Juneteenth 2006

Workers join hands to confront a growing poverty


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Homelessness: A crime against humanity

Los Angeles is one of the richest and glitziest of American cities. It also has the dubious distinction of being the “US homeless capital.” Over 90,000 human beings wander its streets, eating from garbage cans, sleeping on doorsteps or in ghettos on cardboard boxes, alongside the majestic skyscrapers that light up the downtown skyline.

This crime against humanity is not confined to Los Angeles. Today, hunger and homelessness affects 38 million people. Families constitute the fastest growing section of the poor, comprising 29 percent of the nation’s homeless. Cities overwhelmingly expect that requests for food and housing will increase in 2006.

The American people want an end to homelessness. Once the government began dismantling social programs in favor of privatization, countless church, student and community groups who were opposed to the immorality of the system arose to fight for more beds, social programs and aid to help the poor. Yet, nothing has changed. The reason is because the people have been misled. They have dealt solely with the symptoms of the problem, and not the cause.

The cause of homelessness today is a changing economy. Capitalism rests on human labor. But, the economy is changing into a system based on workerless, wageless production. As a result, a new class of propertyless people is being born that cannot survive within the capitalist system. Proof of this was seen when Katrina’s refugees were told, “You’re on your own.”

To hide this callous, selfishness on the part of the ruling class, during the Reagan years, the American people, were taught a new “morality.” They were told that the only important thing in life is your own material wealth. They then turned their back on those who are unable to keep up in a dog-eat-dog society. The result is that 269 U.S billionaires — people like Warren Buffet, Bill Gates, and the owners of WalMart — live like kings. Worldwide, 793 billionaires have a combined worth of $2.6 trillion, up 18% from a year ago, while 3 billion people live on less than $1 a day.

This shows the direction the world is heading. We have to line up our social activity with the new reality. The ruling class cannot change the system to conform to the new technology without destroying themselves as a ruling class. Therefore they must blame and condemn the victims of the system rather than the system itself. The only social force that can change society is those who are being abandoned by the society. They must be educated.

We, the people, have the means to eliminate homelessness and hunger in America overnight. The new technology and global market that is eliminating jobs is at the same time producing a world of plenty. Instead of a system that gives tax breaks to corporations, investors and billionaires, we can create a society that opens up and builds public housing, that provides food and necessities to all based on need, and that turns the productive capacity now held by the big corporations over to the nation. The only thing standing in the way is private property.

We are approaching a fork in the road. Either we visualize and fight for an America without capitalism and its miseries, or one by one we shall enter that hell of homelessness.

Order a bundle of the People’s Tribune newspaper to help you in this fight for a new society and world! Call 800-691-6888 or visit us on the web at www.peopletribune.org
On June 19, 1862, Congress abolished slavery in the U.S. territories. This historic event is celebrated as “Juneteenth.” Juneteenth also provides the opportunity to make a sober appraisal of where these descendants are in the journey up from slavery and to determine what lies ahead for all workers.

Today, after 144 years of unceasing struggle, Juneteenth 2006 finds the majority of African Americans sinking further into economic and social circumstances that recall the bleak times of Jim Crow and the Great Depression of the 1930s.

In 2004, one-fourth of African Americans lived in poverty. In 2005, African American unemployment stood at 10 percent, more than double that of whites, a fact that has persisted for three decades. In 2004, over 2 million men and women were inmates in U.S. prisons and jails. Of this number, 910,000 were African Americans, a stunning 43 percent of the total.

But African Americans are not traveling alone on the road to destitution. Millions of white workers share the same fate. Also important is the fact that alongside are millions of immigrants. As the recent massive demonstrations in support of immigrant workers show, they are emerging as a potent force in the revolutionary movement of the new class of the propertyless.

Due to the recent emergence of so-called “free trade” agreements such as NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement), conditions have been created for an all-out assault by U.S.-led global capitalism on the wages, rights and living standards of the workers of this hemisphere. For historic reasons, the African American and Latino workers, especially the Mexican workers, are bearing the brunt of this assault.

Since the advent of NAFTA in 1994, more than 8 million Mexican workers have been driven to migrate from their homeland in a desperate quest for work. More than 2 million Mexican family farms have been eliminated as giant U.S. agribusiness has flooded the Mexican market with heavily subsidized corn and other agricultural products.

Across the border in the U.S., NAFTA has led to huge job losses especially in the manufacturing sector. Between 1993 and 2002 NAFTA was directly responsible for the loss of 879,000 jobs, including 687,000 manufacturing jobs. However, this shift of jobs and production to the maquiladoras has served only to further reduce the wages of Mexican workers.

NAFTA has contributed to a 25 percent fall in the real wages of Mexican workers and has driven millions into “informal” jobs at starvation wages.

The African American and Mexican workers are natural and historic allies in the struggle for the emancipation of the working class. Before and during the U.S. Civil war, Mexico was a staunch opponent of slavery and provided shelter and passage for fugitive slaves in the Southwest incarnation of the Underground Railroad. One of the great ironies of history is that in 1857, the year the U.S. Supreme Court handed down its infamous Dred Scott Decision, the Mexican Congress passed Article 13 of the Mexican Constitution which stated that any slave that set foot on Mexican soil was immediately a free person.

