

To 'Build Back Better,' listen to those disproportionately impacted by COVID-19

By Chris Hartman

Though often ignored, communities know best what ails them. I am reminded of this often because I hear it in my classroom. I heard it before the COVID-19 pandemic, and I hear it louder now as the pandemic rages on.

At the end of last term, amidst the surge in cases after Thanksgiving, I asked students in my introductory-level public health course to complete a photo essay about the pandemic and what changes they propose to build healthier communities. My students, who represent the tremendous economic, social, cultural, and geographic diversity of New York City and Long Island, are adept at identifying the determinants of health because they breathe, see, and live them. Like many in the NYC metropolitan area—and across the United States—several of my students contracted COVID-19, and many lost loved ones because of the virus.

The COVID-19 pandemic is the latest reminder of the uneven impact of systemic economic and social inequities on health and well-being. Working-class, Black, and Latinx communities suffer from disproportionately higher rates of COVID-19 infection, hospitalization, and death compared to wealthier, white, and Asian communities. The same is true for chronic diseases like diabetes and heart disease. Poverty, access to quality health care, and racism are among the major contributing factors.



In New York, Gov. Cuomo often speaks of building back better, the same slogan adopted by the Biden presidential campaign last year. But who decides how we will achieve this? Public health and health care professionals, city planners, elected officials, educators, and local business owners, should weigh in. Crucially, the voices and perspectives of community members, particularly those hardest hit by the pandemic, must be heard, too.

For the photo essay project, my students

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photographed a wide array of economic, social, and environmental factors that have contributed to the COVID-19 pandemic. Not surprisingly, myriad common themes emerged, regardless of whether the student lived in Harlem or Brooklyn, the North Shore or the South Shore of Long Island.

Though often ignored, communities know best what ails them.

On one hand, my students' photos demonstrate that there is much to celebrate in their communities. They remarked that mobile COVID-19 testing sites are available in most—albeit not all—communities. Many credited frontline and essential workers for their dedication. Others recognized local, county, and state officials for enacting helpful guidance and for providing personal protective equipment to vulnerable populations. And several students included photos depicting the importance of strong social ties for weathering the pandemic and racial injustices.

On the other hand, neighborhood-level challenges persist, particularly in low-income communities. My students photographed the abundance of less-expensive but unhealthy junk food (i.e., “food swamps”) and linked food insecurity to chronic diseases that increase risk for severe illness from COVID-19. They communicated how a tenuous economy and lack of affordable housing further complicate efforts to meet basic needs. Some

students shared that urgent care clinics and quality health care remain out of reach for their most vulnerable neighbors.

What changes do students propose to re-invent their neighborhoods? Create good-paying jobs and support small businesses. Increase COVID-19 testing in low-income communities. Build and fund community health centers. Convert vacant buildings and strip malls to social service agencies, youth recreation centers, and affordable housing. Make neighborhoods walkable. Re-zone food swamps and support healthy supermarkets. Increase support for mental health services. Build parks in low-income neighborhoods. And the list goes on...

Your ZIP code should not determine how long you live or if you are at elevated risk for COVID-19 infection, hospitalization, or worse. We can and must do better. If given the opportunity, Americans most impacted by the current pandemic stand ready to share their experiential knowledge and visions for a better, brighter, and healthier future.

Virginia comes out to support Alabama Amazon workers

By Tn Long

On Saturday, Feb. 20, the Southern Workers Assembly coordinated over 40 solidarity events around the country in support of the workers at the Bessemer, Ala., Amazon facility who are currently in the midst of a vote to unionize their workplace. The unionization campaign there, called the BAmazon Union, is organized by the Mid-South Council of the Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Union (RWDSU).

Several events were held in Virginia to back the Bessemer workers, one next to the site of the future Amazon HQ2 in Arlington, and two others at Amazon distribution centers in Clearbrook and Chesapeake.

The Arlington event was organized by the campaign for Karishma Mehta, a progressive candidate running for the 49th District of the Virginia House of Delegates, which covers part of Arlington. Volunteers from the Mehta campaign worked with the Metro D.C. branch of Democratic Socialists of America. Matt Rogers, a candidate for the 47th District, also covering part of Arlington, participated and spoke to a crowd of 20 people.

