The Prairie Progressive

a newsletter for Iowa's Democratic Left **Fall 2020**

How long?

When I was a church-going person, I joined a Black church. The pastor often started a sermon or a prayer with the words "How long, oh Lord?" That phrase, sometimes uttered with anger, sometimes with puzzlement and often with just long-suffering, stuck with me.

How long? It's been 63 years since I watched girls like me, dressed in their freshly-ironed skirts and blouses, experience their first day of school in Little Rock by having dogs set on them. That was three years after the Brown decision. Then there was Boston. It went on. Now, we don't have official segregation in southern schools, but a much larger percentage of all the children in the United States go to "troubled" schools. Black children have access to the mostly-white private schools, but only if they're rich.

How long? It's been 56 years since the Civil Rights Act wiped out poll taxes and literacy tests in the South. While young people like me were going South to register voters, states and counties all over the United States started chipping away at the law. Then it was gutted by the Congress. Now voting rights can be erased for whole categories of folks with the stroke of a computer key. Long voting lines, difficult-to-find polling places, changes in how you can vote—most of them legal—work to cut down the right to vote.

How long? It's been 54 years since I sat with a young mother who was bleeding from an illegal abortion and we were both afraid to call for help because we might get arrested. Roe v. Wade came along 47 years ago, and I have seen what was a fairly simple law sliced up to systematically curtail the rights of women to own their own bodies. Attempts to repeal the law go on.

How long? We still don't have the Equal Rights Amendment.

How long? It's been 54 years since the Fair Housing Act, but restrictive zoning, red-lining, carefully-worded covenants and home owners associations still keep poor people "in their place." Congress occasionally interferes, but each time the system snipes away at the laws to make them less effective. President Obama's fair housing act was actually turned against people of color when banks interpreted that the law required them to make loans to borrowers of color, many of them single mothers, who were not credit-worthy. That ended up bankrupting the borrowers and contributing to the bursting of the housing bubble in 2008. A lot of people were hurt, but the banks made money.

How long? It's been 77 years since the 1943 riots in Detroit. I was one year old. Detroit erupted again 53 years ago in 1967, and again this year. I put a Black Lives Matter sign on my lawn, and think of all the demonstrations I have attended, all the riots, all the promises to change. Each time I have hoped. It seems that very little has changed at all.

Once again, I have hopes. A few things have changed. Maybe this time it will be enough to tip the scales towards justice. The media does seem to be more willing to call out the egregious violations of voting rights and other laws. A new generation of younger writers call out the new Jim Crow in plain language. Novels, autobiographies and well-researched non-fiction are arriving at bookstores daily, and much more of it than before is put out by mainstream publishers. Sadly, I think we can count on Police continuing to maim or kill Black men, and it appears that these incidents will not go unnoticed this time. Perhaps BLM activists will monitor their cities and states to make sure that effective changes are enacted and are not eroded over time. Best of all, an ever-growing number of white middle class people have loved ones of color, whether by adoption or marriage.

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The other American

I recently re-read Maurice Isserman's biography of Michael Harrington, Catholic aesthete, leftist polemicist, founder of Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and author of "The Other America: Poverty in the United States." Before Harrington published this influential book in 1962, he was a well-known writer and intellectual within the miniscule circle of American Leftists that existed in New York after World War II. By the late 50s the Communist Party of the USA had imploded over Stalin's crimes and the Soviet invasion of Hungary, hoary members of the American Socialist Party were dying off, and the leftist splinter groups fought furiously over the few hundred American socialists still chasing the dream.

Harrington was an only child raised by an activist mother and a benign father. His family was intensely Catholic, and Harrington attended the Jesuit St. Louis University High School, church-run Holy Cross College, and spent several years in Dorothy Day's Catholic Worker movement. A self-professed "pious apostate," Harrington maintained strong ties to Catholicism all his life. A liberation theologist without much theology.

Concern for humankind, Jesuit intellectualism, an unbreakable belief in democratic socialism, and a love of tavern backroom debate defined him. He honed his writing and speaking skills as the editor of the "Catholic Worker" newspaper. As a member of the post-war left, Harrington became a skilled factional brawler and social critic. Of his life in the late 1950s, he styled himself a "premature 60s radical." Evolving beyond radical sectarianism, Harrington worked closely with Socialist icon Norman Thomas, rising civil rights activist Martin Luther King, and was present in Port Huron in 1962 at the intellectual birth of Students for a Democratic Society.

