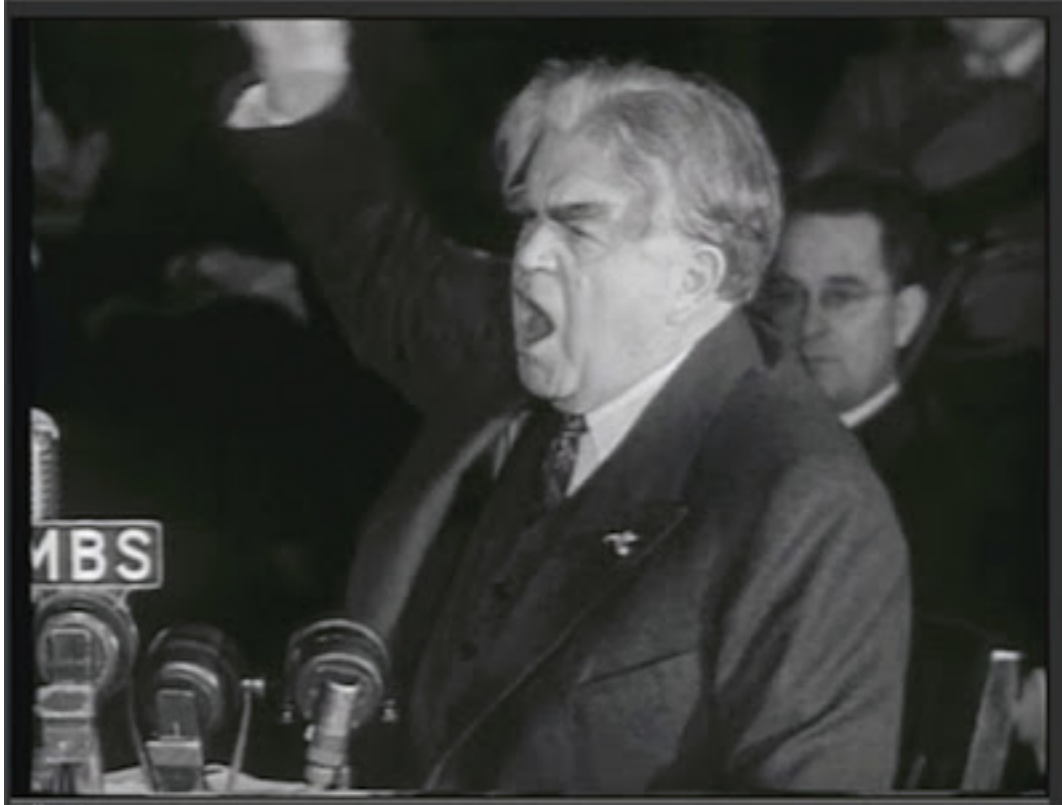


## [Anne Lewis : Workers' Rights and the Fight Against Poverty](#)



*Labor leader John L. Lewis testifies before Congress in 1947. Still image from archival film footage.*

### **Poverty in America and the attack on public sector unions**

**I want to ask a basic question that unifies religious, labor, and community organizations at the core. Why in this, the richest country in the world, are people poor?**

**By Anne Lewis / *The Rag Blog* / March 10, 2011**

The labor movement has rarely won anything without the social movement, and the social movement has rarely won anything without the labor movement. One often cited example is Dr. King's 1963 March for Jobs and Freedom initiated by A. Philip Randolph of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters.

If you have any doubts about the necessity of a combined effort, watch this [archival film of John L. Lewis](#) when he testified before Congress in 1947 about health care and pensions for miners paid by the coal companies.

The resulting welfare fund, hard fought at the grassroots level by miners and their families, was the most comprehensive health care that I can think of. I know because I was covered under it from the mid seventies to the eighties when it was lost under Reagan.

We frequently marginalize each other -- social movement folks saying unions don't matter anymore and condemning labor "bureaucrats" and union folks saying that social movement people don't care about workers and have grandiose ideas of their own power. Some of us get downright schizophrenic dividing our lives into two segments. It's time we stop this nonsense. We need to speak a common language.

I want to ask a basic question that unifies religious, labor, and community organizations at the core. Why in this, the richest country in the world, are people poor? Please think about how you might respond.

