for Zickgraf and the DSA, they can stay in the bar if they like. We won’t miss them.



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