

## In defense of the U.S. working class

BY MARY-ALICE WATERS

### *SWP leader at Havana event answers question: 'Can working people in U.S. make a socialist revolution?'*

*The following is the talk by Mary-Alice Waters to a conference organized by the Cuban Institute of History and the Central Organization of Cuban Workers (CTC) in Havana, Cuba. Waters is a member of the National Committee of the Socialist Workers Party and president of Pathfinder Press. The talk, given April 26, opened a two-part program on the class struggle in the United States that was a major feature of the three-day 12th International May Day Scientific Conference.*

*Waters' presentation was followed by a panel of four workers and a farmer from the U.S. who described their own work experiences in different industries, as well as the union and social battles they've been part of. Biographies of the panelists and an article on the conference published in the May 21, 2018, issue of the Militant follow. Copyright © 2018 by Pathfinder Press, reprinted by permission.*

*Waters was introduced by René González Barrios, president of the Cuban Institute of History.*



Thank you René for your generous introduction.

On behalf of all of us presenting this morning's program on the class struggle in the United States, I want to thank the compañeros of the Cuban Institute of History, the Central Organization of Cuban Workers, and our hosts here at the Cigar Workers Palace for the privilege — and responsibility — you have extended us.

Six months ago, when René first asked us to prepare this session of the 12th International May Day Scientific Conference, I was skeptical. "We're neither professional historians nor academic researchers," I told him. "We're

workers, trade unionists, farmers, communists, members and supporters of the Socialist Workers Party and Young Socialists. Will our presentation be appropriate?"

Each of you has a copy of the brief biographies we prepared on the members of our panel. I won't repeat what's in those notes, except to say that those you will hear from today have lived and worked in every part of the United States — on the land and in jobs from coal mines, oil refineries and railroads, to garment shops, construction sites, slaughterhouses, auto assembly lines, warehouses, and retail giants like Walmart — the largest private employer in the U.S. today with 1.5 million workers on the payroll (and another 800,000 worldwide).

As class-conscious workers, of course, we are partici-



Chris Dorst/Charleston Gazette-Mail via AP

Striking teachers at West Virginia Capitol in Charleston, Feb. 26, 2018, as one of most significant labor battles in U.S. in decades exploded. Teachers and other school workers went on strike statewide, winning support from students, parents, churches and other unions. Strikes and protests spread to Oklahoma, Kentucky, Arizona, Colorado, and North Carolina. "What happened there is a living refutation of the portrait of working-class bigotry and 'backwardness' painted by middle class liberals and much of the radical left," says Socialist Workers Party leader Mary-Alice Waters.

pants in every social, political, and cultural battle at the center of the class struggle in the U.S., starting with opposition to every act of aggression, every war waged openly or covertly by U.S. imperialism.

René listened patiently to all our hesitations. Then he just smiled and said: “Well, that’s what we need to hear about. Here at the history institute we talk to many who study the working class. We need to hear from those who *are* workers.”

So here we are, and we look forward to your questions, to your doubts and comments, and to a fruitful discussion especially.

I can assure you in advance that what you hear from us today will not be what you regularly hear, see, or read in either the “mass media,” or on what is now known as “social media” — although I prefer “bourgeois media” as the more accurate label for *both*.

### Focus on two questions

I will focus my remarks on two questions.

First. Did the 2016 electoral victory of Donald Trump register a rise in racism, xenophobia, misogyny, and every other form of ideological reaction among working people in the U.S.? Is that why tens of millions of workers of all races voted for him?

Second. Is a socialist revolution in the U.S. really possible? Or are those like ourselves, who answer with an unhesitating “Yes,” a new variety of utopian socialist fools, however well meaning?

The clearest and most demonstrative answer to the first question is being given right now from West Virginia to Oklahoma, from Kentucky to Arizona and beyond by tens of thousands of teachers and other public workers in states Trump carried by a large margin in 2016.

Less than two months ago in the state of West Virginia, one of the most significant labor battles in several decades exploded onto the national scene. Some 35,000 teachers, janitors, bus drivers, cafeteria workers, and other public school employees walked off the job together, defying past court rulings denying public employees the right to strike. With overwhelming support from their communities, they closed down the schools in every single county in the state. Yes, *every single one*. Fifty-five counties in all. It was a surprise even for the fighting teachers.

The action came after years of ruling-class budget cuts that slashed funding for students’ meals, textbooks, school supplies, building maintenance, salaries of teachers and other employees, and so-called extracurricular activities such as sports, art, music, and other programs indispensable for a child’s growth and learning.

West Virginia is the historic heart of coal country in the United States, the site of some of the hardest fought union battles in U.S. history. It has long been one of the most economically ravaged areas of the country, and even more so today.

Over the last three decades, the coal bosses and their government, determined to drive down their labor costs and break the back of the United Mine Workers union (UMWA), have waged a concerted assault on the lives and living standards of all working people.

Coal companies have closed hundreds of mines throughout the Appalachian region, as they’ve shifted capital to oil, natural gas, and other fossil-fuel energy sources, including their vast open-pit and nonunion surface coal mines in western regions of the United States. Their only concern is to increase their rate of profit as they employ fewer miners.

Some fifty years ago the UMWA, long the most powerful union in the country, represented 70 percent of coal miners. That figure today stands at 21 percent.