But NAFTA is but a part of a broader process of globalization which, in turn is a direct result of the transition to labor-replacing electronics based production. Just as the support of the Union by the Mexican workers and people contributed to the destruction of chattel slavery, so too on Juneteenth 2006 will the growing class unity between all workers guarantee the inevitable destruction of the system of wage slavery and the building of a new world.
Ohioans rally for health care

SPECIAL TO THE PEOPLE’S TRIBUNE

COLUMBUS, Ohio — At the rally, one speaker from the religious community urged the throng to act like the Old Testament soldiers who brought the walls of Jericho tumbling down by blowing on their horns. On May 6, hundreds of enthusiastic, fired-up Ohio workers found other ways to make plenty of noise as they rallied to demand universal health care: They chanted. They clapped. And again and again, they blew tiny red whistles.

The hundreds of people who gathered in front of the State Capitol here on May 6 came from all over Ohio. They included people of many different ethnicities and religious faiths. All had come to support the campaign to place the Health Care for All Ohioans Act on the statewide ballot in 2007.

This act would establish a public fund that would pay all health care bills without co-payments or deductibles. It would guarantee that every resident of Ohio is ensured full and comprehensive coverage and receives a full range of medical services — in other words, a single-payer, universal health care system. Such a system in Ohio would be a first step toward getting such a system throughout the country in the future.

The speakers at the rally included Congressman Dennis Kucinich; Dr. Jonathan Ross; Noel Beasley of UNITE HERE; and other representatives of Ohio’s unions, medical professionals, and the business community. All vowed to continue the fight until health care is recognized as a fundamental human right.

The rally quickly became a sea of different colors. Doctors and medical students wore their white lab coats; a few public employees wore the green T-shirts of their union; and scores of the workers present wore the red T-shirts of their union, UNITE HERE.

After the rally, those present marched once around the Ohio State Capitol, calling out their outrage at the health care crisis in this country.

The May 6 rally was an important step in the effort to organize thousands of Ohioans to get involved in the fight to get the Health Care for All Ohioans Act on the ballot. Today, more than 1.3 million people in Ohio have no health insurance whatsoever — and many more have inadequate health care. In addition, more than 45 million people in the entire country have no health care.

The May 6 rally gave Ohio’s workers a chance to unite around what they all have in common and what they all need — health care. Today, at a moment when the rulers of this country are doing everything they can to split the dispossessed along the lines of their ethnicities and religious and moral views, the importance of fighting for what we have in common cannot be overemphasized. Tens of thousands of signatures will have to be collected to get the Health Care for All Ohioans Act on the statewide ballot in November 2007, but it can and will be done.

“Whatever you did for the least of these, you did for me.”

BY SANDY PERRY

These famous words of Jesus are for many of us the moral foundation of the movement to end poverty and homelessness in America. But they are more. Homelessness is not just a moral challenge. Just as it was for Jesus, homelessness today is a sign of the times. It is a mirror for discerning the innermost material and spiritual truth of our society.

Homelessness is the most extreme expression of a social destruction that is reaching into every corner of our world. The extraordinary productivity of modern technology is clashing violently with the old private property system. It is producing more and more boundless wealth with fewer and fewer jobs. As a result, millions of people are unemployed or underemployed. They are locked out of America’s wealth as it accumulates in fewer and fewer hands.

The homeless today are a warning of the destitution that awaits the rest of us if we fail to act. As a survival strategy, it is no longer viable to compete for corporate investment and the dwindling number of jobs it offers. The time has come for the “total, direct, and immediate abolition of poverty” called for by Martin Luther King. This means a social movement to demand that the government allocate our social wealth to supply water, food, free health care, free education, and affordable housing to every person.

The success of this movement will depend on its unity and solidarity. When Jesus spoke, he did not restrict himself to the “working poor” or “legal immigrants”. He explicitly included the homeless, the disabled, the stranger, and the prisoner. We dare not do less.

Sandy Perry is Outreach Director for Community Homeless Alliance Ministry in San Jose, California.
Can’t wait for tomorrow

BY ROBERT KURTYCZ

THEIR MESSAGE

There has been a longstanding message conveyed to the working and poor people of this county: “Wait for Tomorrow.” They tell us to just wait for tomorrow and they’ll find a solution. Of course, they never do. Somehow they have convinced us to just wait for tomorrow and we can elect somebody new. So that’s what we do, hoping that they will finally solve the problems that we struggle with everyday. Of course, they never do. Every night we fall asleep dreaming that our struggles will be gone when we awake. Of course, they never are.

What does the word “affordable” really mean in America today? Absolutely nothing! This word is used to deceive and divide us. If we could somehow just work a little harder, or find a little bit better job, maybe we could afford more. In reality, nothing is affordable; either you have it or you don’t.

