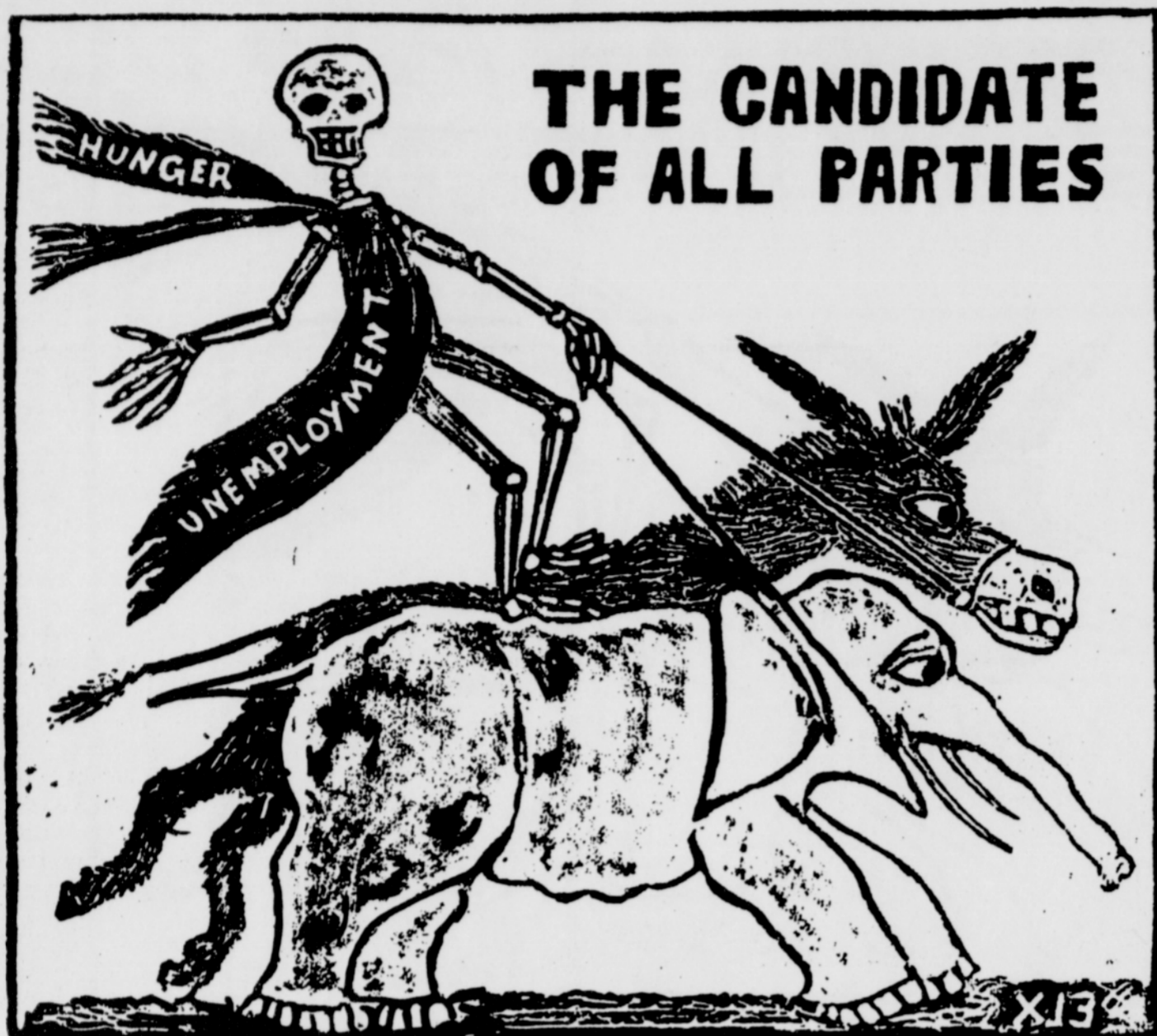


TRASHING THE AMERICAN DREAM



BY BARBARA DARBY

In the beginning the upper class had the American dream. They knew they could build a wonderful life for themselves if they just had someone else to carry the burden of building it. All may have the dream but only so many can have it be true. Capitalism is fundamentally flawed at giving everyone the American dream; you need to claim the top of the mountain by standing on someone's else's shoulders.

When Columbus, and later other Europeans, came to this country they found that the people who lived here would give them anything requested, and they would take it and ask for more. The times have not changed, just the faces and names.