We don’t have time to tell the story of how the owners have closed health clinics won by the union in prior battles. Or why black lung disease, the deadly scourge of miners, driven back in the 1970s and 1980s, has once again exploded across the region, now hitting younger miners in an even more virulent form thanks to “new mining technology.”

Nor can we describe how the mining companies have used bankruptcy proceedings, court rulings, and corporate “restructurings” to cease recognizing union contracts, dump pension obligations, and eliminate UMWA-controlled mine safety committees that were fought for and conquered in previous battles. Through those union committees, miners themselves asserted their power to shut down work on *any* shift in face of *any* unsafe conditions.

You will hear more about these questions later in the program from one of our panelists, Alyson Kennedy, who worked fourteen years as an underground coal miner.

The consequences of this decades-long assault are registered in the statistics.

West Virginia today has the lowest median household income of all fifty states in the union save one, Mississippi. In only three states — Oklahoma, South Dakota, and Mississippi — do teachers earn less than in West Virginia.

Measured by official U.S. government figures that include so-called “discouraged workers” — those who haven’t been able to find a job for so long that they’ve temporarily given up — unemployment in West Virginia is one of the highest in the country: more than 10 percent in 2017.

The state is a center of the drug addiction crisis in the U.S. — it has the highest opioid overdose rate in the country. And the drug crisis is still accelerating, registered most forcefully in one fact: life expectancy in the United States actually dropped for two consecutive years in 2015-16.

To this picture you have to add the not-so-hidden toll of Washington’s endless wars, the burden of which, as always, falls most heavily on working-class and farm families in the most depressed regions of the country. Among

veterans of the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere, the suicide rate is twenty a day. Yes, you heard that right. *Twenty a day.*

We could add more to this picture, but it's not necessary.

The point is that without understanding the devastation of the lives of working-class families in regions like West Virginia (and there are many more) — without understanding the vast increase since the 2008 financial crisis in *class* inequality, including the accelerating inequality within classes — *you won't be able to understand what's happening in the United States.*

You have to compare this panorama of carnage with the lives of the upper layers of the meritocracy to be found in places like Silicon Valley, and the *more* exclusive (far from the *most* exclusive) neighborhoods of population centers like Manhattan, Washington, and San Francisco.

This devastation facing working people is not only the consequence of the worldwide capitalist crisis of production and trade, which began in the mid-1970s and is still deepening. It is the consequence of the *policies* initiated by the Democratic Party administration of the two Clintons in the 1990s and pursued with equal vigor by the Republican administration of George W. Bush and the Democratic administration of Barack Obama.

Policies such as the elimination of federal aid to children of single mothers and drastic cuts in other social welfare programs on all levels.

Legislation and policies disguised under names like the “war on drugs” and “criminal justice” that have made the United States the country with the highest incarceration rate in the world — some 25 percent of all prisoners on earth. It was among those prisoners, we should add, that our five Cuban brothers lived and carried out their political work for some sixteen years.

All these questions are explained and documented in several of the most widely read books published by Pathfinder Press that are available on the table that many of you have already visited: *The Clintons' Anti-Working-Class Record* and *Are They Rich Because They're Smart?* both by Jack Barnes, the national secretary of the Socialist Workers Party, and “*It's the Poor Who Face the Savagery of the U.S. 'Justice' System*” in which the five Cuban heroes talk about their experiences as part of the working class behind bars in the United States.

### Workers resist ... search for answers

Often when we explain these social realities to compañeros and friends here in Cuba (and elsewhere), they ask, “Why do people accept this? Why hasn't there been any resistance?”



Above, Militant/Steve Marshall; below, Associated Press  
Striking teachers and public workers in West Virginia built on lessons of union battles in coalfields over decades, winning support of current and retired miners and their families. Left, United Mine Workers members and supporters shut down Pittston coal plant in Virginia during 11-month strike in 1989. Right, coal miners in Bellaire, Ohio, 1943, read article reporting UMW president John L. Lewis' defiance of government threat to use troops to replace striking miners during World War II. “You can't mine coal with bayonets!” miners replied.

Our answer is always the same: “There *is* resistance. Workers never stop looking for ways to fight back — and *act* when they find ways.” But if you are not part of the working class, you're not aware of what is happening until it explodes.

No worker goes on strike until they've exhausted other remedies. Until they feel they have no other choice.

The West Virginia teachers strike was just that kind of explosion. It seemed to come out of nowhere, but it had been building for years. Its roots are deep.

And when the teachers and other school employees walked out, when they saw the strength of their numbers, their confidence and determination exploded too. With support from their pupils, families, unions, and churches — and a long memory of the many bitter battles fought by the miners — they organized emergency food services for

the students and strikers. Daytime activities for the children were put in place. Clothing and funds were collected, and more.

### **A class rising up**

In the best traditions of trade unionism — and a precursor of the fighting labor movement that will again be built — the strike became a genuine social movement, battling for the needs of the entire working class and its allies.

“What we’re seeing is a class of people rising up,” one striking worker proudly told a reporter.

And he was right. They were the men and women whom Hillary Clinton so contemptuously labeled “a basket of deplorables” during her presidential campaign. People from the “backward” (that was her word!) expanses of the country between New York and California. People she described as “racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic,” and especially women, “married white women,” too weak to stand up to “pressure to vote the way your husband, your boss, your son” tells you to.

