

MICHIGAN SPECTER

For a life worth living

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Photo: Emily Zielinski

Statement from GEO 3550 on Sept. 16, 2020

Tonight, GEO membership voted to accept the University's second offer and end our historic, abolitionist strike for a safe and just campus amid a global pandemic. At our largest general membership meeting to date, 1,074 GEO members voted to accept the university's offer, 239 members voted to reject, and 66 abstained. Our strike is now over. GEO members and supporters now return to our regular work duties. Thousands of members and allies came out in force day after day on the virtual and in-person picket lines to show that graduate students and their allies were prepared to fight for this community. By withholding our labor, building coalitions, and making our power impossible to ignore, we forced the university to give us an offer with substantive progress toward a safe and just campus.

Michigan Specter is the official publication of the Young Democratic Socialists of America (YDSA) at the University of Michigan. If you are interested in contributing to future issues, contact ydsauofm@gmail.com.

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So They Told You To Vote

By Connor Cain

If you're at all like me, you probably stopped paying attention to the upcoming election right around the time Bernie dropped out. Along with the raging COVID-19 crisis, protests concerning the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and wider police brutality have left little time to worry about whether Joe Biden picked his VP or managed to say a few words during a basement live stream. It's pretty hard to get excited for upcoming debates when you're getting tear gassed by the police.

Further, if you're at all like me, you were probably more or less reminded of the election by the incessant calls from center-left politicians and media figures to "VOTE!" They rarely tell you who to vote for, as that would offend the bipartisanship those individuals crave so badly. Still, it can be easily inferred that it's an urge to pull the lever for anyone with a big D next to their name. "The problems you see and the anger you feel are real," they will tell you, "and the solution is to vote for Democrats in November."

I truly, truly wish that were the case. But here's the thing: voting will not and cannot save us. Believing it will ignores the reality of America in 2020. Much ink has been spilled over this, but theory isn't even necessary to illuminate the idea. Take Minneapolis mayor Jacob Frey, for instance. Despite running on promises to fix the relationship between police and the public, he's currently presiding over the epicenter of some of the largest civil rights protests in American history. Or take media darling Andrew Cuomo, who broadcasts COVID-19 advice almost daily while failing to control the enormous outbreak in his own state. If you're still not convinced, take the DNC Platform Committee members,

who on July 27th voted overwhelmingly to oppose marijuana legalization and Medicare for All despite majority support from rank-and-file Democrats. The Democratic Party establishment as it exists now is able to identify the problems we face, but is unable and unwilling to confront their systemic roots.

To actually solve these problems, we will need to build power outside of the electoral arena. There are many promising developments here, including police abolition groups, mutual aid projects, and labor movement struggles. These must continue to be expanded, both because of the government's demonstrated incompetence and the unwillingness of both major parties to solve any real issue. However, that doesn't mean that elections are completely useless. For one, state and local politics can have profound impacts on day-to-day lives, and leftists in these offices can begin to chip away at the neoliberal order. Putting leftists in key positions of power can offer some relief while also building visibility for the movement. Additionally, while leftists at the federal level may be constrained by their lack of numbers, they have the potential to challenge members of the party establishment and make a case for left policies at a national level.

In the upcoming Michigan primaries on August 4th, there are multiple opportunities to promote those leftist candidates. In Ann Arbor and Ward 5 specifically, where I'm writing from, these primaries are especially important due to the lack of Republican challengers in November.

Dan Michniewicz, running for Ann Arbor City Council in Ward 5, represents one of these opportunities. Dan is a baker in Ann Arbor, and one of his

principal concerns is the extremely high rent costs in the city. Instead of electing someone who claims to care about this issue, we can choose someone who actually lives it, and can serve as a real voice on city council. Further, Dan's commitment to increasing the stock of decommodified housing through the creation of a land trust is a real challenge to the other candidates' market-based solutions.

Running for Washtenaw County Prosecutor, Eli Savit's candidacy is an opportunity to immediately end cash bail. While efforts to defund the police and abolish incarceration are ongoing, his victory could offer material relief to those presently involved with our racist judicial system. Savit aims to implement restorative justice practices for victims who want them, which can facilitate community healing. Endorsed by over 10 union locals, Savit's hard stance on wage theft will also protect workers' rights.

