

Experience is the Comb You Get When You Are Bald: The Thirty-Fifth Newsletter (2018)



Dear Friends,

Greetings from the desk of the **Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research**.

Since March, Palestinians in Gaza have walked towards the Israeli perimeter fence. They are undaunted. Almost two hundred Palestinians have been killed in this largely peaceful protest. In June, the UN General Assembly voted to condemn Israel's use of 'excessive, disproportionate and indiscriminate force' against the Palestinians. Algeria's Ambassador to the UN – Sabri Boukadoum – said that Israel's actions have not spared children, women, the elderly, nurses, or humanitarian workers. Israel has, he said, 'in a premeditated way harmed Palestinians'. On 22 October, Mustafa Hassona of the Anadolu Agency took the photograph above. Mustafa has taken some fabulous photographs from the Great March of Return, the extraordinarily brave struggle by the Palestinian people to expose the Israeli occupation and to underline their own resilience.

Palestinians have a word for this resilience – *sumud* (صمود). Human beings – under whatever circumstances – are resilient, steadfast, defiant. Ugliness defines our times. And yet, people are resilient. Sumud.



Resilience is needed in Brazil, where the people go to vote for their president this Sunday. Their choice is stark – Jair Bolsonaro, a near fascist, or Fernando Haddad, a humane and decent man. Bolsonaro is not unique. He is part of a pattern that includes Duterte of the Philippines, Orban of Hungary and Trump of the United States. These are right-wing demagogues who – as I write at *Salon*– stand at the podium ‘with acid on their lips’, pointing their ‘guns at migrants and refugees, at the urban poor and the rural distressed. For them, social marginality is the crime’. These neo-fascists care little for real social problems; ‘They are too busy oiling their guns’ (for more on neo-fascists, read **Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research Working Document #1**).

Our office in Buenos Aires has released a **statement** about this election in Brazil. They say that the victory of Bolsonaro ‘poses a grave threat to democratic and social rights in Brazil and threatens to roll back advances made by people’s movements’. The violence of Bolsonaro supporters, the statement notes, ‘give us a bitter taste of what a Bolsonaro administration would look like’. His government will attack labour rights, increase privatisation, end legal restrictions on the exploitation of nature and asphyxiate public education. A Bolsonaro victory will shift the political needle not only in Brazil but across Latin America. The staff at our Buenos Aires office write that they ‘reject the fascist, neoliberal direction in Brazil’. The statement ends – This is the moment to unite. No to fascism! No to neoliberalism! Polls are close, with the Ibope Institut showing Haddad in the lead in São Paulo, where he only won 20% in the first round. Is this a sign of hope?



Harshness is not only the political mood of the neo-fascists. It defines the everyday social world of workers across our world. Last year, a team of young journalists from Malaysia – R.AGE – published a teeth-hurting **story** on workers who live in a *kongsi*, the makeshift housing for construction workers. Many of the workers are from Bangladesh. When the team asks about the housing for the workers, one worker says that conditions are ‘worse than the garbage dumps in the slums of Bangladesh’. Their homes often catch fire, the workers hurt or killed – with little concern from anyone other than their families and friends. This story reminded me of the many stories about shack fires in South Africa, and – especially – of a **story** by Nation Nyoka of a shack fire in the Good Hope settlement near Johannesburg. It reminded me of a **story** by Matheus Hamutenya about the fire-prone reed houses that hold the grape workers of Namibia. Ester Marius said that she saves her money for her family, lives without water and electricity, but wishes that ‘things will get better one day’. In Gujarat (India), the workers of power looms live in hovels adjacent to their factories (as recounted by Reetika Revathy Subramanian in this powerful **story**). On the walls of the congested rooms, the workers carve their names in their native language – a way for them to enter history before they get killed by the machines or by tuberculosis.

Such a social landscape, a world where workers are exploited and where life is bare, is as far away as possible from what one sees in the world of advertisements, Karl Marx, in Chapter 10 of *Capital* (1867), described these conditions,

In its blind unrestrainable passion, its wear-wolf hunger for surplus labour, capital oversteps not only the moral, but even the merely physical maximum, bounds of the working-day. It usurps time for growth, development and healthy maintenance of the body. It steals the time required for the consumption of fresh air and sunlight. All that concerns it is

simply and solely the maximum of labour-power that can be rendered fluent in a working-day. It attains this end by shortening the extent of the labourer's life, as a greedy farmer snatches increased produce from the soil by reducing it of its fertility.

This could have been written yesterday.