Is it any wonder Trump won West Virginia by a vote of 69 percent to 27 percent for Clinton?

The *better* class of people who engaged in this struggle not only kept every school closed for nine days. They sent thousands of demonstrators to occupy the state capitol day after day. Midway through the walkout, teachers rejected their union officialdom’s call to accept the governor’s promise of a deal. *They’d heard promises before.* They stayed out until they forced the legislature to pass, and the governor to sign into law, a five percent pay raise. And not only for school personnel, but for every single state employee.

A confident mass of red-shirted victors marched out of the state capitol building shouting, “Who made history? We made history!”

And as word spread, teachers in Oklahoma, Kentucky, and Arizona prepared for the next strike actions. “Don’t make us go West Virginia on you!” became their battle cry.

Of all that, you’ll hear more from the panel later this morning.

What has happened in West Virginia is a living refutation of the portrait of working-class bigotry and “backwardness” painted, almost without exception, by a broad spectrum of middle class liberals and much of the radical left in the U.S., and around the world as well. It is not only Donald Trump they obsessively hope to impeach. Their target — and the object of their fear — is that class of people who are rising up, many of whom voted for Trump.

What’s behind the actions of tens of thousands of working people like these is not hatred of Mexicans, Muslims, African Americans, or a desire to keep women at home, barefoot, and pregnant. Just look at the pictures on the display board at the back of the room. Look at the faces of the women in West Virginia, Kentucky, Arizona and elsewhere who are at the forefront of the teachers’ battles!

Workers engaged in these fights are not clamoring for a border wall, groping women, or marching with KKK hoods and burning crosses. They are demanding dignity and respect for themselves and their families, and for all working people like them.

And they have nothing but distrust and growing hatred for those they call “the political class” in Washington and in every state capital in the country, both Republican and Democratic. That’s why chants of “Drain the swamp!” resonated far beyond those who voted for Trump. It’s not reactionary attitudes that are driving most of these working people. Their strike action registered something different: a step in the direction of independent political consciousness, which can only develop over time through *large-scale working-class actions on picket lines and in the streets.*

With the West Virginia strike and its spreading example, working-class resistance and class solidarity in the U.S. have entered a new stage.

If you remember even one thing from our program here this morning, I hope it will be this:

Among working people in the United States, there is greater openness today than at any time in our political lives to think about and discuss what a socialist revolution could mean and why it just might be necessary. Why our class should shoulder the responsibility of taking state power. How we can ourselves become different human beings in the process.

What’s more, that political openness is as great among those who voted for Trump as among those who voted for Clinton, or the record number who couldn’t bring themselves to vote for either presidential candidate.

We know this not from polls or news reports filed by others. We know it from our own experiences, and from those of our kin scattered across the United States. We know it firsthand from our regular communist propaganda activity, as we go door to door in working-class neighborhoods of every racial and ethnic composition, urban and rural, from one end of the United States to the other, talking about these questions with thousands of working people. With whoever comes to the door.

### **A socialist revolution in the U.S.?**

That brings us to the second question. Is a socialist revolution in the U.S. really possible?

Two months ago, we were asked that by a student here in Havana at the foreign ministry’s Higher Institute for Foreign Relations (ISRI). He didn’t believe it, he said. The economic and military strength of Washington is far too great — and the working class far too backward. U.S. imperialism, he insisted, will have to be defeated “from the outside.”

We in the Socialist Workers Party are certainly among a small minority, even among those who call themselves socialists, who say without hesitation, “Yes, socialist revo-

lution is possible in the United States.” And no liberating movement of millions can ever be imposed “from the outside” *on any country*.

We say not only is socialist revolution in the U.S. possible. Even more important, revolutionary struggles by the toilers are *inevitable*. They will be forced upon us by the crisis-driven assaults of the propertied classes — as we’ve just seen in West Virginia. And they will be intertwined, as always, with the example of the resistance and struggles of other oppressed and exploited producers around the globe.

What is *not* inevitable is the outcome. That is where political clarity, organization, prior experience, discipline, and, above all, the caliber and experience of proletarian leadership are decisive.

Our confidence comes from the class-struggle battles we ourselves have been part of, as well as what we learned firsthand from the battle-tested workers who recruited us to the communist movement. I will give you just three examples.

### The example of the Teamsters

Those who recruited my generation were among the founders of the first Communist Party in the United States in 1919. They were delegates to the founding congresses of the Communist International. They were leaders of the great labor battles of the 1930s, battles that in a few short years swept past the craft-divided business unions of the American Federation of Labor to build a powerful social movement that organized industrial unions in virtually every basic industry.

By the high point in the late 1940s some 35 percent of the privately employed working class was unionized, up from 7 percent in 1930 (and that number is close to the 6.5 percent who are union members today). The lessons we learned from the speed and power of that transformation, the pitched battles not only



Beinecke Library, Yale University

Socialist Workers Party leaders were pioneers of U.S. and world communist movement in 1920s and of labor battles that built industrial unions in 1930s, including organizing drives that brought tens of thousands of truckers into the Teamsters union. Left, Minneapolis Teamsters leader announces victory in 1934 drivers strike. Teamsters local organized citywide Union Defense Guard to halt fascist recruitment and led union opposition to U.S. imperialist aims in World War II. They “taught us what the U.S. working class is capable of as it awakens in struggle,” says Waters. Right, longtime SWP leader James P. Cannon (table, second from left), was founder of U.S. communist movement in 1919 and a delegate to 1922 Congress of Communist International in Moscow. Also at presiding table are Karl Radek (Bolshevik party, Russia, left) and Clara Zetkin (Communist Party, Germany, right). At podium is Claude McKay, one of U.S. delegates.

with employers’ goons and police, but fascist gangs and National Guard troops sent in to break strikes, are all part of our basic education.