That same question was posed to a wide segment of people, rich and poor, in 2001. The [NPR survey](#) provides an analysis of public response to welfare reform (many of us called it *deform*) during the Clinton administration.

Here's a table that asks whether it's circumstances that create poverty or poor people themselves not doing enough. The percentages describe poverty level -- we know it's set way too low. In 2001 200% of poverty for a family of four was \$34,000.

	People not doing enough	Circumstances	Don't know
Total	48	45	7
<100%	39	57	52
100-200%	44	46	10
200%+	50	44	6

Then NPR asked folks to name the most important cause of poverty in the United States.

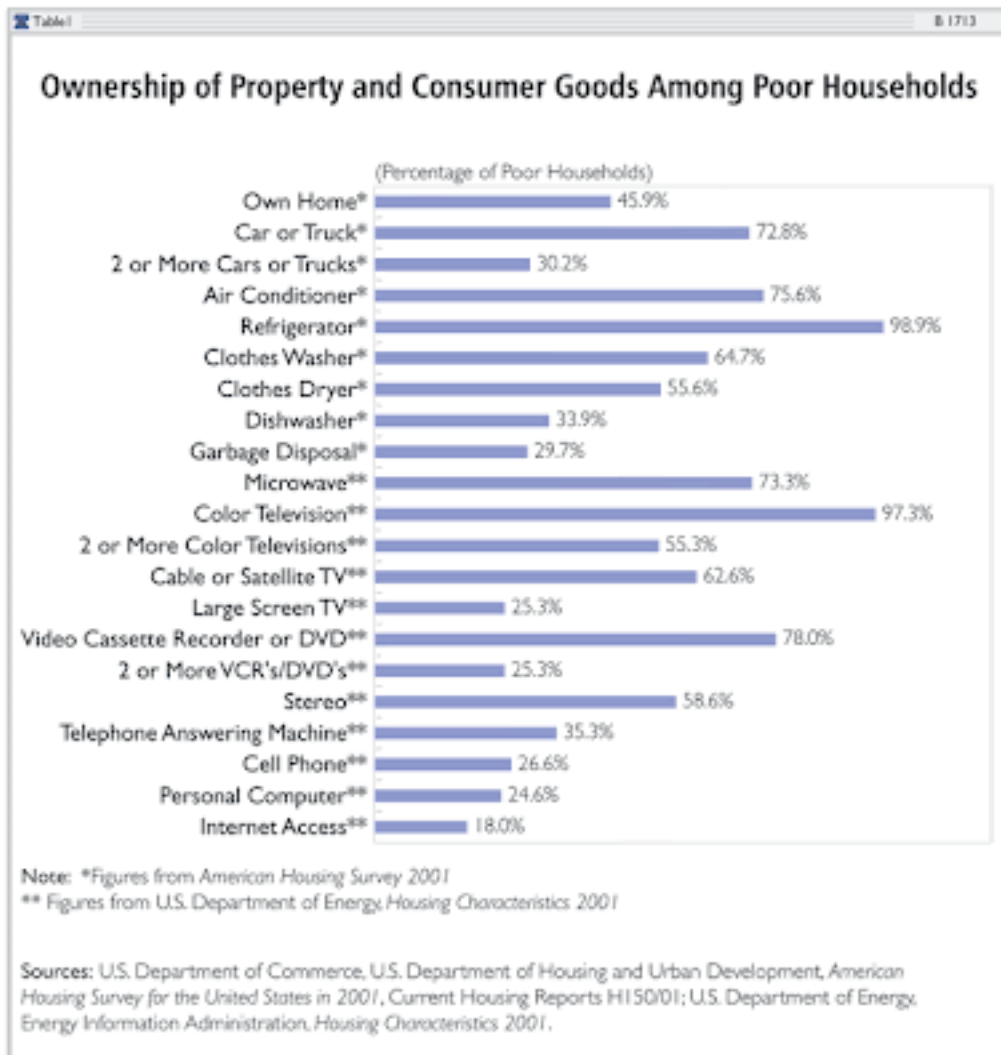
### Most Important Cause Summary

	Total	<100%	100-200%	200%+
Drug abuse	13	22	12	11
Medical bills	6	10	9	5
Too many jobs being part time or low wage	13	17	13	12
Too many single-parent families	8	6	8	7
A shortage of jobs	6	10	7	5
The welfare system	6	3	5	6
Too many immigrants	4	5	5	4
Poor people lacking motivation	11	8	10	12
Decline in moral values	13	6	13	14
Poor quality of public schools	16	9	12	17
None of these	1	1	2	1
Don't know	3	2	4	3
No item a major cause	2	*	1	2

Number one is “the poor quality of public schools.”

