

Introducing *Platypus*

An introduction to the new Marxist reading group and journal, focused on making sense of the mess inherited from the old, new, and post-political Left—and it questions raises about political solidarity and critical consciousness in the present

[T]he producers are more than ever thrown back on theory ... by virtue of insistent self-criticism. ... [F]ollowing the schematic division of physical and mental labour, they split themselves up into workers and intellectuals. This division cripples the practice which is called for. ... [T]he growing opacity of capitalist mass society makes an association between intellectuals who still are such, with workers who still know themselves to be such, more timely ... [In the past] such unity was compromised by free-wheeling bourgeois of the liberal professions, who were shut out by industry and tried to gain influence by left-wing bustlings. ... Today, when the concept of the proletariat, unshaken in its economic essence, is so occluded that in the greatest industrial country there can be no question of proletarian class-consciousness, the role of intellectuals would no longer be to alert the torpid to their most obvious interests, but to strip the veil from the eyes of the wise-guys, the illusion that capitalism, which makes them its temporary beneficiaries, is based on anything other than their exploitation and oppression. The deluded workers are directly dependent on those who can still just see and tell of their delusion. Their hatred of intellectuals has changed accordingly. ... The masses no longer mistrust intellectuals because they betray the revolution, but because they might want it, and thereby reveal how great is their own need of intellectuals. Only if the extremes come together will humanity survive.

—Theodor W. Adorno, “Part 10. Imaginative Excesses,” in “Messages in a Bottle” (orphaned from *Minima Moralia*, 1944–47) (in *New Left Review*, 1993)

CHRIS CUTRONE

Platypus is an idea for a journal project on the Marxist Left several of us have had for a number of years, starting with two of us with a long political background on the Trotskyist Left, going back to our undergraduate years (1989–92) at Hampshire College. The journal idea has been grounded in our shared commitments to challenging post-New Left politics. In recent years, the initial two of us were joined by a few University of Chicago students of the critical social theorist and Marx scholar Moishe Postone. We have been motivated by questioning what a Leftist politics today might be—we are struck by the decline if not total demise of the Left, and by

the certain absence of Leftist politics informing the world. So our project involves radically interrogating the self-declared “Left,” taking nothing for granted in our sense of the necessity for reformulating a Leftist politics and re-appropriating the history of the Left towards the present.

The idea for taking our namesake from the platypus comes from the history of the creature’s discovery and difficulties being categorized and recognized for what it is, which we take to be emblematic for the state of any possible Left—of any social-emancipatory politics—today. Just as the platypus symbolizes the challenge to traditional understandings of the order of the natural world, our intent is to challenge the received understanding of the Left, both “Old” (of the 1920s–30s–40s, i.e., post-1917) and “New” (1960s–70s)—as well as “post-” (1980s–present). We find present and historical self-understandings on the Left to manifest great confusions that remain confounding and defeating for emancipatory politics today.

Because our focus is on ideological problems of the Left, we consider ourselves to be revolutionary intellectuals and identify as such. Our approach to the history of the Left is characterized by going “against the grain” of historical events, exemplified by Walter Benjamin’s philosophy of history. For us, past moments in the history of the Left are charged with emancipatory potential that went unrealized but nonetheless continue to task us in the present. It is in this sense that we understand Benjamin’s injunction that “even the dead are not safe”; past struggles that failed or were betrayed can be failed and betrayed again, and needless suffering in the present and future that could have been averted will not be. For us, any possible future emancipation is tied to honoring—learning from—past efforts and sacrifices. Our first meetings of the *Platypus* Marxist reading group in Chicago grew out of the course I teach at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) on Theodor W. Adorno and addressed Adorno’s 1969 correspondence with Herbert Marcuse concerning the New Left: we recognized the history for problems of our present in Adorno’s critical prognosis on the 1960s.

The principal influences for *Platypus* are the Marxist political tradition exemplified by Marx, Lenin, Luxemburg and Trotsky, and the critical theoretical tradition of the Frankfurt School, exemplified first and foremost by the works of Adorno, but also by important works by Lukács,

Benjamin, Horkheimer, Marcuse, et al. However, we are also concerned with the complex legacy of 20th Century thought and politics that has developed in response to—and reaction against—Marxism, both politically and intellectually: existentialism, post-structuralism, and other tendencies leading to “post-”modernism—as well as neo-conservatism—which we regard as products of the regression and disintegration of the Left to the present.