The rise of the CIO, the Congress of Industrial Organizations, is told in rich detail in one of the books you’ll find on the Pathfinder table at the back, *Labor’s Giant Step* by Art Preis, one of the *Militant’s* principal labor reporters for many years.

What I want to call special attention to here today, however, is the most far-reaching and politically significant of the labor battles of the 1930s — the union-organizing drive of the Teamsters, the truck drivers union. It was an organizing campaign that began in the North Central city of Minneapolis in 1934 and, by its high point in 1938-39, had been spread across an area nearly the size of the Indian subcontinent. Yes, the Indian subcontinent!

The rich history and lessons of this campaign are recorded in four remarkable books — *Teamster Rebellion*, *Teamster Power*, *Teamster Politics*, and *Teamster Bureaucracy*. And it is with great pleasure that today, here at this conference all four volumes are available for the first time ever in Spanish.

Farrell Dobbs, the author of the Teamster series, was in his twenties shoveling coal in a Minneapolis depot when he emerged as a leader of the 1934 strikes that turned that city into a union town. He was the central organizer of the campaign that brought tens of thousands of over-the-road truckers into the union — from Tennessee to North Dakota, from Texas to Michigan. He resigned as general organizer of the Teamsters union national staff in 1940 to become labor secretary of the Socialist Workers Party, and he was sent to prison during World War II along with seventeen other



leaders of Teamsters Local 544-CIO and the Socialist Workers Party for organizing labor opposition to the imperialist war aims of the U.S. government. He later served as national secretary of the SWP for twenty years.

More than any other labor experience, it is the Teamsters organizing drive that taught us what the U.S. working class is capable of as it awakens in struggle. It taught us how quickly the working class can learn the meaning of class political independence, proletarian internationalism, and begin to transform the union movement into an instrument of revolutionary struggle for the entire class and its allies.

Those experiences involved organizing the unemployed, farmers, and independent truckers as allies. They included launching and training a disciplined Union Defense Guard that stopped in its tracks a fascist recruitment effort promoted by the bosses. These experiences included broadening international horizons, as union militants followed events in Germany, China, and Spain and took on gangs of anti-Jewish thugs. There was growing awareness of the need for workers to enter the political arena as an independent class force, with their own party.

That rapid advance came to an end in 1939-40 as Washington's intensifying imperialist war drive came down on the labor movement. But as Dobbs writes in his "Afterword" to *Teamster Bureaucracy*, "The principal lesson for labor militants to derive from the Minneapolis experience is not that, under an adverse relationship of forces, the workers can be overcome, but that, with proper leadership, they can overcome."

That is one of the same lessons taught us by the political cadres who under Fidel led the Cuban Revolution to victory.

### Battle to bring down Jim Crow

None of us on this panel today lived through the great labor battles of the '30s. But several of us were part of the generations transformed by our experiences as part of another profoundly revolutionary, working-class struggle — the mass movement of the 1950s and '60s that brought down the Jim Crow system of institutionalized race segregation in the U.S. South. That successful battle forever changed social relations, both North and South, including within the working class and unions.

And that is my second example.

The roots of that struggle are to be found in the century of resistance to the counterrevolutionary violence and terror against African Americans that reigned throughout the South following the abolition of slavery in the U.S. Civil War — the Second American Revolution. The betrayal of post-Civil War Radical Reconstruction by the rising forces of finance capital and the bloody overthrow of often Black-led popular governments in the states of the former slavocracy were the greatest defeat ever suffered by the U.S. working class.

The objective conditions for the explosion of another wave of that struggle in the 1950s, however, were the product above all of:

The mass workers struggles of the 1930s, which fought to integrate the workforce in auto, steel, trucking, and many other industries.

The social convulsions of World War II, which included the exodus from the land and the accelerated incorporation of millions of African American workers, both male and



**Above**, first mass meeting in Montgomery, Alabama, 1955, to back boycott of segregated bus system. **Inset**, April 16, 1956, *Militant* promotes bus boycott. **Right**, Socialist Workers Party presidential candidate Farrell Dobbs speaking on Pontiac, Michigan, radio station WCAR calling on listeners to back Montgomery fight. Dobbs drove to Alabama with first station wagon donated for volunteer shuttle service during boycott.

female, into industry and other urban employment, North and South. That was part of what is known as the Great Migration that had begun during the first imperialist world war, and included the recruitment of hundreds of thousands of soldiers who were Black to serve in segregated, dangerous, so-called noncombat units of the U.S. armed

forces during World War II.

The first steps toward desegregation of the U.S. armed forces in the years of “peace” between the atomic bombing of Japan and the Washington-organized invasion, partition, and occupation of Korea. These were followed in late 1951 by the desegregation of the army’s combat units as well, as the U.S. rulers’ invasion force faced determined resistance from Korean and supporting Chinese troops.

The victorious national liberation struggles that swept the colonial world during and after World War II, from China, Korea, Vietnam, and Indonesia to India, Africa, and the Caribbean. This includes the Cuban Revolution, which marked the point of furthest advance of those battles.

