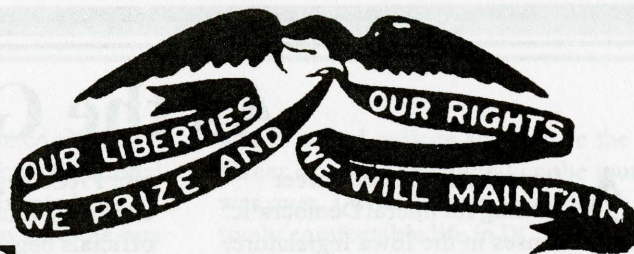


THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE



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Summer 2000

A NEWSLETTER FOR IOWA'S DEMOCRATIC LEFT

Blood on the Leaves: Prairie Dog's 2000 Summer Reading List

Larry's Party by Carol Shields

Learn about Larry's friends, Larry's work, Larry's penis, and Larry's search for the wonderful and good, in the best novel about a perplexed white male since *The Shipping News*.

Flowers in the Dustbin by James Miller

The ideal rock and roll history book for those who think that no good music has been made since 1977.

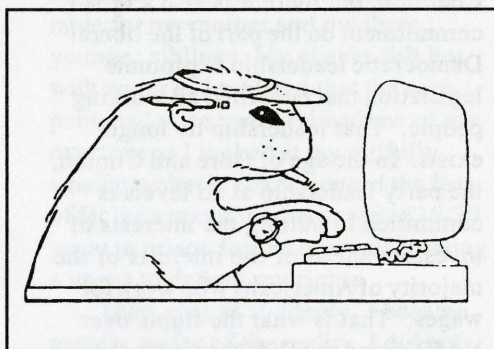
Black Hunger: Food and the Politics of U.S. Identity by Doris Witt

So you still think "soul food" means "massive leftovers?" A University of Iowa English professor expertly depicts the intersection of food, travel, and African influences in Brazil, Mexico, and Haiti, as well as in Harlem, Chicago, and Chapel Hill.

Strange Fruit: Billie Holiday, Café Society, and an Early Cry for Civil Rights by David Margolick

How can a 60-year old song about lynchings continue to have an impact on American culture? Maybe it's the power of the lyrics ('southern trees bear a strange fruit/blood on the leaves and blood at

the root'). Maybe it's power of Lady Day's voice. Maybe it's the racial violence that continues to be a fact of American life.



Classrooms and Courtrooms by Nan Stein

In their own words, elementary and high school students describe the pain of sexual harassment and what happens when they turn to school officials for help. Stein advocates for the victims but also addresses the due process rights of the accused. A must for parents, teachers, and school administrators.

Revolutionary Road by Richard Yates

If you wondered why in the world *American Beauty* won all those Oscars, try the real thing. This recently reissued masterpiece about marriage, children, work, and self-

deception in the suburbs is funny, scary, insightful – and as timely and relevant as any book or movie forty years later.

The Real Worlds of Welfare Capitalism by Goodin, Headey, Muffels, and Dirxen

When it comes to welfare for poor people, the US is by far the stingiest of the world's rich nations. Many Americans, nevertheless, feel overburdened by – and resentful of – government programs to alleviate poverty. *Real Worlds* analyzes how market processes generate (unnecessarily) a class of citizens with very low incomes, and comes to a disturbing conclusion: the hallmark of the American economic system is the majority's placid indifference to the poverty of the minority.

I May Not Get There with You by Michael Eric Dyson

Despite his sanitized image, Martin Luther King, Jr., was more a radical than a saint. Dyson's down-to-earth portrait shows an authoritarian minister who, at the time of his death, was beginning to challenge the premises of modern capitalism.

*Summer Reading List,
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As the Glasses Clink

After a distinguished career battling for liberal Democratic causes in the Iowa legislature, Minnette Doderer will be succeeded by the President of the Iowa City Chamber of Commerce. That transition summarizes the transformation of the Democratic Party during the last quarter of a century.

When I first came to Iowa in the 1970s, I discovered a Democratic Party committed not only to New Deal and Great Society principles, but also to grassroots political activism. In the shadow of former Governor Harold Hughes, Democrats really believed that government could be an instrument of social justice. Senator Dick Clark had won election using the venerable technique of filling shoe boxes with card files containing the names of likely voters, and persuading volunteers to turn them out on election day. The presidential caucuses were genuine opportunities to discuss who would be the best president, and what our position should be as a party on the issues.