These first years of my teaching at SAIC and the Univ. Chicago have been characterized politically by the conditions of the post-9/11/01 world: the various policies of the George W. Bush administration, and the Afghanistan and Iraq invasions and occupations. So my teaching Marxist critical theory in this context has always involved certain caveats about the (in)adequacy of the present “Left” response, and how the historical critical-theoretical tradition (of Adorno, Benjamin, et al.) might speak to the state of the Left today.

The actual determining impetus to form the *Platypus* reading group was provided by a few of my graduate students from SAIC classes last year (2005–06), who raised the issue of an extra-curricular forum that could address the purchase of historical critical theory for the tasks and problems of the Left today. Thus the reading group was formed in Spring 2006, at first including the core *Platypus* group of long-term participants, and expanding to include my fellow teacher colleagues and graduate students from Univ. Chicago and my graduate students from SAIC (about a dozen people altogether), and growing by June to include a group of undergraduate students from SAIC and Univ. Chicago, with whom we doubled our numbers.

At the meeting that saw the undergraduate students join the group in numbers, I presented the short editorial/mission statement, “What is a platypus? On surviving the extinction of the Left,” which I had drafted at the request of two long-term colleagues on the *Platypus* project for a planned intervention at the Marxism 2006 “Festival of Resistance” Conference of the British Socialist Workers Party (affiliated with the International Socialist Organization in the US). I also proposed a “syllabus” of readings for the group to discuss for Summer and Fall 2006, centered around readings from *The New Left Reader* anthology edited by former Students for a Democratic Society President (1965–66) Carl Oglesby. The core members of the prospective editorial collective regard the reading

group as a place for expanding the editorial collective and cultivating writing contributors for the journal, which we intend to launch in 2007. The *Platypus* editorial statement and a supplemental short history of the Left can be found at: http://home.comcast.net/~platypus1917/platypus_statement.html

The *Platypus* Marxist reading group in Chicago presently consists of about two dozen regularly attending participants, of which approximately three-fourths come to any particular meeting. We have held bi-weekly meetings since April, with some discussions spawning extra meetings and many continuing onto our e-mail discussion list.

Events that groups of several of us have attended that have informed our progress in the reading group and the *Platypus* journal project, allowing for our growing familiarity and critical awareness of the present state of the “Left,” have been the following: Talks given in Chicago by Brian Holmes on emergent “contingential” identities and geopolitics, David Harvey on cosmopolitanism and the “new” imperialism, the Retort Collective on their book *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War*, Fredric Jameson on dialectic and historical meaning, and Richard Wolin on his book *The Frankfurt School Revisited*; the Chicago Social Forum this past May; and the re-founded Students for a Democratic Society First National Conference in August. In September, most of us attended the Chicago screenings of Patricio Guzmán’s film *Salvador Allende* (2004), which has provided a good frame for our discussion of classic historical issues on the Marxist Left concerning the state, political parties and social revolution. —These events have informed our sense of possibilities for a re-founded Left mostly in a negative sense, allowing us to grasp what any future Left will have to combat and overcome (and illustrating for us the manifold legacy of the preceding Left of the 1960s that has been our critical focus thus far). Positively, the massive immigrants’ rights protests in the first half of 2006, which happened to coincide with the emergence of our group efforts, have remained signal events for our thinking about emerging possibilities for the Left in North America.

Up to this point, our discussions in the *Platypus* reading group in Chicago have been primarily concerned with issues of theory and practice, specifically in considering the history of the 1960s “New” Left in terms of its multiple origins and concerns, such as the Civil Rights movement, the student Free Speech movement, solidarity with the Cuban Revolution, protest against the Vietnam War and imperialism, and women’s liberation, and how these had challenged the Left.