At about the same time, the Heritage Foundation decided to prove poverty in the United States wasn't a problem after all. The Heritage Foundation survey is titled, “Understanding Poverty in America.” Here's the starting point.

The [next bar graph](#) compares the living space of poor people in the United States favorably to that of the average European.



**CLICK ON IMAGES TO ENLARGE.**

Here are two more rational definitions of poverty:

Fundamentally, poverty is a denial of choices and opportunities, a violation of human dignity. It means lack of basic capacity to participate effectively in society. It means not having enough to feed and clothe a family, not having a school or clinic to go to, not having the land on which to grow one's food or a job to earn one's living, not having access to credit. It means insecurity, powerlessness and exclusion of individuals, households and communities. It means susceptibility to violence, and it often implies living in marginal or fragile environments, without access to clean water or sanitation. -- **United Nations**

To meet nutritional requirements, to escape avoidable disease, to be sheltered, to be clothed, to be able to travel, and to be educated. -- **Amartya Sen**

Better, right? We're at least getting to the idea of living well and a more humane definition. Notably lacking is the mention of labor unions and collective action, although you could

make the argument that the United Nations definition pushes us in that direction with language about effective participation, dignity, and jobs. The lack of worker organization isn't mentioned in the NPR study. Neither is discrimination, race, ethnicity, or gender or environment or workers' rights.

Would you have named lack of unionization or lousy labor law or something like that as an important reason why poverty exists in this country?

In July 2002, union members overall had a [20% higher hourly wage](#) (\$20.65 vs. \$16.42). In blue-collar industry it was \$18.88 vs. \$12.95; in service occupations, \$16.22 vs. \$8.98. That's not counting benefits. Those ratios have remained constant.

Currently nearly one in three public workers are union members compared with 6.9 percent of the workers in private-sector industries. These organized workers are under siege in Wisconsin, Puerto Rico, Indiana, Ohio, and here in Texas. Many work in public schools and universities. The occupation of the Wisconsin capitol started with 2,000 graduate teaching assistants and union members from the University of Wisconsin, Madison, on Feb. 14. The attack on these workers and on the work that they do is tightly connected -- and they are fighting back.

First, education is not, in and of itself, a cure for poverty. NPR poll aside, "Poor quality of public schools" is not the most important cause of poverty. We could go on and on about how good or bad our schools are, but [lack of education is not the leading indicator of poverty](#).

As much as we'd like it to be so, there isn't any substantial difference in the average wage of a high school graduate and a high school drop out. It's considerably less than the boost from unionization. Remember unionization gave a worker at least a 20% boost in wages. A high school diploma gives a less than 15% boost.

**The attack on teachers' unions in this country has been absolutely barbaric and I believe it violates international standards of dignity and decency.**