Finally, Solomon Rajput's candidacy for the US House of Representatives represents a chance to upset the 80+ year long Dingell political dynasty. More than that, though, Solomon would serve as another ally for progressive policies in the House. Importantly, Rajput understands the urgency of climate change and supports a Green New Deal — something that his opponent, Debbie Dingell, refuses to do.

As stated, these politicians will not save us. If these three candidates win, they would need to be watched and held accountable as closely as any other politician. Still, because the election will occur regardless, the opportunity to elect allies into key positions of power shouldn't be passed up. Voting won't save us, but it definitely won't kill us either.

Graphic: Alex Zittleman



But Honestly: Who Really Cares About Statues?

By Alex Noble

Amidst a global pandemic that has left over 160,000 Americans dead, an economic recession that has brought Great Depression-level unemployment, and nationwide uprisings sparked by the extrajudicial police murder of George Floyd, one of the defining issues of the upcoming presidential election has become the culture war. The president of the United States has decided to stake his re-election bid on statues. Yes, the marble or cement carved to resemble historical figures has been pushed to the forefront of the national conversation despite everything else going on around the country. Ironically, this framing illustrates what statues actually represent — a propagandistic distraction.

Around the world, protesters are taking to the streets to demand racial justice. These uprisings have led to conversations about race relations and have forced certain areas to face their historical wrongdoings. City councils around the United States have begun voting to remove statues of Confederate generals and racist figures. The American Natural History Museum proposed the removal of a Theodore Roosevelt statue where he is depicted riding a horse while flanked by two figures, one of Native American descent and one of African descent, which Indigenous activists have been trying to get removed for years. A Christopher Columbus statue has been removed in Buffalo, while Andrew Jackson statues are being removed in New Orleans and Jackson, Mississippi. Some Confederate statues have been removed from Richmond, Virginia but a statue of General

Robert E. Lee remains standing.

So, what happens when a city council won't face its history? Or who decides which statues are racist or not? Recently, a Ulysses S. Grant statue was taken down by protesters in San Francisco which led many to ask, Why him? Grant was a general for the Union army and fought against the Confederacy. South Carolina representative Jim Clyburn said “no one was more anti-slavery” than Grant. But a closer look at history will tell us that Grant, in fact, did own a slave.

Later during the Civil War, Grant became frustrated by the Union's inability to hurt the Confederacy economically because of a large black market trade for cotton throughout the South. Grant scapegoated the Jews for this, highlighting the anti-semitic trope that Jews are greedy and opportunistic. In 1862, General Grant demanded their evacuation from Paducah, Kentucky, writing, “You are hereby ordered to leave the city... within twenty-four hours.”

Cesar Kraskel, a Jew who emigrated to the United States because of the religious persecution he faced in Prussia, could not believe the Union army was forcing him to leave his new home and business for the same reason he left Europe in the first place. When Lincoln found out about Grant's anti-semitic actions, he condemned them and swiftly reversed the order. A Jewish historian called the order “the most sweeping anti-Jewish regulation in all of American history.”

This brings into question one of the main (and worst) arguments against

removing statues. Statue defenders always ask how people will remember history if statues are removed. And, to that, the response is incredibly simple: there are statues right now and people still do not know their history. The argument also takes for granted that statues accurately depict history, when they do not. Indeed, statues constantly whitewash history. They often reinforce lies like the Lost Cause ideology, which paints the formation of the Confederacy as a just and noble cause rather than strictly being about the ability to own slaves. Many statues glorify the Founding Fathers despite the fact that the vast majority of them owned slaves. Confederate statues paint the generals and soldiers as war heroes rather than the racist monsters they were. History is taught using history textbooks and artifacts in museums; no one learns history from statues.