THEIR ATTACKS

They want the child in Detroit to wait for the ambulance to arrive to save his mother’s life, but he will have to wait for tomorrow when it’s too late. What about the 4,000 children in Chattanooga, Tennessee who never made it to school because they couldn’t afford gas for the buses. I guess they can wait for tomorrow, too.

I watched as my grandmother passed away, thinking about how many years she split her pills in half waiting for “affordable” health care. She was waiting for tomorrow 10 years ago. How did our lives become linked to profitability? I never read that in any of the historical documents upon which our country was founded.

When will “our” children come home from an unjust war? What happened to the billions of our dollars that disappeared in Iraq and New Orleans? Why did the Oil Companies make $120 billion last year and we can’t afford a tank of gas? They will have an answer for us tomorrow.

By far their largest attack on workers is the attack on our brothers and sisters, the immigrant workers. When will they have fundamental rights as promised by our immigrant forefathers? When will the curtain of fear be lifted off our fellow workers so that they can fully join us in our struggles against the powerful corporations? Can we afford to wait for tomorrow?

OUR RESPONSE

Earlier this year I had the opportunity to travel to Venezuela for two weeks. In just seven years Venezuela has made a shift towards social justice for the people. I visited some of the poorest neighborhoods in the country, and was astounded at what I saw. Everyone had free universal health care. They make sure that no one is hungry. And every child is entitled to unlimited education, even if they choose to become a doctor, for free!

I was very impressed, to say the least, that all this had come about in just seven years. But as I talked to the Venezuelan people they were very critical of the government. They did not feel that things were progressing as fast as they should be. At first I was confused at this criticism of a government that had provided all these things in only seven years of leadership. Then it hit me, of course, that this was not enough, there was still progress to be made. The Venezuelan people had been waiting for so long and they are not going to wait for tomorrow ever again, not for anything!

There is no doubt that this shift in thinking has made its way north. Even as you read this article there are people taking to the streets somewhere in our country. Tens of millions of people marching in the streets to end the war, to secure health care for all, to stop the corporate greed that is devastating our families, to fight for the rights of our people, including the immigrant workers.

We must not let them fool us into believing that these are just individual battles, because we know that they are not. The new vision for America is starting to take shape, and it is being created deep in the hearts and minds of the working class of America. The same place every great vision for our country has ever come from.

While the topics I have talked about are critical to all of our futures, they are not the driving force behind what is happening today. We are making the shift in the way that we think. We are no longer willing to wait for tomorrow on any of our issues! That is the true change that is taking place in every city across the country.

As I finish writing this article I can’t help but think back to the title, “Can’t Wait for Tomorrow.” That title is more reflective of how we thought yesterday. Today a new idea is being chanted in streets from coast to coast, “We Won’t Wait for Tomorrow!”
Detroit water battle surges ahead

FROM THE MICHIGAN WELFARE RIGHTS ORGANIZATION

Dear American Water Warriors,

Critical street battles are taking place. On March 10, 2006, Detroiters suffered a set-back in our fight to make water accessible to the poor. The progressive members of the local Detroit City Council were out-maneuvered in a successfully rigged vote that increased the water rates.

Michigan Welfare Rights, aligned with a coalition of grassroots organizations and individuals, had locked in the Water Affordability Plan. Prior agreements made with critical members of the Council were designed to force the Water Department to implement the program without delay, and to force a moratorium on the 45,000 water shut-offs already budgeted for the year.

Betrayal happened by Council members who prefer the company of well-to-do residents, and who see financial opportunities for themselves by showing they have no love for poor people. The progressive residents, angered by this act against the most vulnerable Detroiters, organized pickets at the homes of these renegade politicians. Calls for a candidate recall are being raised, and the city is in turmoil because more and more residents are holding elected officials accountable for betrayals that affect the life or death of thousands.

This fight is about the basic humanitarian right to have water, regardless of the ability to pay for it. This right is being threatened by privateers who are positioning themselves to accept city contracts worth millions to privatize water.

Detroit, like other major cities, is struggling with double-digit unemployment, rampant political corruption, a rise in homelessness, hunger, and people without healthcare. The rich corporations don’t seem to have enough money so the poor are being stripped of the basics needed to live.

The Water Affordability Plan will allow everyone, no matter how poor, to have water based on a formula that lets everyone pay on a scale. It prevents shut-offs. Families on welfare assistance are candidates to have minor children taken away and placed in foster care when water is disconnected, so this Plan is critical to the lives of millions in state.

CLASS WARFARE

Detroiters are approaching straight-up, hand-to-hand class warfare. On one side, we have the rising class of people who have already lost work, their benefits, and their homes and cars have been repossessed. They have NO ties to the existing political parties who do nothing to help. On the other side, we have General Motors, Ford Motor Company, Daimler-Chrysler, the City of Detroit, and other corporations, laying off workers, reducing or eliminating benefit packages, making life for those still working a living hell.