As America's "oldest young radical" he tried and failed to convey the laborite political and socialist wisdom and passionate anti-Communism of the Old Left to the New. Initially Harrington was a strident critic of the Port Huron Statement and SDS, crossing swords with Tom Hayden at times, until he recognized his mistaken judgement of the New Left and apologized for his bitter attacks.

In 1962 Harrington published "The Other America: Poverty in the United States" and spent the rest of his life running from the hated title of "the man who discovered poverty." While doubts exist that John F. Kennedy or Lyndon Johnson read Harrington's book, there is no question that it helped spark the early 1960s understanding that there were two Americas. Poverty flourished alongside the affluent society. Harrington's description of urban and rural penury and his thesis that a culture of poverty, not individual social or economic problems, trapped the citizens of his other America, was novel at the time.

JFK's early interest in fighting poverty in a concerted way and LBJ's multi-fronted War on Poverty were well-intentioned but underfunded attempts to address the economic, social, educational, and other problems of the poor systematically. Harrington's innate opposition to totalitarian Communism complicated his early reactions to the anti-Vietnam War movement. He wanted the US to leave, and for the war to end, but he did not support potential victory by the Communist dominated National Liberation Front.

In the 1960s Harrington became an advocate of what he described as the left wing of the possible. He opposed the war without supporting the Viet Cong, and protested outside the 1960 Democratic Party Convention over civil rights, but later publicly supported a compromise solution at the 1964 convention which failed to seat the activists of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. In 1968 he supported the Catholic Robert Kennedy for president until his assassination. Harrington then tacitly accepted the need to vote for Humphrey over Nixon.

In his book "The Other American," Isserman describes Harrington's personal and political journey from radical Catholic to Troskyite leftist, from his unrealized hope that the American Socialist Party might renew its former glory, to the founding of the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC) and then the Democratic Socialists of America. Harrington believed that DSA was the left wing of the possible inside the Democratic Party. His dogged belief in democratic socialism earned him the status as America's premier, and perhaps only, famous socialist. He won national and international prominence as a socialist thinker and became the radical conscience of the Democratic Party. He wrote, lectured, and organized to ensure that democratic socialism remained a small but influential idea in the U.S. through the long nightmare of Reaganism. Local activists will regret Isserman's failure to mention Jeff Cox, Iowa's best-known socialist, early member of DSOC, then DSA, and friend to Harrington. Harrington himself would be stunned by the growth of DSA and elated by the return of socialist ideas to American politics. "The Other American" published in 2000 is strikingly pertinent today.

—Duncan Stewart of Iowa City believes that he is the best-known socialist on his block.

Business as usual

Once in a great while, though you think you know what your job is and what it means, the earth of the greater wide world beyond will shift, sending you off-balance in a signal moment of realization. Suddenly the job is not what you thought, but rather all that and much more.

For me, it's happened a few times. Once, when same-sex marriage went from being a contentious back-room LGBT community issue to a national, front-burner fastball coming hard across the plate. Suddenly the media spotlight was intense, emotions ran high, and I was operating at a whole different level than on a day-to-day basis. Day-to-day kept coming to be sure, but so did this other social and civil rights issue with a life and velocity all its own.

It happened more recently when a gentleman wrote to me asking for some assistance with a research project. The man was F. Wendell Miller Professor of History at the University of Iowa, Colin Gordon. He wanted all our deed document images from 1900-1950. It was a new kind of request, for which there was no current template.

He explained that he hoped to get the digitized images into a file to run through optical character recognition (OCR) software. He and his class would then scan for phrases like "the Caucasian race" to locate what we now call 'racially restrictive covenants.' Back then, they were called business as usual. I was hooked on the idea, and proceeded to work with our software vendor and county IT staff to load the entire 50 years of deed documents into a file for him. It was a privilege to play a small role, and it is a marvel that today, all documents of this sort in Johnson County and Iowa City are online and mapped. The work is found here: https://dsps.lib.uiowa.edu/mappingsegregationia/.