The naked hypocrisy and moral bankruptcy of the U.S. rulers who claimed to have instigated and pursued that second worldwide slaughter for “freedom” and “equality.”

For my generation, and several others of us here this morning, the years of mass struggle that overturned the American prototype of apartheid were a school of popular revolutionary action, *our* school.

That’s when we learned discipline. When we learned the power we had, not as individuals, but in our numbers and, above all, our organization. When we learned how to engage within the movement in heated, yet civil debate. When we learned to be political, not naïve, as we joined in political battles raging within the movement for Black rights.

One of the myths of the battle to bring down Jim Crow is that it was a pacifist movement. That all those involved were opposed, in principle, to taking up arms in self-defense against the violence of the Ku Klux Klan, White Citizens Council, and other vigilante outfits deeply intertwined with the Democratic Party and police departments across the South and parts of the border states.

The record shows otherwise. It was workers with military training and combat experience in Korea who organized themselves as the Deacons for Defense and Justice in Louisiana, and a chapter of the NAACP in Monroe, North Carolina, to protect their communities and their kids who were marching. Martin Luther King was protected by well-organized security.

Above all, we identified with and learned from Malcolm X, as he more and more consciously charted a revolutionary, an internationalist, and then, yes, a working-class course. As he charted a course to join forces with those the world over, whatever their skin color, who understood that we are fighting a worldwide battle “between those who want freedom, justice and equality for everyone and those who want to continue the systems of exploitation.”

For many of us, it was that mass, Black, proletarian movement in the United States, combined at the same time with the example of the workers and farmers of Cuba and their advancing revolution, that gave *our* generation unshakable confidence in the revolutionary capacities of working people.

That story is told in one of the most important books we

have brought with us, *Cuba and the Coming American Revolution* by Jack Barnes.

“The greatest obstacle to the line of march of the toilers,” Jack says in those pages, “is the tendency, promoted and perpetuated by the exploiting classes, for working people to underestimate ourselves, to underestimate what we can accomplish, to doubt our own worth.”

What the workers and farmers of Cuba showed us is that with class solidarity, political consciousness, courage, focused and persistent efforts at education, and a revolutionary leadership of a caliber like that in Cuba — a leadership tested and forged in battle, in sacrifice, over years — it is possible to stand up to enormous might and numbers that initially seem to pose insurmountable odds — *and win*. And then to accelerate the building of a *truly* new society, led by the only class capable of doing so.

That was the foundation of the political education of our generation.

### Vietnam and the antiwar struggle

As the mass proletarian struggle against Jim Crow tri-



Above, Militant/Larry Seigle

Washington was shaken by spread of mass opposition to Vietnam War “not just among students and millions of workers but increasingly the ranks of the U.S. draftee army,” says Waters. Top, Fort Jackson Eight, GIs who fought effort to court martial them in 1969 for speaking out against the war. Bottom, Vietnamese liberation fighters, April 1975, celebrate atop captured U.S. tank after victory over decades-long U.S. imperialist intervention.

umphed, our confidence in the revolutionary capacities of the U.S. working class deepened with the third example I'll point to. That was the battle to put an end to the U.S. rulers' war against the people of Vietnam. We never doubted that the Vietnamese people — and those of us determined to defend their fight for national sovereignty and unification — would win.

In the course of that battle, as the mobilizations against the war grew to involve millions, the widening fissures in the fabric of U.S. society struck *fear* in the hearts of the U.S. rulers.

Massive revolts exploded in the Black ghettos of major cities in the North, culminating in those that spread to virtually every U.S. city in 1968 following the assassination of Martin Luther King in Memphis, Tennessee — a cold-blooded political assassination in the midst of a strike by sanitation workers there for whom King had gone to rally support.

In an effort to intimidate and quell protests, the U.S. rulers increasingly resorted to the mobilization of National Guard troops, culminating in May 1970 in the fatal shooting of two students at Jackson State in Mississippi and four students at Kent State University in Ohio. These killings took place as demonstrations of unprecedented size rocked the U.S. in opposition to Washington's invasion of Cambodia, along Vietnam's border.

And we saw how the U.S. rulers and their servants were shaken by the spread of mass antiwar opposition not just among students and growing millions of workers but increasingly the ranks of the U.S. draftee army, especially those being sent to fight in Vietnam.

This was what the bourgeois political crisis known as Watergate and ouster of President Richard Nixon was really all about — the tremors of fear among the U.S. rulers.

It is experiences such as these that have taught us something about the political dynamics that will inevitably be part of a victorious American socialist revolution.



One final point, to close.

The world we are living in today is not headed toward a future of capitalist peace and prosperity. To think otherwise you'd have to believe that the ruling families of the imperialist world and their financial wizards have found a way to "manage" capitalism in crisis. That they've discovered the means to preclude shattering financial collapses and breakdowns of production, trade, and employment.

You'd have to believe that the credit crisis that exploded as recently as 2007-08 was an aberration and won't happen again, with even more devastating consequences for working people.

The opposite is the truth.

The crisis of finance capital is not a short-term cyclical adjustment. World capitalism's profit rates have been on a long downward curve for more than four decades, since the mid-1970s. Do any of us believe, under the domination of breakdown-ridden financial and banking capital, that world capitalism is entering a sustained period of increased investment in the expansion of industrial capacity and massive hiring of workers?