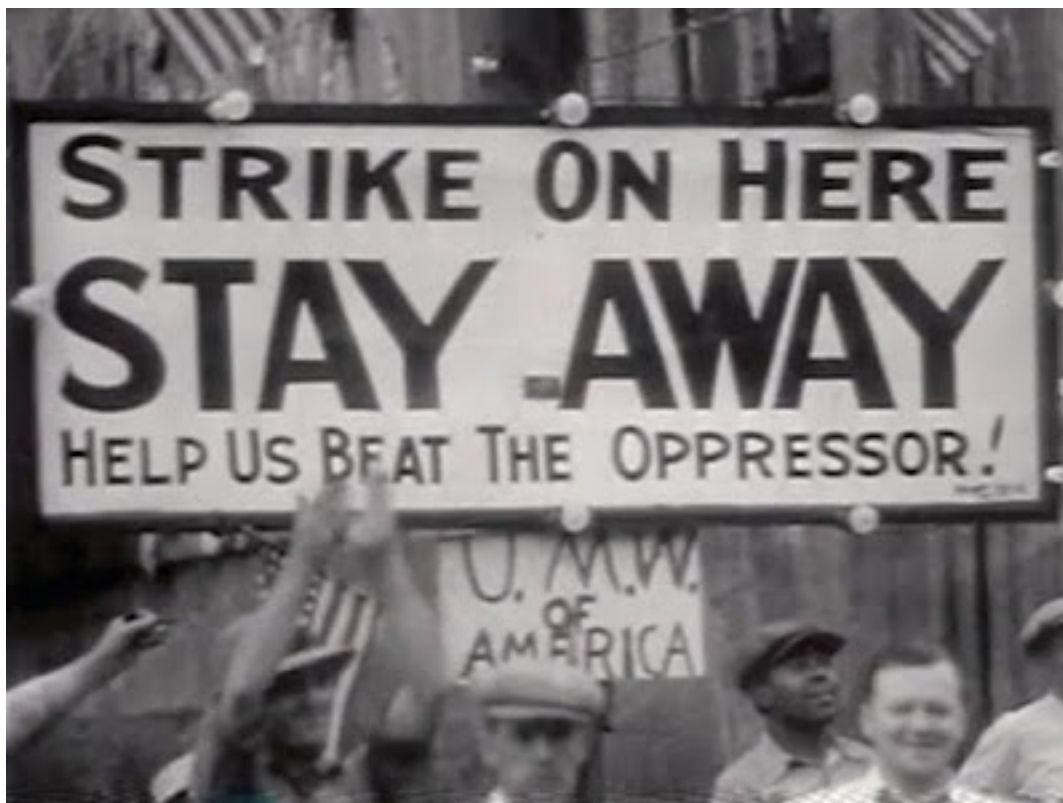
Unfortunately, the way we've been looking at education both at primary and secondary level is supply-side economics: improve the quality of workers through education and grow the quantity of quality workers-- all for the rich employers -- and they won't be poor no more because the rich will take care of them. Well it doesn't work that way any more than tax breaks for the rich have created an economy that benefits all of us.

All this talk about creating a competitive workforce for the global economy and endless debates about whether our public schools and universities do or don't meet the demands of the marketplace is a bunch of hooey. But most folks believe this nonsense. Me too. When I think about our teen-age son's future, I immediately think: will he finish high school; will his grades and SAT scores be high enough to get into a good college; what's a high ranked college we can afford... and so on.

Even though I know darn well that there would be much better ways to go about making sure that our child has a good future -- make sure that his nutrition is good, introduce him to cultural expression, work to strengthen our community with public transportation, public space, libraries, and museums, fight for the rights of public school workers and quality public schools, and fight for the rights of all workers, especially their right to organize.

The attack on teachers' unions in this country has been absolutely barbaric and I believe it violates international standards of dignity and decency. I also believe there are large elements of sexism involved here. 70% of public school teachers are women overall. In Texas about 82% of elementary and middle school teachers are female. At UT, about 80% of full professors are male and about 60% of lecturers are female.

Working conditions for teachers are really lousy. Think about being the only adult in front of a class of 20 eight-year-olds and having to pee. Forced overtime -- hours worked without pay are unbelievable -- and pay isn't so great. Wisconsin teachers average about \$40,000 a year. Lecturers in my department, which is unusually well paid, start at \$6,500 a class and are only allowed two classes a semester and two semesters a year. That's \$26,000 a year for what works out to be full time work with an unpaid leave over the summer.



*Still image from archival film of John Lewis testifying before Congress in 1947.*

In 2002, No Child Left Behind began a new attack in the name of school reform by devaluing teachers in the name of accountability. It was really insidious. It told teachers

what to say in their classrooms (teachers in low performance schools are scripted like actors these days); used corporate standardized tests to tell teachers what to teach; it bought curriculum prescribed by corporations (yes folks like Pearson Education, Houghtlin Mifflin, and The Pet Goat publisher McGraw Hill use the language of illness as though kids are sick and they're doctors); and emphasized charter schools and privatization as salvation. And it's not just the Republicans. Think of Arne Duncan and the Race to the Top.