As I began this article I was struck to recall a third occupational epiphany, a personal one. Some 15 years ago, I was printing off some covenants and restrictions for a customer with questions about a potential property boundary dispute. The situation was unfolding out around Lake MacBride, at what is known as the Cottage Reserve. My eyes stopped on a page, widening considerably, as I slowly comprehended in full the following verbiage:

(6) The said Cottage Reserve area is hereby platted for the sole use and benefit of the Caucasian Race, and no lot or parcel of ground shall be sold, owned, used, or occupied by the people of any other race except when used in the capacity of servant or helper.

Please note the awful and purposeful use of the word "used," as in "used in the capacity of servant or helper." There's no mistaking that meaning. People of color are able to occupy space on this property only if being used…by white people.

As if the above weren't clear enough, consider the fast-following item (7). It prohibits the 'keeping or maintaining of hogs, cattle, horses or sheep.' So in near proximity to reserving the Reserve for the sole benefit and use of the Caucasian race, people of color are categorized alongside hogs, cattle, horses, or sheep.

Again, there is no mistaking the meaning. This is what we thought at the time. This is what we ordained and enforced in legal documents. It is a mark of racism's insidiousness that such documents were so often mundane in one paragraph—stipulating maximum heights of garages or number and kind of outbuildings, delineating collective use of shared roads or wells—only to pivot in the very next to equating entire swaths of humanity to livestock, allowing their presence only if white owners were using them.

Often, when the topic of reparations is raised, one observes the heads of certain kinds of white people exploding, if quietly. People of that sort might seek enlightenment in these covenants and restrictions, which were stipulated in property transactions from the early 1900's until outlawed in 1948. They were of like kind across the nation.

Consider the financial implications of the sheer volume of parcels restricted in this manner. Tote up the generational losses of wealth caused by the absence of just one home and its plot of land from one family. Have you ever borrowed against your home and land? Think of all those who help kids through college by doing that very thing, and how many people of color had no means to do so. How many lost educations, how much lost income, what final tally of all the wealth lost forever to families over time? It is breathtaking to contemplate. And it all starts on pieces of paper, the day-to-day documents that come through an office as people buy and sell homes and property. It is that simple, and that monumental. In that way, it mirrors racism itself.

—Kim Painter has been the Johnson County Recorder since 1999.

Rx for the rona

Mitigation is the starting point. The key to making this condition livable is a mask.

Cloth masks with enough layers to reduce transmission between two people wearing them by 95%, but increases the work of breathing and is pretty hot. A paper surgical mask, which sells for a dime on line, accomplishes that 95% reduction of transmission with less than one-fourth of that increase in work of breathing and heat retention of a multi-layered cloth mask. The raw material for these masks and for N95 masks is recycled plastic bag material made into blown polypropylene paper.

A "War Powers Act" would command and reward mask makers in the US who otherwise balk at gearing up. Instead, President Trump is willing to depend on China and Japan. The federal government could send 10 paper surgical masks to every citizen at no charge. The impact on the federal budget would be infinitesimal. If you like a fashionable and washable cloth mask, make one with just two layers and slip the paper mask in between the layers as an insert. Iowa's Governor Reynolds should at least mandate masks indoors in businesses and facilities, and enforce the mandate while continuing to encourage other public mitigation efforts.

Testing capability needs to be built until well below 5% of tests performed are positive. The current 10% rate of positivity spells uncontrolled spread. Recently approved Covid-19 antigen tests never wrongly identify someone as infected, nor do they identify someone as contagious who is not. Antigen tests may miss a few people who are infected but not highly contagious. They are cheap to produce at around a dollar a test and are fast (a 15-minute turnaround). Like a urine pregnancy test, they can be done on site with little training.

A "War Powers Act" should make these tests available at every essential workplace and at schools for screening two or more times a week. They would absolutely catch those "super spreaders." Instead, Iowa struggles in competition with other states to obtain testing materials. To add insult to injury, State Epidemiologist and Medical Director Pedati inexplicably decided not to add thousands of these positive Covid-19 antigen tests to Iowa's reporting, dismissing them as inconclusive. She is well-trained and knows better. Shouldn't Dr. Pedati resign if she is making this case but Reynolds blocks her?

> Reynolds and Pedati are posers.

An army of contact tracers needs to be built to meet the challenge of the numbers of positive tests and to track down the contacts they have exposed for quarantine. Currently that's 700 or more new cases a day. Mitigation needs to drive that down to a manageable number, as has been successfully done in Canada and elsewhere. Public health workers need to enforce quarantines and support those quarantined with medicine, food, and even a place to stay if needed, as well as monitoring their illness. Currently, public health workers can't possibly keep up effectively. Don't tell me that unemployed trainable talent cannot be found.