That has all changed for two reasons: leadership and money. As a member of the state Democratic Central Committee in the 1980s, I had a ringside seat for those changes. Under the leadership of a succession of state chairs, notably Bonnie Campbell and the late Arthur Davis, the state party shifted its emphasis from promoting grass roots democracy and political activism to raising money from wealthy donors and big corporations. This was aided and abetted by party staff who regarded the source of money as irrelevant. A jubilant staffer once informed the Central Committee that we had just received \$50,000 from an east coast PAC hoping to promote gambling in Iowa.

While the presidential caucuses were being transformed into a media campaign, the state party was transformed into a soft money fundraising machine. Wealthy donors and corpo-

rate PACs began to dominate the party, and party fundraisers and elected officials began to be more and more accountable to them. As corporate money began to flow to Democratic candidates, the labor movement found itself outspent inside the Democratic Party.

Although there is a distinctive Iowa dimension to this story, it reflects national trends. For half a century following the 1930s, the glue that held the Democratic Party together nationally was its commitment to working people, a legacy of Franklin D. Roosevelt's job creation programs and the passage of the National Labor Relations Act. The labor movement was at the heart of the New Deal Coalition, but there was also a broad commitment on the part of the liberal Democratic leadership to promote legislation that benefited all working people. That leadership no longer exists. In the age of Gore and Clinton, the party leadership at all levels is committed to putting the interests of investors ahead of the interests of the majority of Americans who work for wages. That is what the fights over NAFTA and the WTO were all about. Orchestrated by Clinton and Gore, both were terrible defeats for the labor movement. Unions have poured more and more money into the Democratic Party only to find themselves outspent by corporate donors and wealthy investors, and treated as just another special interest group by Democratic legislators and fundraisers

In Iowa the crucial battle has been over taxes rather than trade. With only the Iowa labor movement objecting, Democratic legislators have pushed through large increases in the regressive sales tax (including its local option versions) and equally impressive cuts in Iowa's progressive personal income tax. The tax burden has been shifted decisively to wage earners. It should not be surprising to anyone that corporations such as McLeod USA

have been funding Johnson County Democratic legislators in races against Republican opponents.

Democratic leaders from House Speaker Richard Gephardt down to the lowliest campaign fundraiser are very proud of their ability to raise money from corporate sources. But as the glasses clink at fundraising receptions for corporate lobbyists, the Democratic Party is sinking slowly into the position of permanent minority party. For fifty years after the New Deal, for as long as the Democratic Party stood for working people, it was the natural party of government in America. Now it is a minority party at almost every level, reduced to getting elected by attempting to frighten the public about the Christian Right.

The domination of the Democratic Party by employers, investors, and corporate PACs is not merely a bad thing for Democrats, but a bad thing for all Americans. The overwhelming majority of Americans do not employ other people or live on investments, but work for wages or live on social security. They are now largely unrepresented in politics as both parties compete with big corporations and wealthy donors for support. It has never been easier to vote, yet fewer and fewer people bother. Can you blame them? Without a party to represent them, the wage-earning majority has been disenfranchised. A Chamber of Commerce President might be an excellent legislator in many ways, but a person holding that position is unlikely to be a vocal advocate for employee rights, progressive taxes, and fair trade.

There remain many Democrats worth supporting, especially in Johnson County, but the pool of progressive pro-labor Democrats is shrinking. That's why Ralph Nader's attempt to send the Democratic Party a message is receiving so much well-deserved attention. ✕

— Jeff Cox

Reflections on Solidarity

Solidarity is a word I use daily as I describe the work of the Campaign for Labor Rights to activists in the mid-Atlantic region. The 'solidarity model' which we employ in our work means that we take our cues from the sweatshop workers who are organizing, who are risking their jobs, their safety, and sometimes their lives. It means that we mobilize in the U.S. when sweatshop union activists ask us for our support to strengthen their hand in their struggles for justice. But solidarity is not just a concept.