One important discussion, which was carried over the course of several weeks, concerned the historical struggle against racism and for social equality; the roles played by the Civil Rights movement, organized labor and the Marxist Left; the emergence of Black Nationalism (Malcolm X) and the Black Power turn of the late 1960s; the relation of these developments to

summer/fall 2006

the self-understanding of the Left; and its legacy for ostensibly Leftist politics today. We consider the Black Power turn to have been highly destructive of the Left, for it was predicated on the idea of such a thing as a “white” Left, where political solidarity—and consciousness—should not be so racialized. Our sense of the present dearth of blacks on the Left indicates this to us, for we do not regard victims of oppression as thereby having inherently more emancipatory politics, and we regard “identity” politics as symptomatic of the decline of the Left. An important point in our discussion of the late-1960s Black Power turn was to question whether Malcolm X and the Black Panthers really had been to the “Left” of—had more social-emancipatory politics than—Martin Luther King, Jr., Bayard Rustin, et al.

On the issue of identity politics, we also addressed the issue of women’s liberation from gender and sexual oppression vs. feminism, primarily through a seminal essay by the psycho-analytically informed socialist-feminist theorist Juliet Mitchell, “Women: the Longest Revolution” (a work first published in *The New Left Review* but inexplicably omitted from *The New Left Reader*), her subsequent debate with Marxist scholar Quintin Hoare, and a constellation of related texts, including Marcuse’s essay “Marxism and Feminism,” which contains theses that Mitchell explicitly critiqued. As in the case of the Black Power turn, we discussed the emergence of so-called “second-wave” (meaning 1960s–80s) feminism and its explicit anti-Marxism as having been disastrous for clarity about social-emancipatory politics on the Left to the present. Like other substantial essays from the 1960s we have considered, we took Mitchell’s work as indicative of a path not taken which we must necessarily revisit, rather than accepting its subsequent historical eclipse.

In neither case of the historical struggles for social equality, against racism or for women’s and sexual liberation, do we accept that the 1960s “New” Left “knew better” than previous Marxist politics had *done*. Rather, our point is to recover the actual social-emancipatory content of the history of the Left and recognize that perhaps the perceived failures of the “Old” Left had come to seem so only because of subsequent historical defeats and disintegration that set the stage for the 1960s, and not

due to inherent deficiencies or blindness in the Marxist revolutionary socialist tradition. Perhaps the fault was in the (1960s) present and not a past too hastily liquidated. The questions that remain to be answered include: How does a working class-struggle perspective point beyond itself? What, for Marxists, is the social-emancipatory content of the struggle of “labor against capital,” beyond the empirical struggles of workers under capitalism?

The Left tendencies that have been important as influences for our past and present activities towards *Platypus* include various currents in the (post-)Trotskyist Left, including such groups as the Spartacist League and News and Letters (Marxist-Humanists). Beyond these, we have had contact with some other groups in Chicago. A few participants in the reading group during Summer 2006 came to us from the 49th St. Underground, an extremely broad-based and all-inclusive Chicago group whose lead organizers are also University of Chicago graduate students.

In mid-summer (July), the reading group came to touch upon the issue of the significance of the October 1917 Bolshevik Revolution and subsequent international Communism, in the context of discussing the troubled legacy of “Leninism” for the New Left, after 1956 (the crises of the Khrushchev “revelations” of Stalin’s crimes, the split between the Soviet Union and Mao’s China, and the Soviet invasion of Hungary) and after 1968 (when the New Left became predominantly “Marxist-Leninist” or Maoist). Our discussion of Communism began with reading French Communist Party theorist Louis Althusser’s essay on “Contradiction and Overdetermination” (1962), addressing the issue of problems in Marxism regarding the Hegelian dialectical “logic” of history and the role of critical consciousness and agency in revolutionary possibilities. This was followed by our reading of contemporary (circa 1960) Trotskyist writings on the problem of Marxism and revolutionary “leadership” (including the issue of the 1959 Cuban Revolution).

However, this discussion of historic Bolshevism and international Communism in the 20th Century was the occasion of a precipitous and unfortunate development for *Platypus*. Rather than trying to think through and re-consider the meaning of the importance of the Russian Revolution for 20th Century Marxism, a couple of

reading group participants from the Univ. Chicago balked and left the group, bringing about the first major controversy that *Platypus* has experienced (this was a “shake-out” that only involved those leaving who had not been full participants in the group but had maintained an ambivalent distance for political reasons).