The way to stop the spread and lift economically and socially onerous aspects of mitigation doesn't require an understanding of molecular biology or rocket science. Our current leaders are like parents who don't know the meaning of discipline, giving in to childish right-wing temper tantrums over infringing on their freedom to do harm. Covid-19 transmission at the Sturgis motorcycle rallies is estimated to have generated 266,796 new cases in the US between August 2nd and September 2nd, at an estimated cost of care of $12.2 billion. If the Sturgis riders had been paid $25,000 each to stay home, the US treasury would still be ahead! Conservatives' economic arguments don't hold water.

Governor Reynolds shrugged off the 65 Covid-19 deaths of Tyson packing plant workers in June. Then she and Trump forced the survivors back into the packing plants. Who feeds those dead breadwinners' families or pays for their children's education? Reynolds and Pedati are posers, clearly content with the deaths of more than 200 Iowans a month from now until who knows when, as is Trump, who dismisses more than 20,000 deaths of Americans a month as too expensive or unworthy of saving. We as citizens and patients must bring an end to this malpractice.

—Dan Gervich is a retired infectious diseases and critical care physician, healthcare epidemiologist, and Chief Infection Control Officer at MercyOne in Des Moines.

What I did this summer

It's been a rough summer between the COVID pandemic, fires in California, and the derecho in Iowa. Here in Oakland, California, the out-of-control fires the last week in August had us quarantined at home without the benefit of outdoor distance socializing. People were advised to stay inside with the doors and windows closed. What could I do with my time?

I decided to join the Postcards2SwingStates effort, ordered 200 cards to send to Iowans (my favorite swing state), and started addressing the beautiful postcards designed for this specific purpose. I started early so I wouldn't have to do too many postcards before the end of October when the postcards will be sent out, just prior to November 3.

I thought the task would be drudgery, but wanted to do my part to save our country from the current administration. I sat down to begin during the Democratic National Convention. It turned out to be a surprisingly enjoyable and uplifting activity. As I listened to the speeches from both politicians and regular people, I addressed each postcard. I felt amazingly connected to each of the people whose names and addresses I wrote.

Because I had attended the University of Iowa in the 1960s, I recognized all of the names of Iowa cities and towns. Because I had met people from most of these communities in my time in Currier Hall, I was proud that there wasn't a town on the list that I couldn't pronounce! Even some of the names of voters were familiar Iowa surnames. Appearing on this list were: Zimmerman, Smith, Halverson, Debolt, Coffelt, Oberholzer, Holerud, Berry, and of course, Yoder. And I also got to see the changing demographics of Iowa reflected in the names on the list—the sizeable percentage of Latinx surnames; Martinez, Mejia, Garcia, Nunez, Gomez, and Hernandez. And a couple of Asian names: Lian and Nguyen.

More than the nostalgia, writing the cards really made me feel that I was participating in our democracy. I was directly asking these people to vote. I knew which voters were first-time voters so I could tailor the pre-prepared hand-written message I wrote on the cards. I felt that if I were the recipient of one of these cards, I would appreciate that a person in a faraway state had taken the time to write me, urging me to vote.

I know that, like many swing states, Iowa is struggling right now. What was once a thriving arena of progressive politics with LGBTQ rights, and forward-thinking legislators like Tom Harkin, is now being led by people who are in the pocket of Donald Trump. I was saddened to see a report of a University of Iowa student who tested positive for COVID shortly after arriving on campus. Ironically, when I read the Iowa City Press Citizen article about Annie Gaughan and her story, I was again reminded of my days in Iowa City. The photo of the stained sink in Annie's quarantine dorm room in Currier Hall, looked exactly like the sink in my Currier dorm room 45 years ago—gross, even then! It is possible to resurface stained porcelain.

The University, which has been and should be a beacon of enlightenment, an advocate of science, and a safe place for all, has ignored safety measures for COVID on campus. Hopefully, the tide will turn this November. Maybe my postcards to Iowa Democratic voters will make a difference. Somehow, reading those names makes me believe hope can come from the most unexpected places.

—Francie Hornstein is Senior West Coast Correspondent for the Prairie Progressive.