Now I would agree that our public schools have failed Latino and African American and working class children. That's one of the reasons that so many parents fought for integration. We know that separate is not equal. Now we have further segregation of the schools in a system based on and currently exhibiting apartheid.

I don't think the language is too extreme. A very interesting study explores the [role of the Koch brothers](#) of Wisconsin fame in defeating the Wake County, North Carolina, socio-economic integration plan. That plan was a model of quality education for all children for the country. The Kochs poured money into the school board race, cast the plan as communistic, and put in a new school board. They won and the children and teachers of Wake County lost big.

Then we have "Waiting for Superman," which I watched at the Alamo Drafthouse South with a "progressive" Austin audience who giggled at those lazy teachers, cried and then rejoiced with the poor little black child who won a school lottery, and really dug the idea that the problem with the public school system was teacher tenure and their union. I resorted to drink.

Here's a cartoon from Saving Our Schools from Superman that sums up the movie.



### **Saving our schools from Superman**

At UT, our buildings are plastered with plaques that reveal the connections between the corporate world and higher education. We have the Accenture Endowed Excellence Fund; the Arthur Anderson and Co. Centennial Professorship; Austin Smiles Endowed Fellowship in Speech Pathology; Bank of America Centennial Professorship in Petroleum Engineering; Enstar Chair for Free Enterprise; La Quinta Motor Inns, Inc. Centennial Professorship in Nursing; the BP Exploration Classroom Endowment; Conoco Phillips Faculty Fellowship in Law; and so on.

We have a University President whose three legislative priorities are:

- no disproportionate cuts (I guess it's okay to cut education as long as we also let folks die on the streets);
- support for the Texas Competitive Knowledge Fund (dollar match for external research support);



- and a new engineering building.

We have a legislature and a state governor that doesn't believe in public services at all -- not education, not health care -- not for children, not for the disabled, not for the elderly. They're cutting off college scholarships and denying the rights of immigrants as well as working class students an education.

That's the external world. The internal one at the University of Texas, Austin is that the budget crunch is used as an excuse to do what the higher-ups have wanted to do all along. Raise tuitions and cut programs that serve students and lay off lecturers, graduate students, and staff (we're down to once a month office cleanings). Do away with the Identity Studies Centers that we fought to bring to the University -- African American, Asian, Mexican American, women, and gender. Forget undergraduate education and turn us into an elite research institution.

**We need to join every progressive force in this country into a movement that will finally put an end to the systemic destruction of educational opportunity and workers' rights.**

Before I summarize this rant, I wanted you to see a [scene from an interview I did](#) with the Director of Public Affairs, Martin Fox, at the National Right to Work Committee. That's one of the main organizations that the Koch brothers fund and hang out with.

The clip is from a documentary I made in the context of the Pittston coal strike, which was about health care for retired and disabled miners and widows. "Justice in the Coalfields" is about the contradictions between individual and collective rights and what justice means.

The clip begins with a map of right to work states -- you'll be hearing a lot about that in the next few months. It ends with Bradley McKenzie who led a student walkout in support of the miners. He became a non-union coal miner because there were no union jobs, but his ideas express solidarity at its core. In between is Martin Fox who handled press communications for the Committee at the time.

Martin Fox was a proud member of the National Rifle Association. I know this because I watched him get in his car, with a customized license plate that read "GETAGUN." Martin Fox is now President of the National Pro Life Alliance and a priest. He holds forth on unions on [his blog](#).

Who has the power to challenge these obscene thugs who have taken over our country?  
Who wants to challenge them?

Well we do. The "we" is organized labor -- public worker unions. Really, we're not providing state "services." We're providing public necessities. We're helping the social movement create a vision of a more decent world that includes the working class. And when we collectively fight for ourselves to have decent pay and decent working conditions and democratic control in the work place, we're not in contradiction with the public good. We're supporting it.

There are a lot of us. The Texas State Employees Union TSEU-CWA local 1686 has 12,000 members in Texas. We have large numbers of women and African Americans and Latinos. Discrimination has been slightly less in the public sector and these workers are more likely to join a union because of a history of struggle. AFT has 57,000 members in Texas and TSTA has 65,000 members. And there are state workers organized by AFSCME and other unions.