All evidence points in the other direction.

We have entered what will be decades of economic, financial, and social convulsions and class battles. Decades of bloody wars like those in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and more.

The coming years *will* end in World War III — inevitably — *if* the only class capable of doing so, *the working class*, fails to take state power. If we fail to take the power to wage war out of the hands of the imperialist rulers.

But for us, a sober and realistic assessment of what lies ahead is reason neither for panic nor demoralization and despair. To the contrary. The years that are coming will also bring increasingly organized resistance — worldwide — by growing vanguards of working people pushed to the wall by the capitalists' compulsion to intensify the exploitation of working people in order to reverse their declining rate of profit.

It is through those battles that class consciousness, as well as confidence and leadership capacity, will develop among working people — unevenly but apace.

And time is on *our* side — not theirs.

On March 13, 1961, barely a month before the victorious battle of Playa Girón, or the Bay of Pigs debacle as it is known in the U.S., Fidel Castro spoke to tens of thousands of Cuban workers, farmers, and youth preparing to meet the invasion we all knew was coming. Answering Washington's illusions that the coming battle would install in Cuba a government subservient to the U.S. rulers, Fidel told the cheering crowd: "There will be a victorious revolution in the United States before a victorious counterrevolution in Cuba."

His words were not empty bravado. Fidel *never ever* stooped to demagogy. Nor was he gazing in a crystal ball, pretending to divine the future. We, and the revolutionary people of Cuba, understood him well. He was speaking as a leader offering — *advancing* — a line of struggle, a line of march, for our lifetimes. He was, as always, addressing Lenin's question, "What is to be done?"

In North America — and Cuba as well — each succeeding generation of revolutionaries has carried those words on our banner.

The political capacities and revolutionary potential of workers and farmers in the U.S. are today as utterly discounted by the ruling families and their servants as were those of the Cuban toilers at Playa Girón.

And just as wrongly.

# How U.S. working people have fought back

## *Biographies of the panel participants*

*“From Clinton to Trump: How U.S. working people are responding to the antilabor offensive of the bosses, their parties and their government” was the title of the second part of the program on the class struggle in the U.S. at the April 24-26 conference in Havana. Members of the panel included a working farmer and four other workers with years of experience in different industries. Each made brief presentations describing not only the consequences*

**Alyson Kennedy.** Alyson is a fourteen-year veteran union coal miner. She was among the first wave of women who broke through the barriers that coal bosses used to exclude women from underground mining jobs. She has been part of numerous UMWA battles in the coalfields from West Virginia and Alabama to Utah. Alyson was the Socialist Workers Party candidate for president in 2016 and currently lives in Dallas, Texas, where she works at the international retail chain Walmart.

**Harry D’Agostino.** Harry is a worker, musician, bass player, band leader, and Young Socialist. He travels and performs throughout the Northeast and North Central regions of the U.S. Like many millions of workers, young and old, he has held numerous jobs from small shops to warehouses, almost always as a “temp worker” who can be fired at any time and gets no health coverage or unemployment compensation.

**Willie Head.** Willie is a longtime family farmer from south Georgia, a veteran of the century and a half of battles by farmers who are Black to keep their land. Like most small farmers, he has also worked many nonfarm jobs throughout his life, union and nonunion, in order to bring in the income necessary to keep farming.

**Jacob Perasso.** Jacob is a freight rail conductor and

*for working people of the bosses’ four-decades-long offensive but also the labor and social struggles in which they and their coworkers have fought.*

*A sheet with the following brief biographical notes introducing each panel member was given to all participants. Everyone also received the prepared remarks of Harry D’Agostino, a panelist who was prevented from being present by another political responsibility in Cuba.*

member of the SMART-TD union in one of the largest rail yards in the Northeast. He is a leader of the work of the Young Socialists in the U.S. and internationally. Prior to his current employment, he worked, among other jobs, in meatpacking plants in the Midwest, where he was involved in a number of union-organizing battles.

**Omari Musa.** Omari has worked for half a century in every kind of job, union and nonunion, from rail and oil to an ice cream factory, from California to Miami. He currently lives in Washington, DC, where he is employed by Walmart. He is a lifetime veteran of battles in defense of the rights of African Americans and a longtime national leader of the work to defend Cuba and the Cuban Revolution, both inside and outside the labor movement.

**Róger Calero.** Róger came to the U.S. from Nicaragua with his family when he was fifteen. As a member of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), he worked in meatpacking plants in the Midwest and has been involved in union battles defending the rights of immigrant workers. In 2002 he was arrested and targeted for deportation by the U.S. government, triggering a successful international defense effort that won the support of numerous unions. He was the presidential candidate of the Socialist Workers Party in 2004 and 2008.



Maykel Espinosa/Juventud Rebelde

Panel on class struggle in U.S. at April 2018 Havana conference organized by Cuban Institute of History (IHC) and Cuba’s union federation. From left, Willie Head, Omari Musa, Alyson Kennedy, Jacob Perasso and Mary-Alice Waters. At right, René González Barrios, president of IHC. At podium (not in photo) is Róger Calero.