The water fight is just the tip of the iceberg. Detroit is caught-up in the transformation from a human-labor manufacturing center to a non-human-labor manufacturing center and is on the cusp of what all Americans must face. These corporations are like “JAWS.” Their appetites are insatiable. They swim and eat anyone in their path.

Detroiters are learning that corporations are not our friends. They have one goal: to make profits. They are experts at engaging various ideologies to help deliver to their feeding frenzy. In Detroit, contention between African-Americans and other people of color is stirred up, while corporations gleefully keep stealing from us all. We don’t yet fully understand the nature of the class struggle we are in, so when privatization contracts are suggested by people of color, we don’t recognize the treachery of the messenger.

POISED FOR VICTORY

We are poised for victory as greater numbers of Detroiters and people in surrounding communities are asking why water is being held hostage. If we can secure access to water and get the Water Affordability Plan implemented, we will push toward an affordable light and gas plan, affordable housing, healthcare, and access to all that should be available to every person — to each according to their need. That victory will come tomorrow.

As long as we continue to anoint the treacherous Republican or the equally treacherous and gutless Democratic Parties as the “deliverers” who will guide us out of the swamp, no progress toward a higher standard of living for us all is possible. We must take steps toward understanding the class nature of politics in Detroit. We must form a new path, not based on the color of those in the fight, but instead based on class and the character of those in the fight. In Detroit, we are marching, and our slogan is, “You get what you organize to take!”

Contact the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization at http://www.mwro.org/. Phone: (313) 964-0618. E-mail: info@mwro.org.

New Film Chronicles Struggle of ‘Water Warriors’

“I had no idea that we would be engaged in this horrific fight to have water acknowledged as a basic human right.”

— Maureen Taylor, State Chair, Michigan Welfare Rights Organization

“Water Warriors” is a new film from independent filmmaker Liz Miller about Highland Park, Michigan residents’ determination to fight water privatization. View it at http://redlizardmedia.com/website/Trailor1.mov. Invite Maureen Taylor and Marion Kramer to speak on your campus about this life or death struggle. Call Speakers for a New America at 800-691-6888 or email info@speakersforanewamerica.com.

Demanding water in Highland Park. PHOTO/SYLVIA ORDUÑO

Protest at one of the Michigan governor’s houses over the right to water. PHOTO/SYLVIA ORDUÑO
A Tribute to Vallory Johnson — A Leader and Water Warrior

BY MARIAN KRAMER
MICHIGAN WELFARE RIGHTS ORGANIZATION AND HIGHLAND PARK HUMAN RIGHTS COALITION

Vallory Johnson was a daughter, wife, mother, sister, aunt, friend, woman, African-American, worker, warrior, businesswoman, designer and seamstress, leader and a Highland Parker.

Vallory Johnson loved her family, her friends and Highland Park, Mich. She was involved in different civic and community activities to secure a quality of life for all citizens in Highland Park and the metropolitan area. She felt that money should not make a difference in the ability to enjoy the necessities of life and to access our human right to have food, clothing, shelter, recreation, education, a clean environment, health care and jobs.

Vallory Johnson worked on numerous activities and projects throughout her life. Vallory and her husband, William Johnson, (who preceded her in death) opened the first African-American Barber Shop that was located on Woodward. The shop was popular in the community. It was known as a social club, where one could get both a hair cut and a political education. Vallory kept the Barber Shop beautiful with different African artifacts.

Vallory, William and Billy (their son, who preceded her in death also) were some of the first Highlanders involved in the early struggles for everyone to have a right to water. They were outstanding leaders in the fight to save Highland Park from becoming a medical waste dump.

Vallory and her husband were appointed by former Mayor Linsay Porter to lead and serve on the Police Athletic League (PAL) of Highland Park. Vallory was appointed to serve as a member of the Tax Assessors Board of Highland Park where she served for some 13 years. She was an active member of the Highland Park Business Association of Highland Park.

Vallory was an active member of the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization and fought hard for people to have a right to all utilities. She was one of the founders and served as Co-Chair of the Highland Park Human Rights Coalition, organized because thousands of Highland Parkers and Detrosiers were experiencing water disconnections. She helped lead the fight to get the governor of Michigan to come to Highland Park to listen to the community, an action that led to a moratorium on water shut-offs for Highland Park. You could always hear Vallory saying: “Water is a Human Right.”

Just months ago, she helped to organize a group of Highland Parkers who called themselves: “The Group.” Their purpose is to feed the hungry, help the homeless, feed the Firefighters, and help with the clean up of Highland Park. Vallory Johnson was a member of the Healing Spring Missionary Baptist Church, which helped fulfill her vision when the Church adopted the Highland Park Fire Station.

Mrs. Johnson was always available to improve the quality of life for her community. One of her last organizing tasks was to get the women of Highland Park to plant flowers throughout the city. Vallory loved beautiful things and she fought for Highland Park to return to its former beauty where the residents could thrive, not barely survive.

We pledge to continue the work of Mrs. Vallory Johnson, a leader and a champion for all of humanity.

THE FUTURE IS UP TO US!