The weaponization of statues is nothing new. Contrary to popular belief, the majority of Confederate monuments went up between the years 1900 and 1920, with another spike occurring during the 1960s. These statues were used to emphasize and enforce Jim Crow and to counter the Civil Rights movement. They were used to intimidate Black people as they began to organize and fight for their freedoms and rights. It was a way for white people to reassert their dominance. The largest monument to the Confederacy is called Stone Mountain, located in Georgia. This carving of Confederate soldiers was completed in 1972. Yes, 1972 — after Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, after the second Civil Rights

Act was signed, and over 100 years after the Civil War had ended. Activists' calls for its removal have intensified in recent weeks with one calling the monument a reminder of white supremacy.

After seeing protesters removing statues around the country, President Trump signed an executive order that would imprison statue removers for 10 years. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, in 2016 the only crime that had an average sentence of well over 10 years was murder, while negligent manslaughter, rape, and sexual assault were at or around 10 years. It certainly says something about his priorities that the president would require a sentence for tearing down statues to be the same length as negligent manslaughter and just two years less than the average time served by a rapist. During the July 4th weekend, Trump gave two speeches focusing on statues and railing against anarchists, rioters, looters, and agitators that were supposedly trying to “erase history.” His

emphasis on statues is a completely different strategy than the one he ran during his narrow 2016 victory over Hillary Clinton. So far, this strategy has been failing as his approval rating has plummeted along with his polling numbers.

The strategy Trump is using didn't just materialize overnight. It comes from centuries of people celebrating so-called “patriots.” The United States has never reconciled with its dark past, whether it was the genocide of Native Americans, the enslavement of Black people, the internment of Japanese-Americans, or the horrors of American foreign policy and military intervention in Latin America, the Middle East, Africa, and Southeast Asia. Americans are still living in the past but have yet to hold their country accountable for its crimes. Many statues glorify all the wrong parts of history and serve as a deflection whenever anyone offers criticism of United States history. People cannot move forward until past atrocities are faced head-on and their effects still felt

today are addressed. The focus on statues represents the cheap, easy way out. People can act like things have changed without structurally changing the system that badly needs to be overhauled.

Every racist statue glorifying a slave owner or murderous general needs to be removed. It is unjust and inhumane to have taxpayers pay for and regularly see statues that represent their ancestors' oppression. But that cannot be the end; statues must be the start of a long conversation. Racial injustices in the health care, education, and criminal justice systems as well as housing and the environment all need to be dealt with and corrected too. Malcolm X once said, “The white man will try to satisfy us with symbolic victories rather than economic equity and real justice.” This must be kept in mind, and we must maintain focus on the real issues and not get sidetracked by attempts to distract from our end goals. 🌱



Photo: Parker Michels-Boyce via Virginia Mercury

From Original Sin to Original Revolution: Fighting the Climate Crisis with Indigenous Knowledge

By Ashvin Pai

“We have to shift our attitude of ownership of nature to relationship with nature. The moment you change from ownership to relationship, you create a sense of the sacred.” — Satish Kumar

Fanatical commodification of Earth’s natural resources under today’s capitalist economy has created, in the form of climate change, the worst potential catastrophe that humankind has ever seen. It has been well documented that if such a crisis is allowed to happen, the most marginalized and vulnerable populations will suffer the most. Perhaps even more disgusting, it is this very fact, that the upper echelons of the capitalist class won’t be affected and may even profit from the ruins, that prevents meaningful climate solutions from being adopted under the current economic system. This point is understood well enough by current socialists; solving the climate crisis requires dismantling capitalism. However, it would be a mistake to assume that a move to a more equitable economic system alone could sufficiently address the environmental issues of today.

To achieve a sustainable future, a fundamental change in the relationship between humans and the environment is needed. This is because the current conception of our relationship to the environment, a relationship built on fear and mistrust, is incompatible with said sustainable future. Western thought has traditionally held the view that there exists a rigid hierarchy of beings, with humans at the top and plants and animals at the bottom. Such a view teaches us that the environment is something to be subdued, to be dominated, and the fact that this view persists to this day is unsurprising given the history of colonization. Cultures that were spiritually connected to nature were frequently called savages by white colonizers. Indeed, a survey of French writing in the 16th and 17th centuries suggests that over time, the old French adjective “sauvage” went from simply referring to a forest habitat to being used as a derogato-

ry term for peoples living in accordance to nature. Seeing as this etymological change occurred around the height of European colonization, it can be argued that colonization wasn’t just a war against the native peoples of a given land, but a war against the spirit of the land itself. One only has to read a few excerpts of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* to understand the extent to which white colonizers viewed nature as an enemy of their imperialist systems. It is without a shred of doubt that we can say the ideological predecessors of our modern capitalist system held themselves in opposition to a healthy conception of nature.