# THE MILITANT

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## U.S. class struggle a feature at Havana conference

### *Panel from U.S. describes capitalist rulers' offensive, growing resistance by working people*

BY MARTÍN KOPPEL AND RÓGER CALERO

HAVANA — “Did the 2016 electoral victory of Donald Trump register a rise in racism, xenophobia, misogyny and every other form of reaction among working people in the United States? Is that why tens of millions of workers voted for him?”

That question was posed by Mary-Alice Waters, a leader of the Socialist Workers Party, in one of the featured talks at a three-day conference here. The gathering was one of several events held in conjunction with the celebration of the international day of the working class, May Day, when more than a million workers mobilized in Havana and across the island.

Waters also posed a second question: “Is a socialist revolution in the U.S. really possible? Or are those like ourselves, who answer with an unhesitating ‘Yes,’ a new variety of utopian socialist fools, however well-meaning?”

Her talk, which focused on answering those questions, initiated a two-part program on the class struggle in the United States. The second part was entitled “From Clinton to Trump: How working people in the U.S. are responding to the anti-labor offensive of the bosses, their parties, and their government.” It was a panel of leaders and supporters of the Socialist Workers Party with years of trade union experience in major industries and other sectors of the economy, including agriculture. They described the multifaceted forms of capitalist exploitation and oppression working people face in the United States, and even more

importantly, the growing resistance that the owners’ offensive is generating.

The two-part program was a central feature of the 12th International May Day Conference, held here April 24-26. The main sponsors of the event were the History Institute of Cuba and the Central Organization of Cuban Workers (CTC), the country’s trade union federation. It was attended by some 130 people. Most came from cities across Cuba. Others were from Mexico, Argentina, Chile, Colombia, the United States, Spain, and the United Kingdom.

CTC General Secretary Ulises Guilarte opened the conference with an address on challenges facing Cuban working people and the unions today, from the vantage point that here “the working class is in power.” Presentations were also given by leaders of Cuba’s Commercial and Food Workers Union and Tourism Workers Union.

Silvia Odriozola, of the National Association of Economists and Accountants, spoke on the state of the Cuban economy today. Another feature was a panel discussion on the Cuban sugar industry. Liobel Pérez, of the state sugar company Azcuba, explained steps underway to improve irrigation systems and the mechanization of the sugar harvest, as well as to develop biofuel from sugarcane derivatives.

Orlando Borrego, who fought under the command of Ernesto Che Guevara in Cuba’s revolutionary war, and served as sugar minister in the 1960s, spoke about his experiences working with Guevara in the revolutionary government. He described Guevara’s qualities as a communist leader who instilled confidence in working people that they could build a socialist society on new economic foundations and transform themselves in the process.

The conference program included more than 20 panels. Some discussed the situation facing working people internationally, from Argentina to Venezuela. Others took up the history of the working-class movement in Cuba, from the role of Julio Antonio Mella, founding leader of the Cuban Communist Party in the 1920s, to the textile workers strike during World War II. Another series focused on women in the Cuban workforce and unions.

The conference itself was held at a historic trade union and cultural center, the Cigar Rollers Palace. Founded by the tobacco workers union in 1925, it served for decades



Left, Maykel Espinosa/Juventud Rebelde; right, Martín Koppel/Militant  
**Left, SWP leader Mary-Alice Waters. Right, Ulises Guilarte, general secretary of CTC.**

as a broader center for educational, social and organizing activities of the labor movement. It is now being restored to become a social center and museum on the history of the Cuban workers movement.

### **Presentation on U.S. class struggle**

The final day of the conference featured the two-and-a-half-hour program on the class struggle in the United States. In her talk, titled, “In defense of the U.S. working class,” Waters addressed misconceptions and prejudices about the U.S. working class that are common in Cuba and elsewhere.

In replying to the two questions she posed, Waters described in some detail the importance of the teachers strike that exploded in West Virginia and has spread to Oklahoma, Arizona, and elsewhere. She explained how it is a response to decades of attacks on the living standards of working people by the owners of industry and their government. In West Virginia, she noted, the teachers strike “became a genuine social movement fighting for the needs of the entire working class and its allies.”

Waters said it’s not surprising that most of the states where teachers have walked out are where Trump won big majorities in 2016. She quoted a teacher from West Virginia — one of the most economically ravaged regions in the country — who said that people there voted for Trump for the same reason they went on strike. They have nothing but distrust and growing hatred for what they call the political establishment, both Democrats and Republicans, from Washington to state Capitols across the country.

Far from growing reaction, what we’re seeing among working people in the U.S., Waters underlined, is greater openness today than at any time in our political lives to consider what a socialist revolution is and why our class should take state power. That’s what SWP members have learned firsthand as they go door to door talking with working people in rural and urban areas across the country.

Is a socialist revolution in the U.S. possible? Waters answered, “Not only is it possible, but even more important, revolutionary battles by the toilers are inevitable.” What is not inevitable is victory. That depends above all on the caliber of proletarian leadership.

As evidence of the kinds of battles to come and the revolutionary capacities of the working class, she pointed to three of the most important class-struggle upsurges in the U.S. in the last century. One was the mass labor battles of the 1930s that organized millions of workers into the industrial unions, and especially the union-organizing drive led by the Minneapolis Teamsters throughout the Upper Midwest, who had a class-struggle leadership that included members of the Socialist Workers Party.

Another was the mass Black, proletarian-led movement of the 1950s and ’60s, which brought down Jim Crow segregation. Combined with the deep impact of the simulta-



Martin Koppel/Militant

**Audience at panel on class struggle in U.S. at April 2018 Havana conference.**

neous example of Cuba’s advancing socialist revolution, it gave new generations unshakable confidence in what the working class could achieve.