Those of us in the labor movement and those of us in the social movement have got to get to know each other. We need to practice democracy together and work together. We need to join every progressive force in this country into a movement that will finally put an end to the systemic destruction of educational opportunity and workers' rights.

There's a great line at the end of a Committees of Correspondence statement on Wisconsin:

And to the workers of Wisconsin, Indiana and Ohio: our heartfelt thanks -- may your occupation of the statehouses foretell the day when you become the governors.  
*[Anne Lewis is an independent filmmaker associated with Appalshop, senior lecturer at UT-Austin, and member of TSEU-CWA Local 6186 and NABET-CWA. She is the associate director of Harlan County, U.S.A and the producer/director of Fast Food Women, To Save the Land and People, Morristown: in the air and sun, and a number of other social issue and cultural documentaries. Her website is [annelewis.org](http://annelewis.org).]*

### **[The Rag Blog](#)**

Posted by thorne dreyer at [8:15 AM](#) 

Labels: [Anne Lewis](#), [Education](#), [John L. Lewis](#), [Labor Unions](#), [Poverty](#), [Public Schools](#), [Rag Bloggers](#), [UT-Austin](#)

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**Onward Through the Blog**

**The Rag Blog is a reader-supported newsmagazine produced by activist journalists committed to progressive social change. The Rag Blog is published by the New Journalism Project, a 501(c)(3) Texas non-profit.**



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A promotional graphic for 'Rag Radio'. On the right is a photograph of Thorne Dreyer, an older man with glasses and a goatee, wearing large black headphones. On the left is a stylized graphic of a vintage microphone with the words 'RAG RADIO' in red, bold, sans-serif letters above it. Yellow lightning bolt symbols are scattered around the microphone. In the background, there is a newspaper clipping with the headline 'John Economy: The First 100 Days' and other text.

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### Recent Stories

- [Tom Hayden : Progressive Dems See Opening for New Politics](#) by Tom Hayden / The Rag Blog. **The sight of progressive Democrats shaming and exposing the Wall Street-funded "Third Way" Democrats is a sign of a powerful new opening for progressives on the American political spectrum.**
- [Jack A. Smith : Climate Change Confab Brings Too Little Too Late](#) by Jack A. Smith / The Rag Blog. The sharply increasing scientific indicators of impending disastrous global climate change have failed to motivate the principal developed countries to accelerate the lackluster pace of their efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.
- [Lamar W. Hankins : Opportunist Narvaiz Takes On Doggett Again in Gerrymandered 35th](#) by Lamar W. Hankins / The Rag Blog. **Former San Marcos mayor Susan Narvaiz, who is again challenging U.S. Rep. Lloyd Doggett in Texas' gerrymandered 35th district, is a political chameleon who says what she needs to say to protect herself from political accountability.**
- [Steve Horn : Keystone XL's Houston 'Fork in the Road'](#) by Steve Horn / DeSmogBlog. The southern half of TransCanada's Keystone XL tar sands pipeline includes a "Houston Lateral Pipeline" that is leading the LyondellBasell refinery to retool itself for the looming feast of tar sands crude and fracked oil bounty.
- [RAG RADIO / Thorne Dreyer : November Guests Include Spiritual Counselor, Citizens' Advocate, Singer-Songwriter](#) by Rag Radio / The Rag Blog. **Thorne Dreyer's guests in November included a Methodist minister and longtime social activist, a noted citizens' advocate, two staffers from the original Rag, the author of a book about the 'movement that started the civil rights movement,' and an acclaimed singer-songwriter. Listen to the podcasts here.**
- [BOOKS / Alan Wieder : Paul Buhle's 'Radical Jesus: A Graphic History of Faith'](#) by Alan Wieder / The Rag Blog. Noted historian Paul Buhle, who has published an acclaimed series of nonfiction comics, is one of the most prolific and insightful critics from the American left. "Radical Jesus," which communicates the social message of Jesus Christ in comic format, investigates the inequalities that exist in the world through a theological lens.
- [Rabbi Arthur Waskow : Israel, Hillel, and Idolatry](#) by Rabbi Arthur Waskow / The Rag Blog. **Hillel International, the "home" for many Jewish college students of diverse backgrounds and beliefs, has been beset with controversy about when uncritical support among American Jews for Israel becomes "idolatry of the State."**
- [Paul Krassner : Is There a Doctor in the House?](#) by Paul Krassner / The Rag Blog. The Coachella Valley in Southern California hosted a massive four-day health clinic that helped more than 2,500 uninsured patients. Krassner points out that California