When the Europeans saw what the Indians were willing to give to them, they asked for more — they demanded the Indians bring them more gold and in the process they worked the Indians to death. In the end the aliens took their gold, their food, their land and their health. These European Christians, with the support of their Pope, made laws that only they could own the land, or they placed tariffs on land, *encomienda*, and made the Indians give them the benefits of the land. They forced other Indians to give the proceeds of their labor, drafting them to use for 'public works' — unloading ships, building roads, transporting supplies, etc. Other Indians became commodities for trade and were taken to foreign lands to work for others. These deeds were not new to the Europeans: they already practiced them among their own peoples, bringing indentured servants and prisoner slaves to work for them for the myth of freedom. When the Native American people lay waste from exploitation and disease, the European Christians ravaged the blacks in Africa to fulfill their lust for power and domination over people. These chosen Christian Europeans released the seeds of the American dream.

At this time it was the inheritance of most white men to dominate over the races and women. This domination still affects our society today. Even after the Revolution and a new country formed in the pursuit of freedom, it was only a select few that were allowed privilege.

Throughout the history of the new and democratic nation it has remained that some attained the dream and most did not. Those who could not achieve the dream were called lazy by the hypocrisy of the rich, but indeed this was not so. The cause in fact was that citizens were separated into two classes, capitalists who own the economy and workers who sell their labor for profit. When there were not enough American workers to sell their labor, the capitalists invited more Europeans seeking adventure or fleeing oppression to labor for the capitalists' best interests. New citizens historically were demeaned because of their poverty, color, nationality, political ideas, gender, and sexual orientation, and not permitted for these reasons to participate in the great American dream.

The workers did try however, and many attained all or a portion of the dream for their families and children. Many climbed there on the backs of fellow workers or were smart enough to skirt around the others and become among the first in line. Religious superiority and native nationality claimed the prize for others. This led to the fallacy that if one works hard enough s/he might obtain the prize, The Great American Dream. The labor union movement is the history of the struggle to attain the dream, and many times the spirit of the laborer felt the beginnings of appeasement. "When women were able to work for half the wages of men in the textile mills, they and their children sighed in brief relief as they toiled on for long hours to

THE CANDIDATE OF ALL PARTIES

feed their bodies. In the early 1900s, when Andrew Carnegie erected libraries across the land, steel workers who read and spoke little English had no time to notice; while among capitalists Carnegie basked in a spot of sun amidst the blackness of the steel mills he created at his workers' expense. When women went on strike for the right to talk at work, they probably shouted in the streets then returned quietly to their places of work.

Setting the course for much of the fabric of the labor movement and its relationship to the upper classes was the third President of the United States, Thomas Jefferson. A principal author of the Declaration of Independence ("We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal"), he wrote and spoke other truths that defeated some of his ideals for the emerging country. Such as, "None will work for himself that can get another to work for him." He also stated: "What a stupendous, what an incomprehensible machine is man! Who can endure toil, famine, imprisonment & death itself in vindication of his own liberty, and the next moment... inflict on his fellow men a bondage, one hour of which is fraught with more misery than ages of that which he rose in rebellion to oppose." (1786). "Bigotry is the disease of ignorance, of morbid minds; education & free discussion are the antidotes." (1816): and, "I, however, place economy among the first and most important republican virtues, and public debt as the greatest of the dangers to be feared." (1816). Jefferson seemed to think that workers and capitalists together could both attain the American dream; his thinking was flawed.

Workers did form the first successful unions when Jefferson was President. They organized in support of their basic needs. Then and now, unions are tools for workers in their pursuit of the American dream. Capitalists are always eager to give unions and workers just and only enough to maintain their pursuit and temporarily appease their needs; as soon as they give a little, the capitalists begin plans to recoup losses and maneuver toward even greater profits at the expense of the workers.

*They have taken untold millions that they never
toiled to earn,
But without our brain and muscle not a single
wheel can turn.
We can break their haughty power; gain our freedom
when we learn
That the Union makes us strong.
(from 'Solidarity Forever' by Ralph Chaplin)*

Then the cycle begins again: "Live to Work, Work to Live" and the American dream is still only for the few.

From 1792 when the first local union, the Philadelphia shoemakers, went on strike, the union movement has made strides for workers' behalf only to be struck down by capitalism or laws designed for capitalistic gain. Since their beginning, unions have fought for basic needs in order to attain their share of the American dream; the right to form and join unions, better public education, reductions in hours worked in a day, safer working conditions, health care for themselves and families, more equitable profitsharing, a socialist society, ability to assemble without being fired upon, women's equality, the rights of children to exist without being wage earners, civil rights, a wage equal to their cost of living, and unemployment insurance in addition to other rights the capitalists take for granted in their own lives.

Indeed, the workers succeeded and obtained some of what they needed. Today we benefit from their efforts and do indeed enjoy many of the things they struggled to achieve such as more family time, unemployment insurance and a minimum wage. Should we expect more from a democracy? Yes! Large numbers of our citizens live below the poverty line while capitalists reap the rewards by keeping them hungry and homeless. Living wage jobs are taken away from citizens and outsourced by capitalists and government for higher profit margins, while American workers lose completely or must fight harder for rights and benefits they have slowly acquired over years of hard work. Unions get weaker because citizens have lost faith in union power against massive deregulated conglomerate corporations. Capitalists enjoy their corporate greed and have no concern for workers who need to work to eat. Capitalists also push credit and credit cards to quiet workers' need for dreams; this way they can make gestures of giving when in fact they are taking.