These struggles became intertwined with what became the millions-strong movement against Washington’s war in Vietnam, which reached into the draftee army and shook the confidence of the U.S. ruling class.

In the second part of the program, Jacob Perasso, a union freight rail conductor in Albany, New York, described working conditions in the industry as bosses reduce crew sizes, extend workdays up to 12 hours, and cut corners on safety. He noted how his co-workers are seeking ways to resist these attacks and their openness to discuss what socialists put forward.

Alyson Kennedy, who was part of the first wave of women who fought their way into underground mining jobs, related some of the battles she was involved in, from West Virginia to Alabama to Utah during her 14 years as a coal miner. Currently working as a cashier at a store in Texas, she talked about the teachers strike in Oklahoma and its impact on working people throughout the region.

Willie Head, a small farmer in south Georgia, described the long struggle by farmers who are Black to keep their land and some of the forms of discrimination they face from the banks and the government. He explained how, like most small producers, he has had to work many different jobs off the farm in order to earn enough income to keep farming.

Róger Calero, drawing on his involvement in union struggles by meatpackers in Minnesota and coal miners in Utah, explained how anti-immigrant prejudices are driven by the U.S. rulers, not working people, and why the fight to prevent scapegoating of immigrant workers and win amnesty is a life-and-death question for the working class.

Omari Musa, a veteran of decades of union battles as well as the Black rights movement, gave numerous exam-

ples showing how and why today it is harder than ever for the U.S. capitalist rulers to use anti-Black racism to divide workers, and how this has strengthened the working class.

One panelist, Harry D'Agostino, a musician, who was unable to participate at the last minute, wrote out his remarks, which were distributed to everyone present. He discussed the particular challenges faced by young people just entering the workforce — and the impact of seeing the working class in action for the first time.

#### **'Amazed at conditions in U.S.'**

After the presentations, a Cuban audience member asked why all the struggles in the United States seem to be by different “sectors” isolated from each other.

Waters replied that the apparently disparate struggles register the fact that working-class resistance in the U.S. is only now beginning to develop into a social movement, led by the working class, that can eventually become strong enough to bring together fights on different fronts so they reinforce each other. These different fronts are all class questions, she said, part of the fight to unify the working class in struggle.

The discussion continued informally over the next few hours. Numerous delegates said they especially appreciated the concreteness of the descriptions of job conditions and labor struggles in the United States — and were amazed by the facts presented.

A teacher from the Autonomous University of Chapingo, Mexico, told Waters that what she learned “completely changed” how she viewed what is happening in the United States today. Two Argentine teachers from the National University of Southern Patagonia told the *Militant* they were glad to hear the discussion on the need to defend immigrant workers in face of deportations, an issue posed in Argentina as well, where the ruling class scapegoats Bolivian and other immigrants.

#### **Discussion on Cuban economy**

The economic and political challenges in Cuba today were a central thread of discussion at the conference. CTC General Secretary Guilarte reported that 584,000 people now work in what is often called here the “nonstate” sector of the economy. These include both owners and workers at private restaurants, landlords who rent rooms to tourists in private homes, members of cooperative enterprises in construction, transportation, and many other small businesses. Guilarte as well as economist Silvia

Odrizola explained that the CTC is seeking to organize all those involved in the “nonstate” sector.

A Chilean delegate asked if that meant the CTC is organizing both owners and employees of small businesses as if they are all workers. Odrizola said that was accurate and argued in favor of the policy, saying that “many things are new and changing, and the problems are still being worked out.”

During a panel discussion on “regional economic integration,” an important debate took place between Pedro Ross, former longtime CTC general secretary, and one of the Argentine participants. Ross took the floor to argue that the fundamental problems facing workers and farmers in Latin America will not be addressed until capitalism is overturned, as was done in Cuba. He reinforced a point made by two University of Havana students on the panel who said the world capitalist system is in a long-term economic crisis that means no end to unemployment and poverty for millions.

When panel moderator Nerina Visacovsky, a professor at the University of Buenos Aires in Argentina, began to close the discussion period, saying, “We all need to learn from Che,” Ross interjected, “And Marx, Engels, and Lenin.”

Visacovsky replied, “Yes, it’s true we must study the classics of Marxism, but we also need to see how conditions today have changed so we don’t follow outdated recipes.”

Ross responded in turn, “In Cuba we made a socialist revolution. Ours is a proven ‘recipe.’ Capitalism must be overturned.” He added, “And to learn more about this, I urge everyone to listen to what the American *compañeros* will say,” referring to the panel on the U.S. class struggle scheduled for the next day.

Closing the final session of the conference, Cuban History Institute President René González Barrios thanked the U.S. socialists not only for the presentations but for bringing an array of books on the subjects discussed. Over the course of the three days, conference delegates purchased some 140 of them.

Among the most popular were *Is Socialist Revolution in the U.S. Possible?* by Mary-Alice Waters, and two books by SWP National Secretary Jack Barnes: *Are They Rich Because They’re Smart?* and *The Clintons’ Anti-Working-Class Record*. A good number of participants got one or more volumes of the four-part series by Farrell Dobbs on the 1930s Teamsters battles, now available in its entirety in Spanish.