leads the nation in people without health insurance and says that "the insurance industry has a preexisting condition known in technical terminology as greed."

- [Kate Braun : Winter Solstice Falls on Saturn's Day](#) by Kate Braun / The Rag Blog. **Our celebrations during the Winter Solstice take from many traditions, including the Roman Saturnalia, Druid customs, the German "Yule," and the birth of Jesus; and it was Queen Victoria who popularized the lighted Christmas tree.**
- [Allen Young : Ralph Dungan, the 'Good Liberal'](#) by Allen Young / The Rag Blog. A recent obituary of Ralph Dungan, one of President John F. Kennedy's top aides who later served as ambassador to Chile, reminds Allen of a revealing experience he had with the man referred to by a historian as a "good liberal."
- [Ed Felien : A Good \[Angry White\] Man With a Gun](#) by Ed Felien / The Rag Blog. **Paul Anthony Ciancia considered himself a "good man with a gun" -- a warrior against the traitors who were taking over our government, bankrupting our currency, and trying to establish a New World Order -- when he walked into the Los Angeles airport and opened fire with an assault rifle.**
- [BOOKS / Ron Jacobs : Matt Hern Writes With Bravado That Sports Do Matter](#) by Ron Jacobs / The Rag Blog. Engagingly written, Matt Hern's "One Game at a Time" is motivated by the belief that sports do matter as much as sports fans think they do. Hern, like leftist sportswriter Dave Zirin, "walks into the terrain where sports and politics mesh."
- [Lamar W. Hankins : Right-Wing Rants and the Abominable Straw Man](#) by Lamar W. Hankins / The Rag Blog. **The Internet is a marvelous tool when used honestly and correctly, and with recognition of its limitations. But it is also home to angry rants, often from the far right, that make ridiculous claims -- like the one (that actually originated on a satirical site) saying that the Obama administration was setting up gasoline stations to provide free gas to low-income [read: black] people.**
- [HISTORY / Bob Feldman : A People's History of Egypt, Part 12, Section 1, 1947-1948](#) by Bob Feldman / The Rag Blog. More in Bob's series on the continuing movement to democratize Egypt, this time covering the period from 1947-48 when an anti-imperialist left made experienced growth -- and the Muslim Brotherhood collaborated with the Egyptian regime.
- [Harry Targ : My Nelson Mandela](#) by Harry Targ / The Rag Blog. **An irony of 21st century historical discourse is how real historic figures -- like the late Nelson Mandela -- get lionized, sanitized, and redefined as defenders of the ongoing order rather than activists who committed their lives to revolutionary change.**
- [Michael James : Back to Uptown, 1965-1966](#) by Michael James / The Rag Blog. Mike continues his remarkable memoir, accompanied -- and inspired by -- photos from his upcoming book. His adventures -- and the making of an activist -- continue as he heads back to Uptown Chicago, "progressing along my path with another left turn and a big step into America."
- [Alan Waldman : 'Last of the Summer Wine' Has Kept Millions Laughing for 37 Years](#) by Alan Waldman / The Rag Blog. **British national treasure, Roy Clarke,**

**created and wrote all 295 episodes of this droll Britcom about three elderly Yorkshiremen with too much time on their hands.**