For weeks prior to the Midwest speaking tour last May with fired Mil Colores worker Rosa Ocampo, I had spent enormous amounts of energy mobilizing people in support of the union struggles in Nicaragua's Las Mercedes free trade zone. Many of us had put so much energy into launching our first mobilization of the newly formed Rapid Action Network, leafleting at Target and Kohl's stores around the country in solidarity with the 208 fired workers from the Mil Colores plant and the 68 of them who faced trumped up criminal charges. I spoke to activists and consumers, telling them that the workers made 20 cents an hour, that their restroom facilities were filthy, that they were forced to do overtime. I also had spent time in 1998 in El Salvador listening to maquileras' stories of being fired for joining a union, so I was well-acquainted with what Rosa would talk about.

What I didn't know is that besides being poor and working in a maquila, Rosa is an avid student, excellent cook, passionate folk dancer, a competitive card player. I didn't know that her dream is to be a lawyer, but that she has resigned herself to never realizing that dream because there's no way her family could afford to pay for her high school diploma, much less college.

I didn't know how she bravely faced Craig Miller, the Miami-based owner of Mil Colores as she and her co-workers once again waited long into the evening for their weekly paychecks. She became angrier and angrier as she waited for her meager paycheck, which would surely be lower than it should be, given the number of overtime hours she had worked. She didn't even have the few cordobas for bus fare; she was forced to wait until 9 or 10 pm when management finally would decide to pay them. When Craig Miller walked

"Imagine the reception desk's surprise as a Nicaraguan sweatshop worker and her interpreter signed the register, representing 4500 shares of Kohl's stock!"

by, on one of his visits to the factory (where he never spoke with the workers), Rosa approached him and asked for a few coins for bus fare since they hadn't yet received their pay and she needed to get home to her family. Apparently oblivious to the irony of one of his workers begging for bus fare on payday, Miller gave Rosa enough money to take the bus home. All her co-workers erupted into nervous laughter, unable to believe her audacity, as he walked away.

The initial reason for Rosa's journey to the U.S. was to attend Kohl's shareholder meeting in Milwaukee, where the Sisters of St. Francis put forth a shareholder resolution which would require Kohl's to take seriously their support for labor rights in the factories around the world where they

buy their clothes and allow for real, third-party, independent monitoring of those factories to ensure compliance. Rosa and I entered the meeting, much to the chagrin of those at the door, because another order of nuns had given us their proxy.

Imagine the reception desk's surprise as a Nicaraguan sweatshop worker and her interpreter signed the register, representing 4500 shares of Kohl's stock! A very friendly lawyer representing Kohl's shepherded us from the sign-in table (past the drinks and munchies table!) to our seats. I'm sure that it must have been surreal for Rosa to sit in the plush seats, watch the latest Kohl's television ads on big screens, and hear me whispering the translation of Kohl's remarkable 35% growth in the last quarter.

When the time came for the shareholder resolution to be introduced, Irene Senn, from the office of Justice and Peace for the Sisters of St. Francis, asked to give her five minutes to Rosa and was flatly denied by the company. Irene then read a statement Rosa had made the night before, about the factory conditions as well as her own story of trying to form a union and being fired. The company vice-president then stated that the accounting firm PriceWaterhouseCoopers monitored the Mil Colores factory, that Rosa's statement was false, and that he encouraged Kohl's shareholders to vote for the resolution. When a shareholder raised his hand, he was told, 'We will take questions AFTER the vote.' So much for democracy. The question was, of course, 'Why would Kohl's management so quickly take the word of PriceWaterhouseCoopers while silencing someone who worked at the plant in Nicaragua?' Rosa chuckled when I whispered the translation into her ear, whispering back, 'We know

Reflections on Solidarity
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A Movie for the Mayor

In the closing credits of *Shaft, The Remake*, the very first “thank you” goes to the Mayor’s Office of New York City. In today’s highly charged policing of New York City’s Black community by the same Mayor’s Office, this credit tells us everything we need to know about the racial politics of the 2000 version of *Shaft*.

The 1971 original *Shaft* is often referred to as the prime example of so-called “blaxploitation,” a genre of film defined by the American Heritage Dictionary as “the exploitation of Black people ... by casting them in negative and stereotypical roles.” On the “blackvoices” website, though, you’ll find that in these movies “the hip talk, sex appeal, and messages of black power made blaxploitation movies instant hits with black audiences” long starved for images of strong Blacks on screen. Who put this negative stamp on Black movies for Black audiences? Nobody suggests that the Dirty Harry movies, the *Die Hard* and *Lethal Weapon* series, or the James Bond flicks carry negative stereotypes of white men, exploiting Caucasian culture for profit.