Also in attendance were members of the D.C.

IWW, the Washington D.C. club of the Communist Party USA, and the Virginia Young Communist League (YCL).

In Clearbrook, members from the IBEW and AF-SCME unions joined local left-wing activists in an informational picket distributing leaflets on the BAmazon campaign to Amazon workers going in to and out of the distribution facility there. Due to the snow, the exact demarcation of the Amazon property line was obscured, so Amazon security asked the campaigners to move off the property without incident.

They relocated and were able to continue giving leaflets to stopped cars. Around 20% of the vehicles asked for information, and a couple even tried giving donations to the campaigners directly. While appreciated, donations were refused, and supporters were advised to contact the BAmazon campaign to find out more ways to help.

Most of the workers who received leaflets at both locations were unaware of the campaign in Bessemer, which was expected, but many indicated they intend to keep up with the issue, and some expressed an interest in unionizing their own workplaces.

Supporters of the Amazon workers in Bessemer, Ala., came out to show some solidarity on Feb. 20.

Erdogan slammed, will open a fascist ‘Grey Wolves’ school in occupied Artsakh



By Steve Sweeney

Anti-fascist forces in Turkey blasted authoritarian President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s links to right-wing paramilitary death squads today after reports that he will open a new Grey Wolves school in occupied Nagorno-Karabakh.

He will lay the foundation for the building alongside Azerbaijan’s President Ilham Aliyev in the city of Shushi, which was taken by Azeri forces in November 2020 after a three-day battle.

Turkey’s neofascist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) leader Devlet Bahçeli pitched the idea earlier this year, but the school’s construction is seen as a deeply provocative move as the Grey Wolves have been responsible for the extrajudicial killings of minorities, including Armenians. Until the Azeri invasion, the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh had been run by its Armenian majority since 1994.

A spokesman for Turkey’s United Fighting Forces (BGM), a newly formed coalition of communist and leftist parties that includes Figen Yüksesdag’s Socialist Party of the Oppressed (ESP), Partizan, and the Revolutionary Party, condemned the move.

“The Grey Wolves are a dark stain on Turkey’s blood-soaked history and responsible for the massacre of thousands of Kurds, Alevi and minorities, and attacks on trade unionists, communists, and progressives,” he said.

“Tayyip Erdogan and his fascist alliance will be defeated by a united struggle of all layers of the op-

pressed, There is a big explosion of anger against fascism seen in the struggle at Bogazici [university] – but also at the deepening economic crisis which is pushing more into poverty.”

The Grey Wolves organization is seen as the paramilitary wing of the MHP, responsible for thousands of deaths in Turkey. Funded and trained by the CIA as part of the Operation Gladio “stay behind movements” after World War II, it targets leftist movements and those that deviate from its strict Sunni Islamic ideals.

The group’s most notorious attack came in December 1978, when more than 100 of the country’s Alevi community were killed in a 10-day pogrom known as the Maras Massacre, which led directly to the 1980 military coup.

Grey Wolves founder Alparslan Türkeş had strong links with the so-called “founding father” of the World Uighur Congress, İsa Yusuf Alptekin. They both campaigned for the eradication of communism among the Turkic populations of Soviet Central Asia and Xinjiang.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Grey Wolves set up training camps for young people in central Asia, but having failed to attract support, the group moved to China’s Xinjiang province, where it targeted recruitment among the Uighur community and supported the East Turkestan independence movement.

Erdogan slammed amid reports he will open a ‘Grey Wolves’ fascist school in occupied Artsakh.

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District Court declares South Carolina Republicans' anti-abortion bill unconstitutional

By Harold Geddings III

South Carolina's draconian Senate Bill 1, the "Fetal Heartbeat and Protection from Abortion Act," hit its 1st legal snag on 2/19 when U.S. District Court Judge Mary Lewis issued a 2 week temporary restraining order while the case works its way through the courts.