The frame through which the dissenters chose to attack Bolshevism was the issue of the Bolshevik suppression of the Kronstadt garrison mutiny in 1921 (which the Bolsheviks themselves had not glorified but had regarded as a “tragic necessity,” and on which the principal historian of the event, Paul Avrich—an anarchist—had concluded [in his 1970 book], despite his sympathies for the mutineers, that the Bolsheviks had been “justified”). We maintained that the suppression of the Kronstadt mutiny was a greatly misleading frame for evaluating the merits of historical Bolshevism, and was not good for explaining the subsequent problems of the Left in the 20th Century; rather, Kronstadt as an issue is a well-worn hobby-horse for a very specific politics: post-1917 anarchism. In the e-mail debates on Kronstadt that ensued, the dissenters refused to engage the very difficult but important issue of the meaning of the Russian Revolution for 20th Century Marxism: What, precisely, was the nature and character of the October 1917 Bolshevik Revolution that at once had seemed to confirm and challenge the Marxism? (Gramsci had called it the “Revolution Against [Marx’s] *Capital!*”) For our consideration of the 1960s “New” Left, this difficulty took the form of the 1960s failures to avoid the twin, complementary pitfalls of Stalinophobia and Stalinophilia in regarding both the Soviet Union and international Communism: What would it mean to adopt a critical attitude towards the Russian Revolution and the history of the Soviet Union and international Communism without abandoning everything we might learn and re-appropriate from it (and treating 20th Century Communism merely, as the title of the recent book by apostate Communist and *In These Times* editor James Weinstein (1926–2005) termed it, “The Long Detour” [2003])?

If, as was asserted by the dissenters, Lenin and the Bolsheviks (including Trotsky) and the influence of the Russian Revolution and subsequent Soviet realities had “destroyed” Marxism for the Left, then what are we to make of the fact

that all the problems of Stalinism raised by the dissenters seemed to confirm 19th and 20th Century anarchist critiques of Marx (e.g., by Bakunin, et al.), which forecast that Marxism could only lead to a totalitarian state? What remains of Marxism if the history of Bolshevism is denied root and branch? If, according to the dissenters, the anarchist critiques of Marx are not good, but only Rosa Luxemburg’s critiques of Lenin, then what are we to make of Luxemburg’s and her Polish and German organizations’ long history of political collaboration with Lenin and the Bolsheviks, her solidarity with the Bolshevik Revolution and identification of her own politics with “Bolshevism,” and her membership in the Third (Communist) International after the Russian Revolution up to her murder by German counter-revolutionaries in 1919? —These are the kinds of issues to which we are committed to (re)thinking through, and for which we do not accept *prima facie* received “wisdom” of any kind.

Towards the end of Fall 2006, we look forward to addressing the aftermath of the 1960s New Left and the crisis of progressive politics in the 1970s–80s with a few meetings on the case study of Michel Foucault and his response to the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, through the recent book *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (which includes Foucault’s writings on Iran) written by Chicago-based authors Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson. Starting in Winter 2007, we project embarking on a series of at least eight lectures and discussions on the history of the Left, pre-1789 to post-2001.

We anticipate that *Platypus* could be part of a potentially much broader renaissance on the Left in coming years, one which might occasion yet another “return to Marx” (as had occurred in the 1920s–30s and 1960s–70s) for grappling with capitalism as the fundamental context for social politics. Our goal is to develop a cohort of like-minded thinkers around a publishing vehicle to help inform to best effect such a reconsideration of the critical-theoretical tradition in light of the history of the Left, and thus help open possibilities for actual—eminently realizable—emancipation from an oppressive and highly destructive present and future that need not have been and need not yet be.