While traditional colonization as advocated for by the European monarchies is essentially a dead ideology now, it seems that the conception of nature it developed, among others such as free trade and imperialism, was adopted by the modern capitalist status quo. However, using an absurd amount of logical gymnastics, the idea that humans are above nature has now been used to fuel propaganda that the climate crisis is, in fact, not a systemic problem of capitalism. In other words, by taking advantage of deep-rooted cultural beliefs that humans and the environment are separate, opposing entities, corporations have been able to create convincing campaigns arguing that it is the actions of the individual that have exacerbated the climate crisis, not the systemic failings of capitalism. One of the most notable examples in recent years was BP’s promotion of the carbon footprint, a device used to shift blame for the climate crisis from oil and gas companies toward individuals. Their online carbon footprint calculator is advertised as a tool that consumers can use to calculate the carbon footprint of their products, giving the false impression that it is

the act of purchasing high emission products which is unsustainable, not BP’s production practices. In reality, individual actions cannot possibly make up for systemic failures. A Massachusetts Institute of Technology class found that a homeless person in the US would still produce 8.5 tons of carbon emissions annually, 4.5 tons more than the world average, just by virtue of living in a developed capitalist country. The capitalist propaganda of the environmental blame game has taught us that it is our individual actions that have caused the climate crisis, totally ignoring the fact that, for centuries, capitalism’s ideological underpinnings have promoted the view that domination of the environment is essential to human flourishing. This lie undercuts prospects for meaningful climate action.

The question for socialists then becomes, How should we fight back? What must people know to facilitate a radical shift in the perception of the environment, thus insulating them from corporate propaganda? The most obvious answer begins with a turn to empiricism and other scientific ways of knowing. After all, these ways of knowing have been the predominant source of information the climate movement has utilized in its activism thus far. And while quoting that Procter & Gamble has been purposefully under-reporting its carbon emissions by 98% excluding Scope 3 emissions, or that just 90 companies account for nearly two-thirds of anthropogenic carbon emissions, may help some cut through some of the propaganda, it does nothing to change the underlying human relationship with nature. This is because scientific ways of knowing exacerbate the paradigm that humans are separated from the environment.

As a system of knowledge, sci-

ence relies on certain laws that have been found through the application of the scientific method. As every third-grader learns, this method begins with observation followed by formulating an empirically testable hypothesis. What isn’t taught, however, is the large number of limitations put on that first step: observation. In a scientific framework, it is assumed that, to understand a system, it is sufficient to understand its individual components in isolation. This means that the first step of the scientific process is not simply observation, but isolated observation: observation where a hard barrier is erected between the observer and observed. Thus, when science is applied in an attempt to understand environmental relations, the human is seen as a separate entity, above the system that is being studied. This is not to say that scientific methods are invalid or false; certainly scientific methods have brought the climate movement very far in its understanding of the mechanisms by which climate change occurs. However, scientific methods will not in themselves be sufficient to present a proper solution for the reasons outlined.

Rather, socialists must look back in history to the systems of knowledge held by the indigenous populations whom European colonizers held in such contempt. The original revolutionary ideals of the time, indigenous culture and beliefs were such a danger to the development of “advanced society” that Western governments have been waging a calculated war in an attempt to wipe them out for hundreds of years. Thus, it makes sense intuitively that adopting their worldviews in the present day would be a revolutionary act against capitalism.