How long?
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Even people who never took action before will find it hard to stay silent when they see a Black man abused on the nightly news and think of their grandchild.

Best of all, I see a new generation of children demanding a safer world. It has been eight years since I took my seven-year-old granddaughter Taylor to an event at the African American Museum in Cedar Rapids where an actress portrayed Harriet Tubman. She talked about the difficulties of Tubman's life, emphasizing how the troubles of her color were exacerbated by being a woman. Taylor was thinking about all this in the back seat of the car. After a lot of silence, she said, "Let me get this straight. Half the people in the world are women. There are a lot of Black and brown people. So if we all got together, wouldn't things change?"

I have not told Taylor the story about the pastor's phrase, "How long, oh Lord?" I've waited all my life. I hope Taylor will see those changes in her lifetime.

— Carol Thompson taught high school in Union Springs, Alabama.

Popcorn, peanuts, and Cracker Jack

Sunday afternoons were slotted for room inspection during my childhood. My father was a military man who believed in duty, integrity, and most important, humility.

As the youngest of six children, it never occurred to me to challenge this parental practice. We always passed the inspection and would gather around the color TV, happily chomping away on bowls of hot buttered popcorn as our family eagerly watched the latest episode of Bonanza. It remains a treasured memory of momentary, blissful escape from the raging war and civil unrest that constantly circulated around us.

So when my spouse and partner fantasized for years about retiring and watching his beloved Kansas City Royals baseball team's daily games, it made perfect sense. He had fulfilled his duty by lobbying against injustice at the Iowa Capitol for twenty-seven years. I joined this mission for the last seven. We battled the evil side of the behavioral approach to social problems—enhancing criminal penalties to control behavior. He spent long hours at his computer researching and preparing for upcoming sessions year after year. He simply couldn't justify taking time away from this charge to selfishly watch television. He remained focused on social justice, although he longingly tracked his Royals through the daily sports page.

The main difference between lobbying for corporate interests versus criminal issues is that when we lost the debate, lives would be damaged or destroyed and liberty lost. Enhancing penalties aren't effective, but they are powerful, and some legislators arrive at the Capitol full of anger. Pushing punitive laws serves as an outlet for their personal biases and frustrations. Possibly the most dangerous legislator is the one using social problems to attract media attention. Vanity is easily manipulated, so if the motivation for change isn't pure, the legislator will alter his position when the attention begins to shift elsewhere.

Several years ago, before the legislature gaveled in, a state senator stomped up the east entrance steps at the Capitol and saw me. He swiftly turned and made a bee line towards me. It seems a radio station aired a recording of me during a subcommittee meeting and not him, the chair of the meeting. After this odd episode, it became easier for me to spot attention seekers. They will introduce controversial legislation, hoping to attract far-reaching exposure. Lobbyists who want to get meaningful legislation passed need to maintain a wide berth from the media or risk alienating the posturing politician from future support.

Recently retired, Marty happily turned his back on these political games at the Capitol and switched on Royals baseball. Soon it became clear that he wanted to share America's pastime with me. So after digging out the slightly yellowed Minnesota Twins 1987 Homer Hanky from a dusty old cardboard box containing my inheritance from my father, I embraced baseball, willing to learn all its little nuances. The Twins gained another fan as we watched both teams navigate the shortened 2020 season due to COVID-19. With great pride, I accurately remembered every word to the song "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" that was traditionally sung during the 7th inning stretch. Childhood memories of games past filled me with warmth, only to come crashing down when "God Bless America" was slowly and painfully sung during the break in the 7th inning. With no fans in the stands, and since America wasn't "home sweet home" for many players, the song seemed both insensitive and sadly superficial. But we adjusted accordingly by munching away on peanuts and Cracker Jack, using the mute button when needed.

At the end of August, the Twins decided to be one of a handful of sports teams to participate in the boycott of games in the name of racial injustice. They lost no pay and played a double header the next day, which meant they played 14 innings instead of the 18 they would have played over two days. It didn't play out as a big sacrifice on their part, given that George Floyd died in Minneapolis.

The Royals didn't participate in the boycott. Whit Merrifield, Royals star hitter and fan favorite, said, "We feel what we do is a separation from what's going on in the world. We feel we have to go out and do our job and give people a three-hour window to enjoy a baseball game and not think about what's going on in the world."

