

For 2025 A Call for Solidarity and Organizing in the Face of Tyranny

Mankind has gone very far into an artificial world of his own creation. He has sought to insulate himself, with steel and concrete, from the realities of earth and water. Perhaps he is intoxicated with his own power; as he goes farther and farther into experiments for the destruction of himself and his world. Rachel Carson¹

A Reflection on the 2024 Elections:

I spent most of Election Day as a Poll Greeter in the Forest Hills, PA district I represented as a Borough Council Member for eight years. People brought their children to vote and wanted pictures with Kamala Harris signs, with hope to be making history electing a young, gifted, Black woman as President of the United States. Many people, both Democrats and Republicans, said that the amount of money spent on the campaign in Pennsylvania would feed the homeless for a year.

Both campaigns spent billions of dollars, but it comes down to what story about the future most people wanted to believe. People judged candidates based on their personal economic situation - food prices, energy prices, availability of goods and services. The party in power took the hit because the subjective view of the economy was not favorable for many people. We now face an uncertain future where policies overturning the social services safety net, consumer protections, environmental protections, freedom of the press and workers' rights to organize may no longer be an assumed condition of life in America.²

Nobody talked about the underlying reasons for the price increases, or the global supply chains that affect what consumers have access to, and what they pay. We have lost our common view of America as a place of hope, opportunity, and justice for all. Disparities in lived experience have become normalized, and blame placed on "the government" and non-specific "illegal aliens." Understanding the root causes of so much dissatisfaction may help us move forward.

Environmental and Social Disruptions:

The reality of the world is disruptive and complicated. There is no simple explanation, and the remedies involve transforming systems that have been fundamental to how our society works. Change is distressing. But ignoring the inevitable does not make problems disappear. The laws of Nature are not negotiable. Human actions have caused the problems we face, and human actions can address them. But only if we can take the necessary remedies timely, collectively, and effectively. This requires a common vision of a better future and leadership to inspire people toward a transformed way of living.

Fueled by solar energy, earth's ecosystem services provide fresh water, oxygen-rich air, fertile ground, and the wide diversity of species that constitute the interconnected web of life, of which humans are but one part.³ Human civilization since the Industrial Revolution has created an economy based on resource extraction, fossil fuel combustion, and hyper-consumption. As the population of the world strives to emulate Western society, the earth's ecosystems are reaching thresholds that compromise the support system for life as we know it. Human civilization now faces triple existential threats from global warming, global pollution especially from plastic, and global loss of biodiversity.

- The 10 warmest years in the historical record have all occurred in the past decade (2014-2024).⁴
- Pollution is the largest environmental cause of disease and premature death with more than nine million premature deaths, mostly due to air pollution. Global waste is expected to reach 3.4 billion tons by 2050.⁵
- The World Wide Fund for Nature's Living Planet Report 2022 documents a 69% average loss in the abundance of mammal, bird, reptile, fish and amphibian species since 1970.⁶

Taken together, these human-precipitated threats comprise an assault on the life support system of the living Earth. This constellation of changing conditions creates consequences for daily life that cannot be ignored.

1. Food availability and cost.

Climate warming affects consumer products especially food. Climate change is happening now, all over the world, even in the United States of America. Willful denial of the facts does not eliminate the effects on people, communities or living conditions. In the US, 49 states are experiencing moderate or severe drought; 318.6 acres of farmland are in drought conditions; and 140 million Americans are experiencing drought conditions.⁷ All of these events have affected agricultural lands ruining crops and upsetting normal food distribution patterns for both direct human consumption as well as livestock.⁸ Food prices are directly linked to these mounting climate challenges.

2. Disaster frequency and cost.

Storms are stronger, larger, and more frequent as ocean waters become warmer. In 2024 there have been 24 storms, each causing \$1 billion or more in damage to property, and 148 deaths directly resulting from storms.⁹ For 2024 January—October, 46,784 fires burned 7,992,195 acres, with an average of 170.83 acres burned per fire.¹⁰ Disaster relief programs and definitions have not kept pace with the scale and duration of these effects. For example, at the end of FY 2023, after only five weeks of emergency measures, even limiting most obligations from the Disaster Relief Fund (DRF) to immediate needs, the DRF had only \$2.55 Billion available for the rest of the year to cover the costs associated with major disasters from the average annual appropriation of \$43.75 Billion.¹¹ Communities struggle to recover even decades after disasters such as Katrina and the Paradise Wildfire.