One of the most striking examples of how powerful indigenous knowledge can be is the Native American concept of the Three Sisters Garden. Nearly every Native American nation has its own version of the Three Sisters legend, but they all revolve around the understanding that the ecological relationship between corn, beans, and squash is analogous to the mutually beneficial relationship between three sisters. By conceiving of a spiritual connection between the crops, Native American tribes could immediately see that, when planted together,

these crops grew much better than when planted apart — just like three sisters. This holistic approach to the concept of knowledge, which strives to understand the relationship between the three crops in not just body (the mere physical interactions between the plants) but mind and spirit as well, has allowed Native Americans to be hundreds of years ahead of their scientific counterparts in terms of agricultural understanding. Science can only just now offer explanations that this relationship is indeed true, that through certain biological processes the three plants assist each other in their growth. The corn provides support for the bean stalks, the squash reduces surrounding weeds, and the beans house special bacteria that release nitrogen into the soil. Not only that, but the Three Sisters story shows that Native Americans had an acute understanding of the benefits of permaculture farming over monoculture farming. As it turns out, monoculture farming, the farming model that scientific understanding suggested, has been incredibly destructive to the ecosystems in which it is implemented. From decimating the nutrient capacities of the soil to a massive dependence on oil based fertilizers to taking up thousands of acres more land than their permaculture counterparts, it is only recently that scientists are beginning to understand the many drawbacks of monocultures.

Perhaps even more disastrous, the move away from diverse farming practices aimed at subsistence and local markets has allowed for the formation of giant agro-corporations. Over the years, these companies have merged with one another to create giant monopolies over the world’s food supply. Just four corporations control 75% of the global grain trade. Not only do these monopolies hurt consumers by lowering the quality of their food, but they also threaten to put the very farmers they depend on out of business. The most striking example of this happened very recently when mega corporations Bayer and Monsanto merged in a \$66 billion deal despite outcry from farmers who were concerned about increased seed and fertilizer prices. In this context, it is apparent that the Native American view of the Three Sisters is much more than just a curious folktale.

Rather, it allowed indigenous populations the framework with which to avoid the pitfalls of monoculture farming’s destruction of ecosystems all the way up to its evolution into giant exploitative agro-corporations. Indigenous populations understood that monocultures did not exist in nature, and because of their spiritual connections to their surrounding ecosystems they respected this observation enough to understand that this meant monocultures did not work. This is in stark contrast to science, which would reject the Three Sisters Legend as an anthropomorphic fallacy and insist on isolating each individual crop and experimenting on it to understand which fertilizer or genetic modification allows it to grow best. Because of its insistence on separating the human from the system, the observed from the observer, the fact that monocultures don’t occur naturally does not hold the same meaning to a scientist because their framework treats humans themselves as separate from the rest of the natural world.

From analyzing the behavior of hawks, to mariculture, to correcting incomplete historical accounts, it is clear that the holistic, spiritual views of indigenous cultures are just as valid ways of knowing as science. For thousands of years prior to colonization, indigenous populations managed to avoid instigating the climate destruction wrought by contemporary systems. The opposite view, which has been pushed from nineteenth-century colonialism all the way up to the contemporary propaganda machine, has brought us to the brink of irreparable environmental breakdown. While it is clear that a dismantling of capitalism is needed to perform meaningful climate restoration, the destructive views it has disseminated must be dealt with too. Science, which has proved supremely useful in other areas of climate research, will fail to mount a significant challenge to these views. As socialists move forward on the topic of climate change, they must spread the values and beliefs of the original revolutionaries, the indigenous peoples of the world, with the understanding that a radical shift in human relationships with the environment is needed to prevent the climate catastrophe. 🌱

Radical Love & the Left

By Noah Streng

In what would become one of his final live streams, political commentator and writer Michael Brooks offered a stunning insight into how modern media culture drives a stake through the heart of our collective humanity and ability to live in an empathy-driven world. Capitalism, a mode of production born out of ruthless competition, rugged individualism, and exploitation of both the Earth and humankind, produced a culture modeled upon those very vices. Because of this, any politics rooted in a revolutionary desire to liberate people from their oppressive social conditions must be driven by deeply held compassion for humanity and love for all living things. The act of recognizing the common struggle you share with your fellow human is itself a revolutionary activity. In a hyper-individualized, competitive, and hierarchical social reality, forming bonds with those around you and caring for those you don't yet know is a profound act of defiance against an economic system and social order which incentivize the opposite. As the Left continues to organize in response to the various crises that plague

our world, we must deliberately center our values within a framework of righteous and radical love, empathy, and justice. Informed by radical love, we can meaningfully challenge the cruel logic of the prevailing economic order. For instance, why do we organize our society in a way that gives small groups of people, employers, authoritarian control over our working lives? Why do we disregard democratic values in the workplace, where adults spend most of their waking hours? Why do we give small groups of people the power to deny access to essential resources such as housing, food, and healthcare, if those in need do not possess sufficient funds?