Merrifield gave me renewed hope. But professional athletes, like legislators, are public figures. Some may genuinely care about racial equality, while others just like the attention it brings.

The other night we simultaneously watched the Royals play the Indians and the Kansas City Chiefs play the Houston Texans. The socially distanced and masked Chiefs fans did the tomahawk chop to support their team. Those genuinely dedicated to racial sensitivity have a whole lot of work to do.

—Stephanie Fawkes-Lee is Senior Sports Correspondent for the Prairie Progressive.

Vote for ourselves

Unlike 2016, little support can be seen this year for third party or independent presidential candidates, and the pool of "none of the above" voters has nearly evaporated. Even in the furthest purlieus of the left, Joe Biden has received unexpected—albeit reluctant—endorsements. Can you match the endorsement with the endorser?

___ It is definitely possible to move Joe [to the left]. And every organizer ultimately needs a president they can move.

___ Biden is far more likely to take mass demands seriously. The election will ask us not so much to vote for the best candidate, but to vote for or against ourselves. And to vote for ourselves means that we will have to campaign for and vote for Biden.

___ In terms of being part of an anti-fascist coalition...we're forced to vote for Biden.

___ Not withstanding all his limitations in the past, and the mistakes he made in the past...between Donald Trump and Joe Biden, I think Joe Biden is the person who should be elected in November...I am more than willing to work with him.

___ Biden is not "better" than Trump, in any meaningful way—except that he is not Trump and is not part of the move to consolidate and enforce fascist rule, with everything that means...There can be one—and only one—"good" that can come out of this election: delivering a decisive defeat to Trump and the whole fascist regime.

___ The energy used to shame people should be put into phone banking and whatever else will build enthusiasm for Biden's presidency. I will be voting for Biden as a vote against fascism.

A.) Cornel West, Harvard University

B.) Anita Hill, Brandeis University

C.) Robert Avakian, Revolutionary Communist Party

D.) Ben Jealous, People for the American Way

E.) Angela Davis, University of California

F.) Susan Sarandon, actor

"Don't confuse motion with progress."

—Rev. Earl Lawson

Pick Hit to Flip

Iowa readers of the Prairie Progressive know that all three branches of the Hawkeye State's government are controlled by Republicans. This November, the best chance for Democrats to take back one of those branches is in the Iowa House, where flipping only four seats will create a Dem majority. Here's a suggestion for PP readers: instead of renewing your subscription to Iowa's oldest progressive newsletter, give that money to one or more House candidates who are working hard to knock off a Republican incumbent and restore some sanity to our state legislature.

Charles Clayton, House District 9, Webster County, is a worthwhile choice. He is co-founder and executive director of a nonprofit youth agency in Fort Dodge. Clayton has the support of area law enforcement officials despite having served time for firing a rifle in the air during a New Year's Eve party in 1992 (his voting rights were restored by Gov. Vilsack in 2002). Priorities: education, health care, job opportunities, and ending "social and racial inequalities that leave too many behind." This is a winnable race in a traditionally D district. Send a check to:

Clayton for Iowa
2053 Highland Park Ave.
Fort Dodge, IA 50501

Theprairieprogressive.com

Who should "rule at home?"

Early in September, Polk County District Judge Jeffrey Farrell ruled that Iowa state officials had the right to overrule local school boards in decisions about when and how they might open for instruction during the current pandemic. He asserted, "Whether right or wrong, that is their decision to make." That view reflects longstanding contention over what powers local governments have and whether state (or federal) governments can limit or dictate those powers.

We've seen this fight revisited again and again in recent years, as cities and counties have sought to address pressing issues like raising the minimum wage, regulating firearms, banning plastic bags, limiting cooperation of local police with ICE's round ups of undocumented immigrants, and a host of other issues. Many local governments have met these challenges head on. But faced with conservative Republican control of legislatures, they have been swimming against what seems like an overwhelming tide of legal precedent favoring states.

Has it always been this way? Is there no remedy for protecting local governments' "home rule?"