Will more secure workers be pitted against the new class of poor?

This column is excerpts from the book, “The Future is Up To Us: A Revolutionary Talking Politics with the American People,” by Nelson Peery. Send your thoughts to info@peoplestribune.org.

To order the book send $12 to Speakers for a New America Books, c/o People’s Tribune, P.O. Box 3524, Chicago, IL 60654-3524.

Question: A new social class is forming, made up of workers who are being driven outside the capitalist economy by automation. Will the more secure workers be pitted against them?

Answer: There may be some of that, but probably not much. There isn’t any road to take other than a cooperative society. That doesn’t mean that the ruling class won’t try to pit people against each other. They are already preparing a police state to hold this restless mass of poor in check. But they know ultimately they can’t do that. They have to have something more than cops and an army to control people who are striving to live. The Roman Empire couldn’t do it; neither can the U.S. The only way that Hitler could to do it was through constant warfare.

The new economic foundations will solve problems [among the people] that could not have possibly been solved in previous times. Privileged positions in society are maintained through control of scarcity. But if there is plenty, you can’t have privileges. Today it’s a privilege to have a Rolls Royce, a BMW or a Lexus. If everybody has adequate transportation, then a status symbol doesn’t mean anything. To the extent that you do away with shortages, you do away with privileges. Part of the process of changing society is changing people’s perceptions of what they want. The people have to be won over to want to contribute to society. More than that, they must embrace an ideology which declares that contributing is a source of satisfaction; it is what makes your life worthwhile.
IMAGINE

Editor’s note: Earlier this year Jack Hirschman was named Poet Laureate of the City of San Francisco. Below is an excerpt from his inaugural address.

I’m honored to have been chosen by the committee of my poet peers and then definitively by Mayor Gavin Newsom to serve for the next eighteen months as the Poet Laureate of the City of San Francisco. That honor bestowed must continue to be sacrificed on the altar of profits and voids. It is a poet and that one of the central reasons that I’ve fought as a revolutionary is to lib-erate that idea — that everyone is a poet and that one of the central reasons that I’ve fought as a revolutionary is to lib-erate that idea — that everyone is a poet — into human consciousness. And its most concentrated expression is poetry. And poetry is the truth of Being. And that truth, which I call the most powerful thing in human expression, is precisely so because it defies and deconstructs Power. Because its own power resides in its expression of the end of Power through the verbal and rhythmic adventure of listening not only to what calls from within, but to the inwardness of material things and beings outwardly in motion, which not only live anew in their being named but, in their newness, in their being re-born (for the truth of Beginning is all that Being is), also reveal to the poet their innermost secrets so that he might show the way to the light of the heart in the dark times of chaos and extreme psychic estrangement.

What matters is that a child of six in one part of the city and a man of 65 in another part of the city, both of them sitting at desk or table, writing poems, are embodying the essence of beginning and equality in a way that reduces all talk about beginning and equality to an exercise in rhetoric. Each is writing a poem. In the act of feeling. Whatever the content of each one’s poem, the two are equal in love, though they don’t even know one another, and Power is overthrown.

-Jack Hirschman

Poetry a truth that ‘defies and deconstructs power,’ says San Francisco’s poet laureate

BY CARLTON TURNER

I am the father of a seven-year-old boy and husband to a beautiful, expecting wife.

During the day I work for the 30-year-old grassroots organization for community artists/activists Alternate ROOTS. As part of my duties as the Regional Development Director I help to write grants, design publications, troubleshoot the occasional office technology issue, and travel across the southeastern United States in support of local artists and their energy to organize, unite, create, and share work based in community and grounded in issues that are relevant to here and now.

On some afternoons I can be found in high schools working with youth on issues that are important to them, using music, poetry, and various forms of other media to spark dialogue in order to foster a connection with a generation younger, hipper and more socially savvy than I.

On weekends you might find me working alongside my brother by the same name, Maurice, reciting verses of lyrical poetry and musical compositions that give commentary on our plight as humans on this earth to any

Carlton Turner.

Not hardly! I found myself on Monday May 1, 2006, at a gathering of “progressive leaders”, celebrating the achievements of a distinguished organization. This event was taking place as our Latino brothers and sisters filled the streets of most of the major cities in this country in solidarity. Standing firmly against the systematic oppression of their family and friends by a system that only cherishes the billions of dollars of labor that those individuals represent.

I found myself wondering where the real solidarity was. How is it that those who stood so strongly during the sixties and seventies during the struggle for civil rights can sit idly by while OUR brothers are actively engaged in the continuation of that same struggle; the right to be treated as equal.

The struggle that we are apart of is so much larger than that of Latino immigrants, or of Arab people, or of the young, or the poor, or the old. It is a fight for truth and justice that will ultimately rock the foundation that this nation was built on, a foundation that celebrates the privileged and marginalizes the poor and working class.

Imagine if, on May 1, 2006, every person of color took to the streets in cities across America, stood side-by-side in truth and love and embraced cultural difference and celebrated our common humanity, that teaches us that if one of us suffers, then we all suffer.