As C. Wright Mills put it at the dawn of the last, “New” Left (1960), we must “try to be realistic in our utopianism.” ☒

A PLATYPUS BIBLIOGRAPHY

The bibliography/reading list encompasses several different registers in which our discussions have been thematized. These readings have been important in our discussions less for interest in the authors and their particular political biographies and more in the issues raised by the particular texts themselves. They are listed in chronological order of writing. For the order and themes in which the Platypus group has read and discussed these texts at our meetings, please refer to our web page for the reading group at: http://home.comcast.net/~platypus1917/platypus_chicagoreadings2006.htm

The Present: Crisis on the Left

—Moishe Postone, “History and Helplessness” (in *Public Culture*, 2006)
 —Spartacist League, “The Senile Dementia of Post-Marxism [on Hardt and Negri’s books *Empire* and *Multitude*, and John Holloway’s *Change the World Without Taking Power!*]” (in *Spartacist*, 2006)

Iraq Invasion & Occupation and the “Left”

—Spartacist League, “The Left and the Occupation” (in *Workers Vanguard*, 2005)
 —Fred Halliday, “Who is Responsible?” (interview with Danny Postel, 2005, in *Salimagundi*, 2006)
 —Iraqi Communist Party, “Letter to Fraternal and Friendly Parties About the Situation in Iraq and the Position of the Iraqi Communist Party” (Jan. 2006)
 —Chris Cutrone and Spartacist League, “Exchange on Iraq Occupation” (in *Workers Vanguard*, 2006)
 —Adorno, “Resignation” (1969) (in Adorno, *Critical Models*, 1998)
 —Adorno, “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis” (1963) (in *Critical Models*, 1998)
 —Moishe Postone, “Necessity, Labor and Time” (in *Social Research*, 1978)
 —Postone, *Time, Labor and Social Domination: Reinterpretation of Marx* (1993)
 —Postone, “Rethinking Marx in a Post-Marxist World” (1995)

Hurricane Katrina and Aftermath

—Adolph Reed, “The Real Divide” (in *The Progressive*, 2005)

Marxist Theory

—Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*
 —Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848)

—Slavoj Zizek, “A Plea for Leninist Intolerance” (aka “Repeating Lenin,” 2001/02)
 —Robert Pippin, “On Critical Theory: A Short History of Non-Being” (in *Critical Inquiry*, 2003)

History: The Old Left

—Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, *What is to be Done? Burning questions of our movement* (1902)
 —Rosa Luxemburg, *Reform or Revolution* (1900/08)
 —Luxemburg, *The Junius Pamphlet, or The Crisis of German Social Democracy* (1915)
 —Lenin, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916)
 —Lenin, *The State and Revolution* (1917)
 —Luxemburg, “The Russian Tragedy” (1918)
 —Luxemburg, “What is Bolshevism?” (1919)
 —John Reed, *Ten Days that Shook the World* (1919)
 —Clara Zetkin and V. I. Lenin, “My Recollections of Lenin: an interview on the woman question” (interview 1920)
 —Communist International, “Organizational Guidelines for Communist Parties” (1921)
 —Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (1923)
 —Lukács, “Lenin—theoretician of practice,” and *Lenin: a study in the unity of his thought* (1924)
 —Karl Korsch, “The Marxism of the First International” (1924) (in *Marxism and Philosophy*, 1970)
 —Leon Trotsky, *The Lessons of October* (1924)
 —Trotsky, “Proletarian Culture and Proletarian Art,” “Communist Policy Towards Art,” and “Revolutionary and Socialist Art” Ch. 6, 7, and 8 of *Literature and Revolution* (1924)
 —Max Horkheimer, selections from *Dawn/Dämmerung* (1926–31); “The Little Man and the Philosophy of Freedom” (pp. 50–52), “A Discussion about Revolution” (pp. 41), “Indications” (72–73), “Socialism and Resentment” (73–75), “Progress” (93–94), “Idealism of the Revolutionary” (94–95), “Change of Thought” (34–35), and “Skapis and Morality” (35–37) (in *Down and Decline: Notes 1926–31 and 1950–59*, 1978)
 —Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution* (1930)