One major difference between the original *Shaft* and today’s is that Richard Roundtree was a private eye and Samuel L. Jackson is a police detective, NYPD. While Roundtree wore a stylish brown leather duster, Jackson prefers the black variety worn by the lead players in *The Matrix* and *Columbine*. Old *Shaft* had sex on screen, new *Shaft* doesn’t. Roundtree thinks blaxploitation is a “very ugly term.” The remake just might reinvent the term—a 7-inch doll of Jackson as *Shaft* can be bought at Toys R Us in August.

The first *Shaft* would not so much as “pigeon on Black folk.” The second will pistol whip a Brother to make a point. In the original, the battle line formed at the color line. In the remake, evil comes in various shades. Jackson

is pitted against two villains, each a stereotype of comic book proportions. The first is Walter Wade Jr., spoiled son of a wealthy real estate developer. He is played by Christian Bale, who has gone from brutally slaying women in *American Psycho* to brutally killing a young Black man in *Shaft*. (Is it too late for Bale to have a heart to heart with his agent?)

“The new *Shaft* might still have attitude, but he has shed both the racial and class consciousness of the old *Shaft*.”

The second arch villain is a Latino drug king (surprise, surprise) played by Jeffrey Wright, whose acting style consists of pairing an understated, accent-fracturing spoken language with exaggerated, over-the-top body language, which includes punching holes in his chest with an ice pick. You may read or hear that Wright stole the show. Don’t believe it. There is nothing to steal in this movie.

In the original, a lover asks a troubled-looking *Shaft* if he has problems, and Roundtree’s reply: “Yeah, I got a couple of them—I was born Black and I was born poor,” clearly links race and class. Not so the remake, where in one very telling sequence the scene shifts back and forth between a seedy precinct jail cell, where the two villains end up with the usual assortment of criminals and derelicts, and an upscale night club where Jackson, in his “wardrobe by

Armani” (no kidding) mingles with the rich, and mainly Black, clientele. The new *Shaft* might still have attitude, but he has shed both the racial and class consciousness of the old *Shaft*.

So when Jackson brutally pistol whips a street corner drug dealer and later kills the drug lord there is not the slightest hint in the movie that, well, since all the prime real estate in the city has been grabbed up by white men like Walter Wade’s father, one of the few remaining enterprises with a similar profit potential is street drugs.

Roundtree wonders why the new *Shaft* doesn’t have sex. Jackson has the answer: “I got to shoot people and beat people up instead, to get rid of all my aggression.” More sex and a whole lot less violence was the trademark of the original *Shaft*.

The mayor of New York should love this remake. A new biography of Rudy Giuliani discloses that the mayor’s father was not really a janitor—he was an enforcer for a loan shark and could swing a baseball bat as wickedly as any Bronx Bomber ever could. So the mayor comes by his street cleaning methods naturally. There’s a line in *Shaft* that says it all. As a prelude to the grand finale car chase and shootout Jackson picks up a shotgun, cocks it, and exclaims: “It’s Giuliani time!”

This could be a great ironic line if Black *Shaft* were going off to do battle with Giuliani’s racist cops, like the ones who shot West African immigrant Amadou Diallo 41 times when he reached for his wallet. But he’s not. He’s going off to do the mayor’s dirty work.

Yes, the mayor would like this movie. The only person who might like it more is Charlton Heston. ❧

—Jae Retz

Reflections on Solidarity,

Continued from Page 3

when the monitors are arriving because suddenly there is toilet paper and soap in the restrooms and the medicine cabinet is full. But the moment the monitors leave, the management removes all of it and puts it back in their office.'

The two men shook our hands, flashed winning smiles, and 'sincerely' thanked Rosa for coming. They told us they were our partners, that they are leaders in the labor rights movement, and that we only jeopardize that partnership when we tell their shareholders that the internal monitoring system doesn't work.

A key moment in our tour came as we stood before an eager audience in Madison, Wisconsin. Both Rosa and I must have looked worn. It was the fifth time Rosa had told her story that day: first on a morning radio program through a speaker phone, then at lunch with local Madison activists, then a studio radio interview with large fuzzy microphones picking up our voices, then a long interview with a women's magazine, and finally at an evening presentation at the University of Wisconsin.