Imagine us ALL taking to the streets and demanding that the troops be brought home immediately, demanding that Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Rove, Rice and the likes be charged with the crimes that they are constantly committing against humanity and in the name of the citizens of the United States.

Imagine if we stood our ground as a people that strives for peace and justice and did so until we created the world we want to see for our children and ourselves.

Imagine that no soul rested until every mouth was fed and every person taught the life skills that it takes to live a sustainable lifestyle in a manner that was in harmony with the land.

Imagine the Native Americans demanding that the descendents of the original illegal European immigrants immediately restore power to the right-ful keepers of this sacred land and all of the people of color throughout the world stood with them.

Imagine.
An interview with poet Sarah Menefee

Sarah Menefee has written poetry since age 12. Her books include I’m Not Thousandfurs and The Blood About the Heart (both from Curbstone Press). She has a new book of extraordinary poetry, Human Star. Some of her poetry is at http://www.lrna.org/poetry/index.html.

Lew Rosenbaum

People’s Tribune: How did you start writing poetry?

Sarah Menefee: I discovered early on that I could access a deep part of myself, hear its music and receive its images, that would flow out as structured language, works of art. I’ve been part of the community of poets, doing public readings, organizing, and being published, since coming to San Francisco. Being part of the community, working with other poets, changed my poetry, and allowed it to develop in a social context.

The most profound influence on my work and life was joining and working with the League of Revolutionaires for a New America, an organization that loves and values its poets and artists. I was introduced to some of the great people’s poetries and living poets of the world.

PT: Tell us about your activities and life experiences that you draw from in your work.

SM: What I saw and experienced when I became politically active, especially in the homeless movement (in groups such as the Union of the Homeless, Homes Not Jails and many others), profoundly influenced my work. Behind that were my own struggles to survive, especially in my youth, as a low-wage worker in hospitals and casinos, and my experience with poverty and homelessness while married to a working-class man who was a gambler, traveling around the West. The courage, humor, intelligence and native sense of resistance of the homeless, poor and working people I’ve known is the bedrock of what inspires me. These voices, which are also my voice, speak through my poems.

PT: In your book, Blood about the Heart, you wrote that “art drove me into the loony bin.” How does your activism mix with your poetry?

SM: This poem goes back to my youth, my sense of despair as a young artist (a painter at that time). Despite the common human desire to live a “life of beauty,” the country was waging a terrible genocidal war in Vietnam. Everything, including art, was for profit and for sale. I felt very alone because of that (“droven into the loony bin,” a very enlightening experience!) Art was helping me stay alive and heal and develop as a conscious being, with heart and soul intact. Art in all its forms is the basis of our common humanity, embodies our highest aspirations and dreams, while exposing the injustice and misery they cause, giving us a vision of the future we strive for. That can no more be bought or sold than love itself. It is heartening to see the rebirth of poetry, by the young, as a voice of the movement for transformation that is rising everywhere on earth: whether in spoken word, in the powerful rebelliousness of hip-hop lyrics, or in the mass response by poets against the war.

PT: You start Human Star with a sobering image: “there’s nowhere to go”

SM: We’re all in this together, as a human family: we either make it right for everyone or it’s catastrophe for all. I think that’s something the poor have always understood, how to stand together in solidarity, out of necessity. There’s nowhere to go now but to stand and fight for that vision and that necessity, social transformation.

Buy Sarah Menefee’s new book Human Star directly from the publisher or order from your local bookstore. (ISBN: 1600010431 $12 / $10 direct order (Factory School). Invite Sarah Menefee to recite poetry at your event. Call 800-691-6888 or email info@speakersforanewamerica.com.

Video shows California chapter of National Action Network in action

Hurry, Hurry! Don’t miss getting your first edition of the California State Chapter, The National Action Network, Rev. Floyd D. Harris Jr., in ACTION. Rev. Harris has taken on the government by exposing the Fresno Police Department for profiling and police abuse. Rev. Harris started a Cop Watch Program based in Oakland, California. He brought the program to Fresno to educate the community on how to videotape police. People of color are being mistreated in Fresno. It’s time to take a stand and remember, “No Justice No Peace.” Order your DVDs. They are going fast. Don’t miss this life experience video. Your life will never be the same! The DVD is $30. Send to 1630 W. Keraeny Blvd., Fresno, CA 93706. Phone: 559-264-0097 or 559-803-0286 or www.nancal.org.
Auto giants re-organizing and re-tooling: WHAT ABOUT US?

Disposing of thousands of autoworkers, one way (bankruptcy) or another (severance packages)

BY CLAIRE MCCLINTON

As of this writing, the fate of the American autoworker in this dynamic global economy is playing out in a New York courtroom. A judge is deciding whether to grant a motion by Delphi to dissolve union contracts. Delphi says it wants to pay workers $12 per hour, but if GM offers to make up the difference, they’ll pay $16 per hour. The UAW response was to seek strike authorization from the membership — which was overwhelmingly passed by 90%. If the motion to dissolve contracts is granted, a strike is all but inevitable. (Analysts assert that a strike at Delphi could shut GM down in 24 hours.) In turn, GM (in what looked like a show of desperation) asked the bankruptcy Judge to postpone it’s decision and give the parties (GM, Delphi, and unions) more time to negotiate. Delphi opposed the request and the Judge denied GM’s appeal.