Earlier this year, I visited my friend, the photographer Shahidul Alam in Dhaka (Bangladesh). He showed me his work on the Bangladeshi migrants to South-East Asia. He **documents** how these workers barely know their children. Shahidul remains in prison in Bangladesh. He was arrested for documenting the protests of young people, many of whom are likely the children of these migrant workers. Rachel Spence has written a moving **essay** about his continued incarceration. Shahidul, in prison, worries about the lack of clothes of his cellmates. Many of them have families across the waters sending precious foreign exchange into Bangladesh.

The picture above – of a garment worker in Dhaka getting ready to go to work from her bare apartment – is taken by **Taslima Akhter**, one of Shahidul's students.



Thousands of ordinary people from Central America, like the many millions on the march across the world, are in search of a better life. Their countries have been devastated by civil wars and by US military interventions, by climate change and by unfair trade policies (see this **story** by Zoe PC at *People's Dispatch*). Little is left for them at home. They carry a few things and walk as far as possible. If you look into their eyes, you will see humanity; if you see them from a distance, you will see – as Donald Trump said – an 'army'. In the picture above, some of those who are on this long march northwards are sleeping in Chiquimula (Guatemala) – right in the middle of the 'corridor of violence', dominated by drug cartels that include local

police forces. The town of Chiquimula suffers from extreme poverty and a homicide rate twice the average for Guatemala. Heart attacks are the leading killer in Chiquimula. Gunshots follow closely behind. Why would a human being not seek a better life?



In 2015, the International Monetary Fund showed in a **study** that income inequality and gender inequality are ‘strongly interlinked’. In fact, studies show that when it comes to working conditions, to hunger and to education, the social and economic system puts women at a disadvantage. These numbers are universal – unaltered by culture. This system is held in place by sexual harassment and rape. India’s sexual harassment law – in 1997 – was produced out of a legal case built on the gangrape of a Dalit woman – Bhanwari Devi – in 1992. The Supreme Court used that case to formulate strict guidelines for workplaces. Bhanwari Devi’s case

against the five men who raped her, however, still lingers in the courts. She has not yet received justice.

The #MeToo movement in India has focused on sexual harassment and rape in the workplace. The image above is extracted from a book by Shoromona Das, which will appear soon from **LeftWord Books**. I recently spoke to Raya Sarkar, one of the leaders in the #MeToo movement, who **told** me, 'I believe that at the core of any liberation movement should be the most vulnerable, in this case women working in the informal sector in India who do not have any labour protections and who often belong to marginalised communities. The movement is missing the voices of more Dalit and Adivasi women and I hope we can change that'. Srila Roy wrote a very useful **essay** to put the Indian version of #MeToo into context. Rights to the workplace mirror other rights in society.

In Kerala, there is currently a fight over women's access to the Sabarimala temple. Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) gave a **speech** recently where he said that, 'Our renaissance leaders taught us that some customs are meant to be broken'. In India, Vijayan says, there is a tradition of breaking old and hierarchical rules.

The left government has broken another rule in the state. It has now mandated that workers at workplaces – particularly women in retail shops – will have the **right to sit**.



By 4 November, the US government will place harsh sanctions against Iran. Countries like India, Japan and Sri Lanka – each with diverse political affiliations – will not be able to end their purchase of Iranian oil. The US cannot stop the buying of Iranian oil. It can only block the use of US-dominated banking systems to pay for that oil. Rumbles of a new banking system are on the horizon (I spend ten minutes **talking** about it at the Real News). Out of such new initiatives might come an alternative to the neo-fascist agenda – a multipolar world. It is better than war. The image above is by Ghobad Shiva, the Iranian artist. It was drawn in 2007, around the time when the United States tightened sanctions against Shiva’s country.

Lessons of the fascist period in the last century do not seem to have been digested. Mao Zedong once quoted an old Chinese proverb – *experience is the comb you get when you are bald*.

Warmly, Vijay.

Below, our image for the week. We celebrate the birth of Olufunmilayo Ransome-Kuti (1900-1978), the Nigerian anti-colonial feminist and socialist. She organised thousands of women—and was jailed for it—through the Abeokuta Women’s Union (AWU) against colonial taxation and for women’s rights. The AWU grew across regional and ethnic lines to become the Nigerian Women’s Union, and many of its members became active in the independence struggle. Ransome-Kuti became the first women to hold an executive position in the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroons. In 1978, she was thrown by military soldiers out of a window in the home of her son — the musician and activist, Fela Kuti. She later died from those injuries.