During the q-and-a, someone asked, 'If you make 200 cordobas (\$16) a week, how much would a maquila

worker have to earn to live comfortably?' Rosa, teary-eyed from emotional exhaustion, began to delineate how much she spends a day to take the bus to work (8 cordobas), how much her daily lunch costs (15 cordobas), and how her family sometimes can only eat once a day. Suddenly I felt the weight of all she was saying.

I realized later that, though I had been on speaking tours before, this was the first time I was translating for a sweatshop worker - the first time telling a worker's story, using the word 'I.' I told the audience: 'My name is Rosa. I was fired from the Mil Colores factory. I am 22 years old, and I face potentially 30 years in prison.' For a moment, I felt ownership of those words. I could see and feel myself struggling to put sometimes only one meal a day on the table for my mother and my three younger siblings. My cheeks felt hot with anger as I realized that the company had once again robbed me of my overtime as I looked at my pitifully small paycheck. I experienced the fear of facing a maximum sentence of 26-30 years in prison for the crime of forming a union to defend my rights.

Then, just as suddenly, I became acutely aware of the reality. I did not face criminal charges (despite the fact that I had engaged in civil disobedience in the April demonstrations in DC); I had taken for granted that I

would attend college and pursue the career of my choosing; when the tour was over, I would return to a relatively comfortable life in DC with a job I love. I don't think any of this showed on my face, but I felt profoundly transformed. Profoundly tied to Rosa and her struggle. Profoundly aware of the system which creates the economic inequality between us.

The night that our six-day tour ended, Rosa and I talked about how strange it was that we had only met six days earlier. Rosa said it was as if we had been friends for years and years. She took my hand and told me that on the plane on the way to the U.S., she was terrified about what awaited her. She had no idea with whom she would be traveling, what she would be doing, what she should expect. But when she stepped off the plane and realized that she would be traveling with young women like her, she was immensely relieved. 'The experience of this tour is something that we shared together and no one else will ever understand it,' she said as a tear rolled down her cheek. I told her how transforming the experience was for me, and how she now had more sisters in the struggle here in the U.S. I never dreamed that the bond could have been so deep in such a short time, but that is what these tours are really about - forcing ourselves to confront the humanity of the struggles we face. ✨

— Melinda St. Louis, Mid-Atlantic Organizer, Campaign for Labor Rights. For more info, visit www.afgj.org

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Summer Reading List,
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Deadly Persuasion
by Jean Kilbourne

A former beauty-contest winner connects feminism, advertising, and addiction in a penetrating study of women's susceptibility to the empty promises of our "toxic cultural environment."

Contesting the Master Narrative
edited by Jeffrey Cox and Shelton Stromquist

Regular contributor and erstwhile *Prairie Progressive* editor Cox teams with labor scholar Stromquist to assert that contemporary historians have lost their objectivity by trying too hard to reach a popular audience. Their remedy: greater use of alternative narratives like Indian oral history. More interesting than it sounds!

Life Prints: A Memoir of Healing and Discovery
by Mary Grimley Mason

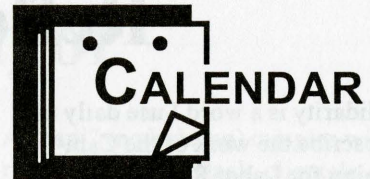
America's first polio 'poster child,' posing with President Roosevelt, grows up to be a Cambridge bohemian who finds sexism a greater barrier than being disabled.

Fay
by Larry Brown

If Mark Twain, Hank Williams, and Janis Joplin collaborated on a novel...

Soul of a Citizen
by Paul Rogat Loeb

Still trying to act on your convictions while everyone around you is busy shopping and investing? Loeb, without preaching, gives practical tips and encouragement to stay involved in larger community issues without succumbing to cynicism. Tip #1: We don't have to become saints – or wait for the perfect situation – to act. ✂



July 30

Legal Defense Benefit for Students Against Sweatshops, 6 PM, music at 7 PM, The Mill, Iowa City. 319-351-9529 or dandersn@blue.weeg.uiowa.edu

Sept. 1-4

Labor in the Pulpits.
Info: 515-237-5047 or afscdesm@afsc.org

Sept. 21

Corlis Moody, Executive Director, Iowa Civil Rights Commission, Iowa City Public Library. 319-643-5548

Nov. 7

Election Day

THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE

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Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.

— Martin Luther King, Jr.