The US constitution was silent on the powers of local government, even as it carved out a domain for state authority vis-à-vis the federal government. In the colonies relatively isolated cities had "incubated" traditions of self-government that nurtured a strong tradition of "local control." But in the era of constitution-making, James Madison worried about the insurgencies that might gain force in cities and towns. As he wrote in Federalist #10: "A rage for paper money, for an abolition of debts, for an equal division of property, or for any other improper or wicked project, will be less apt to pervade the whole body of the Union than a particular member of it, in the same proportion as such a malady is more likely to taint a particular county or district than an entire state." Alexis de Tocqueville gave voice to similar elite fears of local "mob rule" that might require "an armed force which, while remaining subject to the wishes of the national majority, is independent of the peoples of the towns and capable of suppressing their excesses."

The shifting political currents of the nineteenth century and the presence of an increasingly propertyless, immigrant working class in cities gave rise to a legal reconfiguration of city and state relations. A leading legal scholar on local government, Gerald Frug, has described this shift as, "the subordination of cities to the state [which] turned the political world as it then existed upside down." The most influential ruling on the limits of municipal "home rule" came to be known as "Dillon's rule," an opinion authored by Iowa Supreme Court Justice John F. Dillon in 1868. "The true view is this" he wrote, "Municipal Corporations owe their origin to and derive their powers and rights wholly from the legislature. It breathes into them the breath of life, without which they cannot exist. As it creates, so it may destroy. . .[Cities] are so to phrase it, mere tenants at will of the legislature." Dillon's "rule" enjoyed considerable influence, though not without challenge. Judge Thomas Cooley (Michigan) in 1871 asserted that "local government is a matter of absolute right; the state cannot take it away." In a treatise on principles of constitutional law, he wrote, "It is axiomatic that the management of purely local affairs belongs to the people concerned, not only because of being their own affairs, but because they will best understand, and be most competent to manage them." Others argued that the right of local self-government antedated state incorporation and could not be limited by it. Dillon's rule did not categorically limit the powers that states might grant to cities. It simply stipulated that the specific rights of cities to home rule required state authorization. In that respect Dillon's rule left open the door for considerable state-to-state variation in the actual powers that cities might acquire and exercise.

This is the critical issue. The power of cities to govern their own affairs is variable and subject to political determination, with the exception of fundamental, constitutionally protected civil and political rights. Progressive Era struggles over "home rule" were the byproduct of political demands by cities for a more expanded definition of municipal rights. Urban reformers and socialists in some states moved to claim broader governing authority over municipal life and wellbeing. In so doing they reanimated elite fears over the security of their property at the hands of labor and socialist movements that sought to expand the public sector and municipalize essential services.

Under Iowa law counties and cities enjoy broad authority over local affairs providing their actions are "not inconsistent with state laws." State constitutional home rule amendments for cities (1968) and

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Who should "rule at home?" cont'd from Page 8

counties (1978) authorized local government to "exercise any power and perform any function it deems appropriate to protect and preserve the rights, privileges, and property of the county or of its residents, and to preserve and improve the peace, safety, health, welfare, comfort, and convenience of its residents" (Iowa Code 331.301, for counties.) Nevertheless, the state can limit home rule when the state legislature or the governor specifically prohibit cities or counties from acting in what local authorities may believe to be the general welfare. And in recent cases—county minimum wage increases, policing of undocumented immigrants, and decisions about school opening—state legislation or the governor's executive orders have indeed pre-empted local authority.

The remedies seem pretty obvious. Local governments and their citizens must mobilize politically to pressure or ultimately elect state legislators and a governor with a mandate to allow cities and counties a broader right of self-government. In the interim a measure of collective resistance (civic disobedience!) may be in order. We must simply do the right thing to protect students, defend undocumented immigrants, and as a community uphold a higher minimum wage no matter what the state may say.

—Shel Stromquist is the author of Solidarity and Survival: An Oral History of Iowa Labor in the Twentieth Century.

Prairie Dog says:

"Defend democracy, support the U.S. Postal Service!"

CALENDAR

September 23, 2010
Affordable Care Act's Patient's Bill of Rights went into effect

September 26
National Public Lands Day
(free admission to National Parks)

September 29
Presidential debate

October 7
Vice-Presidential debate

October 31
Dia de Los Muertos begins

November 3
Last day to vote

November 14
Divali

November 19, 1945
President Truman proposed national health insurance program

November 20
Transgender Day of Remembrance

December 1, 1955
Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat

December 5, 1955
Montgomery bus boycott began

December 6, 1865
13th Amendment ratified

December 10
UN Human Rights Day

December 15
Bill of Rights Day

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