Of course, we know the answers to these questions. The benefits of an economy will go to those who control the production and distribution of its resources. When decisions over production are placed into the hands of a select few who are motivated by personal profit, the distribution of said resources will always be organized in a way which benefits those select few. Recognizing this, we must offer an alternative method of or-

ganizing production and distribution — one rooted in radical love. The capitalist mode of production demands that landlords selfishly hoard empty apartments and force people into homelessness out of their greed, because the landlord is motivated by their own personal profit, not the well-being of their fellow human. Despite the apartment having been built by workers, workers do not own the building. Instead, control over the house and who gets to use it is filtered through a middleman totally separate from the construction process. A similar dynamic plays out in capitalism, where employers do not contribute labor to the production of the goods and services of their industry, yet are given autocratic control over what is done with (and who gets to profit from) the products that their workers produce. Working people are not only alienated by a lack of control over their lives during their working hours, but are also exploited by their bosses who quite literally live off the fruits of their labor. The Left must therefore make the case for a democratic workplace in which those who create the products and wealth which make a

“The questions of cultivating empathy, cultivating compassion, cultivating awareness — the complete antithesis of social media modes. Long term thinking, compassion, seeing complexity, comfort with oneself, solitude, the opposite of instant gratification, the attempt to constantly humanize and not dehumanize your fellow humans. These are all completely countervailing forces to the market technologic that subsumes all of us today.” — Michael Brooks (1983–2020)

business successful — its workers — should have direct democratic control over their workplaces.

Answering the question of who controls production, we can turn our eyes to the question of distribution through the lens of radical love. Within a cooperative business model, workers can decide what, when, and how much to produce. Because of this, the capitalist logic of denying a homeless person housing while a home remains vacant becomes exposed for its inefficiency, idiocy, and cruelty. Instead of empowering landlords who hoard houses built by workers and then live parasitically off the wealth created by those same workers, we can democratically decide to use our resources to build enough houses for everyone and give working people full ownership over their homes.

Building a politics of care is critical to proposing a meaningful challenge to the social realities imposed by capitalism. Our politics must be rooted in the fundamental belief that all people should have the right to the basic necessities of life as well as the right of bodily autonomy and

freedom from exploitation. Our politics must be international and committed to the empowerment of people around the world in their struggle for liberation. Housing, healthcare, education, and food are human rights. The select few who control production and exploit and profit off the working class stand in the way of constructing that reality. The fight for socialism is the fight against authoritarian and oligarchic control over our economy and our lives. We must build a society and an economy which is run democratically, by and for working people, and not the profit of a small few who make up an “owning” class. To do this, we need to center compassion in our politics and advocate for democracy in the workplace, production to meet human need, and social systems which maximize human flourishing. Capitalist alienation, which robs us of our ability to have meaningful control over our labor, our relationships, and our lives, drives us apart and detaches us not only from each other but from ourselves.

In the age of COVID-19, it is more important than ever that we emphasize

cooperation over competition and compassion over cruelty. In the wake of the ongoing crisis, hundreds of mutual aid networks sprung up across the country. Since the outbreak, millions recognized they are stronger together and, as a result, began taking care of one another. It is these values that we must continue to hold dear in the struggle against the mismanaged response to COVID-19, police brutality, heightened capitalist exploitation, and a looming climate crisis. While grassroots mutual aid networks are important for meeting people's immediate needs, they do not replace bold state action which is necessary to protect society's most vulnerable. Going forward, remember the words of Michael Brooks: “Be ruthless with systems and kind to each other.” Have empathy for people, and ruthless criticism for the systems of oppression and exploitation which dominate our lives. Together, we can build a better tomorrow by fighting for new systems which uplift and cherish human life. A better world is possible. 🌱