

# Foreword

*Robin D. G. Kelley*

The new millennium opened pretty disastrously. The 2000 presidential elections became virtually a coup d'état for George Bush and the Republican Party, with the Supreme Court weighing in for the Right. So much for checks and balances. The Right's victory depended in part on the blatant disfranchisement of Black voters in Florida. The state circulated lists of alleged convicted felons—over 200,000 Black men in all. In Florida, as well as other states, convicted felons lose their right to vote. The list circulating at the polls was full of errors, and there was no mechanism to allow individuals to vote in the case of a mistaken identity. The fact that convicted felons, no matter what their crime, could lose their right to vote in perpetuity is already a problem; that innocent individuals were also denied the vote should have been considered egregious to anyone who claimed to believe in democracy. But there was little outcry beyond the usual suspects.

As a result, we now have Bush in the White House and John Ashcroft as head cop in charge. The wholesale repression of political dissidents is neither a past memory nor the stuff of conspiracy-prone science fiction. It's here. The rapaciousness of corporations on a global scale, the erosion of a safety net for the poor, the increase in homelessness, the growing number of people unable to obtain medical insurance, the impending reversal of *Roe v. Wade*, the wholesale destruction of the environment, and a host of other issues are making living difficult—not just for people in the U.S. but throughout the world. The so-called capitalist miracle in the 1990s is turning out to be quite a scam. The future of capitalism is on shaky grounds right now.

*Dispatches from Durban* analyzes the current crisis with the goal of building a vibrant antiracist, anti-imperialist Left. While Eric Mann is optimistic enough to believe that a broad left challenge to capitalism, racism, and imperialism is possible—indeed, necessary—his portrait of the condition of the world is bleak, to say the least. Under the Bush administration's global war, he argues, we are witnessing the suppression of self-determination for nations of the Global South and the real possibility of recolonization; massive poverty and the disappearance of viable welfare states in the face of structural adjustment policies; privatization of the commons, resulting in "imperialist penetration and control over indigenous resources"; unbridled corporate destruction of the environment resulting in global warming, disastrous weather events, droughts and epidemics; and the suppression of radical movements for social justice and transformation.

Times are rough but, rather than mourn, Eric Mann and his comrades at the Labor/Community Strategy Center and the Bus Riders Union set out to organize. *Dispatches from Durban* is not a blueprint for revolution, but it is a strategic document. Mann, after all, is an organizer first and foremost. A veteran of the civil rights, environmental justice, and labor movements, he has been a major voice on the revolutionary Left for nearly four decades. Given his history, it is not an accident that *Dispatches* was largely produced in Durban, South Africa, during his participation in the historic World Conference Against Racism (WCAR). The Durban conference was a critical world-historical event, something akin to our generation's Bandung—the conference of Non-Aligned Nations in Indonesia in 1955. In some ways, WCAR was a victory for progressive forces, but it also laid bare the weakness of the U.S. Left and the global antiracist, anti-imperialist movement. On the one hand, the U.S. delegation's decision to walk out of WCAR because it could not suppress discussion of Israel's oppression of the Palestinians or reparations for Africa and its descendants was, in many ways, a defeat for the U.S. On the other hand, the debate over Israel and reparations also exposed the weaknesses of the U.S. Left. As Mann reports, some delegates complained that Arab delegates “hijacked” the conference and that the Palestinian question deflected attention from issues like reparations. Although in the end there was more unity than division around these burning issues, the failure to see how these struggles are inextricably linked underscores a political myopia that has been plaguing U.S. progressive forces for some time now.

*Dispatches from Durban* addresses the Left's slow retreat from internationalism. Especially in light of the tragedy

of September 11<sup>th</sup> and its aftermath, we are finding an increasing number of U.S. Leftists supporting the war in Afghanistan and voicing their support for a left patriotic culture. Mann questions whether it is even possible for internationalists to stand behind any national flag, particularly the stars and stripes, because it has come to represent a long history of intervention, warmongering, and imperialism. Moreover, embracing patriotism makes it difficult to build international solidarity and oppose U.S. imperialism in other parts of the world.

Mann addresses the separation between the anti-globalization movement and the antiracist and reparations movements. Indeed, if we go back just two decades, we are reminded that what is now called anti-globalization was considered anti-imperialist. In the 1980s we lived through a period of tremendous right-wing drift, capital flight, monopolization, unemployment, decline of urban communities, and state terror, but the movements that emerged in opposition created real challenges for the Right. It was the age when a vibrant anti-Apartheid movement helped bring about an end to white minority rule in South Africa. Solidarity movements in support of struggles for justice in Central America, Africa, and Asia were very active and visible. Some of these movements were sustained by new immigrants, many of whom were refugees of what Commandante Marcos calls the “Third World War”—the last half century of U.S. intervention, counterinsurgency missions, Cold War battles over control of the Global South, and revolutions. An unknown number of Salvadorans, Guatemalans, Mexicans, Grenadians, Haitians, South Africans, Sri Lankans, Koreans, etc., played critical roles in the resurgent anti-imperialist movements of the '80s. Mann understands these conditions well; influential

political refugees of the era ended up in organizations such as the Labor/Community Strategy Center and the Bus Riders Union. In fact, the multinational character of the Bus Riders Union has everything to do with this particular generation of refugees from the “Third World War.”