This country had a dream but that was all it was. It has long been trashed at the expense of American workers. As long as capitalists place power and money over morals, and value competition more than creativity the American dream will only be real for a select few.

Our "democratic" society is today full of citizens left disappointed, unhappy and dreaming for more at every level, there is always someone who has more and there is always someone who has nothing to eat. Throughout our history we have been over 90% worker pawns and less than 10% kings of capitalism. This is the nightmare called the American Dream.

By the way, it is more than time for a new dream!

Barbara Darby lives in Astoria. Her article "The Fight for Food & Health Care: Who Loses, Who Wins & What is the Price of a Smile" appeared in the May/June 2004 issue of the NCTE.

TRASHING AMERICA ONE SCHOOL AT A TIME: PREPARING OUR CHILDREN FOR THE GULAG ECONOMY

BY SUSAN SKINNER

What is the connection between deconstruction of public education and the destruction of American democracy? It lies in changing citizens' perceptions of what local, state and federal government is responsible for — and in reducing what we as citizens expect from our elected officials. Follow the dots:

First, replace all other sets of belief with the pursuit of profit. The dictates of the "free market" system spares neither the planet itself nor anyone on it. "Efficiency" is the goal. Our lives and everything in them are industrial "products" to be bought and sold. It's all about cold, hard, and immediate cash. Traditions which give us dignity in the face of life's tragedies become commodified and fall away. The future is not discussed. It will take care of itself, or not.

Next, reduce citizens' expectations of what our government provides, and promote the idea that money is scarce. Hide the fact that our tax dollars subsidize the continued shenanigans of the thugs at Enron (still out there looting!), Halliburton, GE, Bechtel, Monsanto and our own Andrew Wiederhorn. Perpetuate the myth that rich people "climb up the ladder" on their own, unassisted by public services like schools, libraries, and social security, and that personal wealth at any cost is what we must strive for in order to be true Americans.

Then substitute the promise of a decent education in a neighborhood school with the threat of endless war against whatever. Throw money at the threat relentlessly. Plant the seed that education is a privilege for the wealthy that cannot be afforded by those less fortunate, and water it with the idea that tax cuts are necessary because money is in short supply.

Reinforce this idea aggressively, with our tax dollars, all the while spending billions more of our tax dollars on starting wars and arming all sides, in places like Afghanistan, Iraq/Iran, Israel/Palestine, China/Taiwan, etc., blowing up lots of weapons so they can be built yet again, and killing and wounding a bunch of kids who joined the military so they could go to college.

Keep spending our money on ridiculous pork-barrel projects like the Star Wars missile defense program, "smaller more usable" nuclear weapons, the Oregon Lottery and its gambling addiction treatment centers, Columbia River channel deepening, and Homeland Security troops to keep our docks free of sturgeon fishermen while uninspected cargo ships cruise by.

Open more prisons and take more prisoners (prison labor is *the* growth industry in the U.S.).

Emphasize the idea that anything that generates immediate profit is good while schools, which require public subsidies, are bad (not immediately profitable).

Make primary education "efficient" by removing neighborhood schools and warehousing little kids to get them prepared for life in the brave new world of consumer lifestyles in our post-apocalyptic theme park. Disentangle parents from children. Increase dependency on busses and cars, further reducing the possibility of outdoor activity, and make us even fatter, more depressed and complacent. Decrease the likelihood that children will learn to interact appropriately with different ages and kinds of people. Fracture the power of intact communities and increase the attractiveness of private schools and "faith-based" education schemes.

Encourage cynicism and distrust of elected officials by holding public meetings, presiding over hours of passionate testimony, and then not even bothering to pretend to listen to our concerns before you vote. Make sure that citizens know how much they don't matter.

Make public policy by fiat and then blame the people for taking democratic action. Promote the idea that citizens' concerns about the behavior of their elected representatives are somehow divisive or violent. Discourage discussion.

Encourage apathy and disengagement. Urge unity. Keep your eyes on the TV for further instructions.

Susan Skinner is a registered nurse and lives in Astoria.

**July 5, 2004 is the 70th anniversary of infamous "Bloody Thursday" when San Francisco police shot two longshoremen to death and wounded more than a hundred during the Great Maritime Strike of 1934. All West Coast ports were closed. National guards were called into San Francisco which was the strike's violent epicenter. The strike presaged the other major industrial strikes of the 1930s, and the maritime unions marched every anniversary of Bloody Thursday for many years.*