Issued just a day after Gov. Henry McMaster signed the bill into law, the 6 page order referred to the bill as "plainly unconstitutional" and thus no longer in effect while the lengthier court processes begin, something legal scholars say could take years.

The next hearing on a more extensive preliminary injunction will be held on 3/9.

The bill sought to prohibit abortion as soon as cardiac activity could be detected via ultrasound. This would leave a five- to six-week window to legally terminate a pregnancy, which is often before a patient is even aware they are pregnant. According to 2019 DHEC data, about 55% of the abortions performed in South Carolina occurred after six weeks' gestation.

Doctors who perform the procedure after this time would face felony charges. The only exceptions allowed were in cases of rape, incest, or when the life of the mother is in danger, but those would require patients' names to be given to local law enforcement. Planned Parenthood of the South Atlantic called this "an egregious violation of a survivor's rights."

Opponents have accused the South Carolina GOP of using this bill as a diversionary tactic.

La justicia ecuatoriana exigió eliminar la quema de gas en la Amazonía

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El 26 de enero pasado, en una sentencia histórica, la justicia ecuatoriana falló a favor de nueve niñas que exigían que se apagaran los mecheros que queman gas de la industria petrolera en la Amazonía, principalmente en las provincias de Sucumbíos y Orellana. La Corte Provincial de Justicia de Sucumbíos declaró que el estado ecuatoriano desconoció el derecho de estas niñas de vivir en un ambiente sano y que violó su derecho a la salud al no proveer tecnologías limpias que evitaran la contaminación.

"Estoy muy contenta porque finalmente se hizo justicia, vamos a recuperar la naturaleza, por todos los niños enfermos, por las personas, por los padres que han luchado para mantenerse sanos, por las familias que se han mantenido también luchando aunque sea para mantener un poco de cultivo, por las familias que viven debajo de los mecheros y les ha tocado abandonar sus terrenos", dijo Leonela Moncayo de 10 años en una entrevista a Mongabay.

En la Amazonía ecuatoriana existen al menos 427 mecheros que queman gas desde hace décadas y funcionan a una temperatura promedio de 400 grados centígrados desde hace más de 50 años.

"Esta sentencia se considera histórica porque reconoce la vulneración de varios derechos: el de la salud, los de la naturaleza y el de un ambiente sano. Y reconoce que el estado ecuatoriano también ha venido incumpliendo de manera sistemática obligaciones internacionales, en este caso, en la lucha contra el cambio climático. Le exige a las empresas petroler-

as que ajusten sus procedimientos y estándares a procedimientos limpios y seguros", dijo María Espinosa, abogada de Amazon Frontliners.

Las niñas demandantes aseguran que tienen a varios de sus familiares y amigos con problemas de salud, principalmente cáncer, debido a la contaminación del aire por la quema de gas. Algunos incluso han muerto. Poblaciones que viven alrededor aseguran que esta es una de las principales causas del alto número de casos de cáncer en la zona.

"Tenía una compañera de mi edad, 13 años, y hace dos años y medio falleció de cáncer. Así como ella, muchos otros han muerto. Las personas que trabajan con eso [los mecheros] no se dan cuenta de que poco a poco nos están matando, el Estado no se da cuenta que de acá saca el petróleo y debería, al menos, hacer un hospital para nosotros", contó a Mongabay Yamileth Jurado, otra de las niñas demandantes.

Una publicación de 2017 de la Clínica Ambiental, un proyecto del Centro de Estudios y Asesoría Social (CEAS) y la organización no gubernamental Acción Ecológica, señala que, en la región amazónica del Ecuador, hay más casos de cáncer en la población que vive cerca a las zonas donde operó Chevron-Texaco y donde existen instalaciones petroleras como los mecheros.

Pablo Fajardo, abogado de las niñas y de la Unión de Afectados por Texaco (UDAPT), aseguró que la UDAPT y la Clínica Ambiental llevan dos años construyendo el registro de tumores en Sucumbíos y Orellana y han documentado 251 casos de cáncer, el 71 % de ellos en mujeres.

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