Mann insists that we need to revitalize a U.S. Left that can learn from the lessons of earlier anti-imperialist movements but develop strategies that are appropriate for our era. He imagines a Left capable of blocking U.S. intervention in Third World countries, battling corporate globalization, and defending the rights of oppressed nationalities here in the “belly of the beast.” He calls on anti-globalization activists to take on racism as a central issue on a global as well as local level.

One crucial issue from the WCAR that worked to link racism and capitalism on a global scale is reparations for Africans and people of African descent. Mann highlights the reparations movement’s revolutionary potential to expose the relationship between the development of capitalism, racism, colonialism and slavery. By claiming that a huge portion of accumulated capital was obtained illegitimately, arguments for reparations strike directly at institutions such as the World Bank, the IMF, the G8 nations and the U.S. itself. The demand for reparations, after all, is not for a hand-out but a down payment for centuries of unpaid labor, violence, and exploitation. Any effort to really come close to making a just retribution would “break the bank,” so to speak. Finally, a successful reparations campaign can also transform the lives of many struggling working people, not just people of African descent. Assuming that reparations would be paid out to institutions rather than to individuals, it would mean that all impoverished urban residents would benefit from a massive

infusion of capital for infrastructure, housing, schools, civic organizations, and related institutions. Demanding such a transfer of resources makes perfect historical sense because the large populations of Latinos, Native Americans, and Asian Americans who occupy poor urban communities are products of centuries of imperialism—slavery’s handmaiden, if you will. And obviously, Afro-Caribbean immigrants to the U.S. are also descendants of slaves and products of policies that compelled them to leave one kind of poverty for another.

As *Dispatches from Durban* makes clear, Mann’s actual experience with the Left in South Africa profoundly shapes the ideas and tenor of this book. Marching in the streets of Durban with African workers in solidarity with the Congress of South African Trade Unions, Mann recognized immediately that the South African Left has many lessons to teach radicals in the United States about building strategic alliances. The critical yet fragile alliance between the South African Communist Party, the African National Congress, and the labor movement exposes just how difficult it is for socialists to hold state power in a capitalist world. President Thabo Mbeki’s move toward greater privatization has resulted in greater suffering among working people. Yet, as Mann shows us, unlike the United States, the South African Left is strong, the unions are well organized and militant, and there is an unusually high level of debate and political participation throughout the country. South African Leftists know that they must walk a fine line as both critics and supporters of the regime, for the threat of intervention always looms overhead. Whether it is Guatemala, or Chile, or Grenada, they know the history of imperialist intervention all too well.

The South African Left's ability to survive and even shape state politics is an amazing, inspiring example. But the most important lesson the struggle there can teach us is how bloody difficult it is to imagine and realize a new society. Different factions are trying to do the impossible work of reconstruction and reconciliation in the midst of internal wars and international capitalist pressures. In many ways, *Dispatches from Durban* speaks to the same condition of urgency, the same kind of immediacy that can force us to respond to crises before we have a chance to map out a different future. Don't get me wrong; it is a strategic imperative to defend our lives, the earth, and our right to dissent, thus, to challenge neoliberalism, racism, and imperialism.

My sister, Makani Themba, also attended the WCAR and also came away with a sense that something new was being built on an international scale. And yet, in her own "Durban Diary" she was haunted by the fundamental question of how to struggle for a new society, especially given the suffering she witnessed all around her. "It is far easier to organize *against* a common enemy than *for* a common vision," she wrote a couple days before returning home. "South Africa knows there are few examples of how to build a nation where everyone is truly free. Making sure people have enough to eat, have a roof over their heads, and enough space in their lives for love and laughter are not the rousing stuff of songs."

Here is the other reason why the revitalized radical movement Mann imagines is so important. We need to think beyond the immediate crises and begin to talk about the future again. Socialists, utopian and scientific, always had the best dreams because they fought to create a space where there is no want of necessities and there would be "enough space in their lives for

love and laughter.” Even in a place as ravaged as South Africa, grassroots radicals, like Eric Mann’s local guide ‘Lenin,’ are working to create a new culture in the townships, one of cooperation and community. It is precisely this sort of work we need if we are going to transform our war zones into “liberated zones.” A revitalized Left can never sustain itself without this broader vision of what we want to build and what is possible.

Mann envisions a renaissance for the Left. There is a refreshing, at times startling, realpolitik optimism running throughout this book.

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