LABOR’S POSITION

The unions’ response to this volatile situation is critical. The strike vote has been taken — the rank and file have spoken loud and clear. They’re ready to fight. This gives tremendous leverage to the UAW. But the union has some things going against it. Mobilization of rank and file preparation for a strike has been weak. For instance, at a recent regional meeting of delegates and alternate delegates in preparation of the Constitutional Convention, there was barely a mention that we are in the middle of a historic battle and what kinds of strategies union members must employ to be victorious. Furthermore, most local Unions have cancelled meetings for the summer, including the Delphi East local where Delphi CEO Steve Miller has vowed to close or sell. This same plant is taking job applications, which rumor has it may be in preparation for a strike.

A successful UAW Convention must become in fact a Strategy Conference with real answers to the following questions:

1. WHAT KIND OF CONTRACT ARE WE GOING TO HAVE 2007? More concessions and give backs to make the company competitive? With massive numbers of workers taking severance packages and leaving the company, are our pensions and Health Care packages secure?

2. WHAT KIND OF UNION ARE WE GOING TO HAVE ??? In the era of the disposable worker driven by the hi-tech revolution and the demands of the new global economy, will our union be an organization that collectively bargains the demise of its members thru buy-outs and unprecedented cuts in wages and benefits OR will the union become an instrument for social change, championing the cause of its members, the community at large and our children — the future members???

3. After answering the two previous questions, finally, WHAT KIND OF AN AMERICA ARE WE GOING TO HAVE??

From the Editors

We have to wake up to the reality that the companies and the government won’t help us. The time is absolutely ripe to think and fight outside the box. If we’re willing to struggle for it, a new America based on a cooperative society is possible where there is public ownership of the giant corporations. We can have an America where no one need worry about job security or health care, where we the people make the decisions, not a handful of billionaires who are beyond public accountability. There is no going back to the old way of life. Technology and globalization have eliminated that possibility. We have to move forward to something new if we’re going to survive and thrive. The workers of the Rust Belt have a history of struggle. If they visualize a new future, they will play a leading role in changing society.


The three photos above depict UAW members and supporters participating in the April 29 “March for the American Dream” in Lansing, Mich.

PHOTOS/DONATED TO THE PEOPLE’S TRIBUNE
‘We’re in a battle to increase the living standards of the people,’ says Alabama state senator

BY SANDY REID

State Senator Hank Sanders is known as one of the few honest and moral senators in Alabama, having served for nearly 20 years. He is the first African American state senator elected from the Black Belt, the rural counties characterized by high rates of poverty, illiteracy, and unemployment. This was where the Alabama vote fraud trials of the mid-1980s sought to stop African Americans from using the ballot to help the poor. Senator Sanders has consistently championed children, health, education and other issues affecting the poor, and voting rights. Everyday he crosses the Edmund Pettus Bridge where the right to vote was won in a cloud of tear gas and billy clubs. The powers that be continue to harass Senator Sanders for his constant struggle for the poor. Alabama ranks among the poorest states in the nation. State-wide 71% of African American children live in low income families, compared to 20% for white children. In the urban areas, 67% of children live in low income families. Senator Sanders discusses these issues with the People’s Tribune, and the possibilities of people coming together to fight for change.

People’s Tribune: Senator Sanders, have you seen any changes in poverty, and is industry coming South?

Hank Sanders: The poverty appears to be increasing. It’s peculiar because employment is picking up. The difference between those that have and those who don’t have is getting bigger. A lot of other things spin off of that — the crime rate, drug rate and all kinds of things. We remain in a tremendous battle to increase the living standards of the people. Industry is coming to the suburbs and away from the big cities, industry is low paying. So in the rural areas, any positive impact is diminished. My impression is that industry today doesn’t require as many workers, though it requires more select workers.

PT: Is there a unionization movement in Alabama?

HS: It is being stopped very effectively. Unions have to work harder. We need them to protect the rights of workers and the folks left out. There was an effort to unionize a plant here in the Black Belt last year. It didn’t succeed. The history of racism ends up affecting what’s done in one way or another. That’s how powerful it is. It impacts everything adversely. And, unions have not always been as inclusive and fair as they ought to be. Sometimes they get hung up in the reactionary movement. PT: Can the poor get together in Alabama?

HS: Normally what happens is the opposite. When poverty is increasing, instead of folks getting together, too often we end up blaming each other along the lines of our differences. There have been many efforts to try to organize the poor across these dividing lines. Those in control know how to divide and conquer. Workers rights issues like Immigration are used to divide and conquer.

PT: Some provisions of the 1965 anti-discriminatory Voting Rights Act may be up for renewal in 2007. Do we need to keep fighting for this Act?