- [Alice Embree : Chile and the Politics of Memory](#) by Alice Embree / The Rag Blog. Chileans went to the polls Sunday and appear to be reelecting Socialist president Michelle Bachelet on the 40th anniversary of the bloody U.S.-supported coup against Socialist president Salvador Allende. Alice writes about the dramatic contradictions in Chilean politics and history.
- [Paul Krassner : A Tale of Two Alternative Media Conferences](#) by Paul Krassner / The Rag Blog. Paul remembers the original Alternative Media Conference in June 1970 at Goddard College in Vermont -- and it was a wild and woolly affair headlined by the likes of Ram Dass, Harvey Kurtzman, and Art Spiegelman -- as the college hosts another conference keynoted by progressive radio host Thom Hartmann.
- [RAG RADIO / Thorne Dreyer : Singer-Songwriter Slaid Cleaves in Interview and Performance Interview](#) by Thorne Dreyer / Rag Radio. Acclaimed musician Cleaves talks about Woody Guthrie's influence on his work, reflects on his time as a busker on the streets of Ireland, and spins some yarns. He also performs live for our audience. Read the story and listen to the podcast.
- [Harry Targ : STEM and the Tyranny of the Meme](#) by Harry Targ / The Rag Blog. From the fear of "falling behind the Soviets" to the missile gap and, more recently the wars on drugs and terrorism, the fear of falling behind some fictional adversaries is an ongoing "meme" used by economic, political, and military elites. The latest? Now it's the "STEM crisis" and the fear that we're falling behind other nations in science and technology .
- [Alice Embree : Anne Lewis' New Website Brings Austin Movement History to Life](#) by Alice Embree / The Rag Blog. Noted documentary filmmaker Anne Lewis has created a website called Austin Beloved Community that uses audio, film, photos, maps, and personal recollections to create a "digital collage" about the struggle for social and economic justice in Austin from the 1880s to the present. Alice interviews Lewis about the unique project.
- [BOOKS / Ron Jacobs : Marc Myers Tells Us 'Why Jazz Happened'](#) by Ron Jacobs / The Rag Blog. Ron reviews a new book on America's own music in which Marc Myers "provides the reader with a deep, rich, and broad perspective on the confluence of jazz and U.S. history in the decades following World War Two."
- [INTERVIEW / Jonah Raskin : Novelist Beverly Gologorsky Was Shaped by Sixties, Feminism, and The Bronx](#) by Jonah Raskin / The Rag Blog. Another unique interview from Jonah with novelist Beverly Gologorsky, whose latest book, "Stop Here," "the title of which nearly shouts its presence. Gologorsky, "a novelist shaped by the New Left," edited anti-war publications Viet-Report and Leviathan in the '60s and '70s.
- [Bob Feldman : A People's History of Egypt, Part 11, Section 2](#) by Bob Feldman / The Rag Blog. The latest in Feldman's series on the "movement to democratize Egypt" covers the period of 1945-6 when Egyptian communist and labor grew and faced government retaliation.

- [David McReynolds : We Are All Wounded Veterans](#) by David McReynolds / The Rag Blog. Long-time pacifist writer and activist McReynolds says there's something "infinitely sad" about the recent celebration of Veterans Day. "In the bad wars -- which are the only wars we have fought for some time now -- there is the terrible knowledge that the enemy was never really the enemy," he says.
- [RAG RADIO / Thorne Dreyer : October Interviews with Poppy Northcutt, Maneesha James, Seth Holmes, and Thomas Zigel Interviews](#) by Thorne Dreyer / Rag Radio. In October Rag Radio guests addressed Texas feminist history, issues involving death and dying, the plight of migrant farmworkers, and the post-Katrina craziness captured in fiction. **Read about our guests and listen to the podcasts here.**
- [Michael James : Going Off Campus, 1965](#) by Michael James / The Rag Blog. Mike continues to share experiences and images from his rich history as an activist and adventurer -- that will be published in an upcoming book, "Michael Gaylord James' Pictures from the Long Haul." Here Mike reports on the Free Speech Movement at Berkeley, community organizing in Oakland, and his travels across the country in a 1957 Plymouth station wagon "drive-away."
- [Alan Waldman: 'Keeping Up Appearances' Tops Second Tier of My Favorite Britcoms](#) by Alan Waldman / The Rag Blog. Waldman has been reviewing vintage, mostly-British television series now available on DVD, Netflix, and YouTube. "Keeping Up Appearances" "is a very funny sitcom with a brilliant cast," starring Patricia Routledge as social-climbing snob Hyacinth Bucket.

#### From the Rag Bloggers

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