—Wilhelm Reich, “Ideology as Material Power” (1933/46) (in *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*)
 —Trotsky, “If America Should Go Communist” (1934/35)
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 —Adorno, “Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda” (1951?) (in *The Culture Industry*)
 —E. H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917–23* (3 vols., 1953); or, *The Russian Revolution: from Lenin to Stalin 1917–29* (1 vol., 1979)
 —Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed, The Prophet Unarmed, and The Prophet Outcast* (3 vol. biography of Trotsky, 1954–63)
 —Revolutionary Tendency of the Socialist Workers Party (U.S.) / Spartacist League, “In Defense of a Revolutionary Perspective” (1962)
 —Adorno, “Those Twenties” (1962) (in *Critical Models*, 1998)
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 —Spartacist League, “Genesis of Pabloism” (1972)
 —Spartacist League, *Lenin and the Vanguard Party* (pamphlet, 1978)
 —Richard Appignanesi and Oscar Zarate / A&Z, *Introducing Lenin and the Russian Revolution / Lenin for Beginners* (1978)
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 —Carl E. Schorske, *German Social Democracy, 1905–1917: The Development of the Great Schism* (1983)
 —Margaretha von Trotta, dir., *Rosa Luxemburg* (film, 1986, 122 min.)

The New Left: Aftermath: The Coup Against Allende in Chile

—Spartacist League, “Chilean Popular Front” (in Spartacist, 1970)
 —Costa Gavras, dir., *Missing* (film, 1982, 122 min.)
 —Patricio Guzmán, dir., *Salvador Allende* (film, 2004, 100 min.)

Foucault and the Iranian Revolution

—Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions* (1982a)
 —Fred Halliday, “The Iranian Revolution: Uneven Development and Religious Populism” (1982/86), and “The Iranian Revolution and its Implications” (interview 1987)
 —Michel Foucault, “Polemics, Politics and Problematisations” (interview 1984)
 —Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson, *Gender and the seductions of Islamism* (including Foucault’s writings on Iran, 2005)

The New Left
 —Stuart Hall, “Introducing New Left Review” (in *New Left Review*, 1960)

Mexico *continued from page 27*

We think Mexico’s massive foreign debt needs to be dealt with. When the debt crisis happened in 1982 and 1994, the banks that made the bad loans and the private companies and financial institutions didn’t pay the price. Instead the loans were socialized and so the Mexican people had to pay off the price and they will continue paying off these loans for the foreseeable future. It may be five, six, seven decades. And by socializing these bad loans, basically Mexico has been put on a debt treadmill.

Rather than having an economy that produces for internal consumption where they can develop a dynamic economy, they have to produce for export so they can earn dollars to pay off this debt. Right now one-third of everything that’s produced in Mexico is exported and about a quarter of the federal budget every year goes into debt payment. You can’t have a functioning

economy where the economy is bleeding money to the north. Mexico is actually sending more money to the United States every year than the United States sends to Mexico—which is not going to work out in the long run! In addition, you have companies like Wal-Mart, which is going in and basically taking over the retailing business. Wal-Mart is now the largest retailer in Mexico. Wal-Mart’s profit margins in the United States are somewhere between three and four percent; in Mexico they are more like eight or nine percent. And all these profits are repatriated every year back to the home base in Arkansas. When you look at all these profits that are immediately repatriated from Mexico to the United States, that impacts the Mexican GNP growth substantially.

What would it take to continue building an immigration movement that can support the type of economic policy reform you’re talking about?

I think we need to shift the ideological debate from a simple discussion of amnesty and guest worker programs, to a discussion of what causes undocumented immigration in the first place. I know hundreds of undocumented workers and not a single one of them would have come to the United States if not for the Washington D.C.-based policies that forced them into the position where they had no alternative. It’s either they come to the United States or their family doesn’t survive. And given those circumstances I think anybody in the United States would make the same decision. So until we address those root causes anything else is a band-aid that’s not going to work.

What can people in Chicago do right now in this political moment to best provide solidarity with Mexico?

We need to support the leadership in the Mexican

American community in particular and in the Latino community in general, that’s addressing these broader issues. We can’t get sucked in by people like Luis Gutierrez and some of these other so-called leaders in the Latino community who are arguing the beltway politics. What we call the “politics of the possible,” the only debate that’s possible in Washington is the debate that the corporations allow. And this is what the corporations want, they want amnesty and they want a guest worker program so that they can continue to create a second class group of workers in the United States.

Any concluding thoughts on solidarity?

Adelante. ☒

Visit <http://www.mexicosolidarity.org/site/> to find out more about msn’s work or to get involved.

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