HS: Yes. To show you how powerful the issue of race is — in 1966, I went with students to Lowndes County to try to help get Blacks elected. The county was 80% Black. We didn’t win. We tried again in 1968. In 1970 we tried again. In 1974, the first person was elected, some 7 years after the Voting Rights Act. In 1982, some 17 years later, obstacles were still put in the way. It takes years, working up to the Supreme Court to stop the adverse consequences of law. It also showed the economic factor. They found all kinds of ways to solve political issues in their favor. So even though it’s been 42 years since the Voting Rights Act passed, and even though there has been some progress, we still have some remnants. The spirit that made it necessary then still has a lot of life left. I expect a big fight. I hope we find a way to overcome it. We need to keep fighting.

PT: What is your vision for the country?

HS: I think it is possible for our children to be able to realize their full potential. It will take a lot of folks communicating across lines of division, and second, working together in all kinds of ways. If we just talk, we’ll find the differences we think exist are much smaller. My hope is that if we talk more with each other, we’ll find we have 90% in common. What we often allow is the 10% that we differ on to keep us from uniting.
WHIRLPOOL SLASHES JOBS; BOYCOTT WHIRLPOOL

BY REV. EDWARD PINKNEY

Since Whirlpool bought Maytag in March 2007, former Maytag executives are moving to Berrien County, Michigan. Whirlpool is building them extravagant homes. Most of the money for this huge expenditure is coming from none other than MICHIGAN TAXPAYERS. By signing off on a $10.4 million tax break specifically for the building of these mansions, Michigan Gov. Jennifer Granholm is selling out taxpayers by forcing us to bear this burden. Whirlpool is shelling out less than half of that figure to get their new executives settled.

Whirlpool Corporation, based in Benton Harbor, is the world’s largest appliance maker, with $19 billion in annual sales. With the $1.68 billion purchase of Maytag Corporation, Whirlpool owns over 70% of the world’s washer and dryer production. This near-monopoly corporation was made possible by government at all levels. As a result of this merging of interests of the corporation and government, Whirlpool North America delivered record first-quarter operating profits, up 12 percent from the prior year.

Whirlpool will now close three factories and cut 4500 jobs to keep profits up. The cuts include 1000 jobs at a plant in Herrin, Illinois, and another 70 jobs at Maytag’s administration office in Schaumburg, Illinois. Both buildings are closing. The washer and dryer plants in Searcy, Arkansas will close, and a plant in Newton, Iowa will shut down in 2007.

By eliminating 4500 jobs, Whirlpool Corporation has continued to suck the life out of the residents not only of Benton Harbor, but in the rest of the country, one city at a time. Whirlpool will outsource over 50% of all Maytag jobs left to maximize profit with cheaper overseas labor.

This shows that the big corporations are consolidating, maximizing profits through automation and outsourcing, and few jobs will be left. The question is how people are to survive? Once again, Whirlpool widens the gap between the haves and the have-nots. We must say enough is enough.

Several people from the Newton, Iowa plant contacted me and asked for help. I told them the only way to beat a corporation like Whirlpool is to boycott the products that the company makes. I promised the people in Newton that I would do all I can to help.

BOYCOTT WHIRLPOOL!
BOYCOTT WHIRLPOOL!
BOYCOTT WHIRLPOOL!

BENTON HARBOR RESIDENTS SPEAK OUT

BY BELINDA BROWN

Rev. Pinkney’s trial was a cover-up to hide that they had thrown out the citizens’ votes in the recall. They needed a commissioner to remain in that seat so they could sell city-owned property to certain corporations, build a golf course and hotels. But how are $350,000 houses and a golf course going to benefit our children? Young people got up at a City Council meeting recently and said, “You’re talking about golf courses? What about our houses that are dilapidated? What about a recreation center for us? Why not clean up our city?”

The young people are restless. There is frustration and anger and hatred because of the blatant disregard of justice and the police brutality. There are serious concerns about how the city is being run and about who is actually running the city. Rev. Pinkney wanted to bring in good paying jobs. But they don’t want jobs to come into Benton Harbor. They want to force the people out. Rev. Pinkney educated and rallied the people together. He got them to exercise their rights through voting and recalling. It gave them hope.

The writer is a resident of Benton Harbor. Her remarks are excerpted from a recent edition of the Kalamazoo Voice cable TV show.

Infant deaths rise in Benton Harbor

FROM THE BLACK AUTONOMY NETWORK COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION (BANCO)

Benton Harbor has the highest infant death rate per capita in Michigan. More than 85% of the Berrien County deaths that occurred were among African-Americans born in Benton Harbor and Benton Township. Of every 1000 African-American babies born from 1997-99, 31.7% in the county died before their first birthday, compared to 5.5% for Caucasian babies. Berrien County Health Department officials have never cared about this situation. It has been going on for a long, long time, it’s increasing, and there’s no excuse for it. The Health Department should be fighting for the government to provide quality healthcare for everyone. Once again, it’s the haves against the have-nots.