3. Migrants from Degradation of the environment.

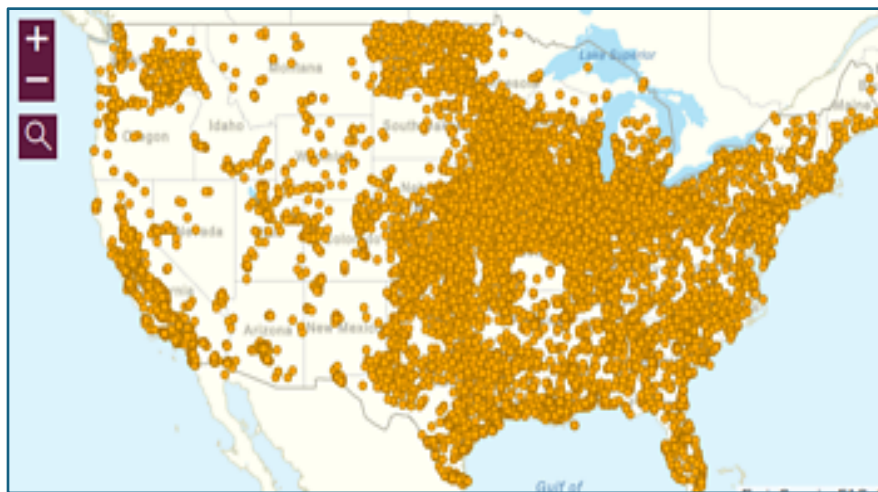
Sudden or progressive change to the environment causes people to move. Climate migration can occur within countries or across borders. Geographers at Columbia's Center for International Earth Science Information Network model the following scenario:

Within the US, America's natural environment will be utterly transformed by mid-century, with profound implications for people's health, safety, and quality of life. Coastal areas will be affected by the progression of sea level rise. By mid-century, climate scientists expect that large sections of the West will be turning into desert, that the Great Plains and the South will be stricken by heat waves and oscillating periods of drought and flooding that will make farming much less productive, and that parts of the South will be so hot and humid in the summertime that it will be dangerous to go outdoors. Climate models suggest that the heat index could regularly exceed 130 degrees Fahrenheit in many southern states, a level that has rarely been observed anywhere and that is life-threatening even to strong, physically fit people at rest.¹²

Approximately 3.2 million Americans have already moved in an effort to escape flooding over the past two decades.¹³ As disasters have increased in frequency and damage, insurance companies have raised premiums, and in some cases, refused insurance. The economic realities are more likely drivers of migration than the absolute effects of climate warming in any particular location. Subsidy programs and state regulations prevent insurance companies from raising their rates, insulating homeowners from the true costs.¹⁴ Those without resources are more likely to become trapped in unhealthy and unsafe places.

4. Environmental Justice Communities.

The National Energy Act of 2005 exempted slick-water hydraulic fracturing extraction for natural gas (fracking) from seven federal environmental and worker safety laws.¹⁵ The boom in gas production, export, and feeding plastic production has exacerbated environmental justice concerns for frontline communities. Hazardous chemical facilities include refineries, plastics production plants, gas and oil drilling, compression stations, superfund disposal sites, and fossil fueled power plants.¹⁶ People living within a three-mile fence line' zone of such facilities are disproportionately people of color, impoverished, and suffer a greater risk of cancer and respiratory illness caused by air pollution. Over 124 million Americans (39%) live in constant threat of catastrophic explosion or toxic gas releases within a fence line zone of one or more hazardous chemical facilities.¹⁷ The East Palestine rail spill of 2023 put a face on this kind of tragedy, but there were 337 leaks or spills of hazardous materials from railroad incidents in all of 2022.¹⁸



124 million Americans live within three miles of one or more hazardous chemical facilities

Communities have endured for generations in polluted areas like Cancer Alley outside of Baton Rouge, Louisiana; Clairton, PA in the shadow of the US Steel coke works; Port Arthur, Texas and Trenton, New Jersey where petrochemical and fossil fueled industries suffuse the surrounding areas with toxic emissions. All of these operations based on extractive fossil industries place a burden on the health of people and the environment, and the communities bear a disproportionate share of the burden of these industrial operations. The economic benefits go primarily to corporations and distant shareholders, while the local communities and the people closest to the

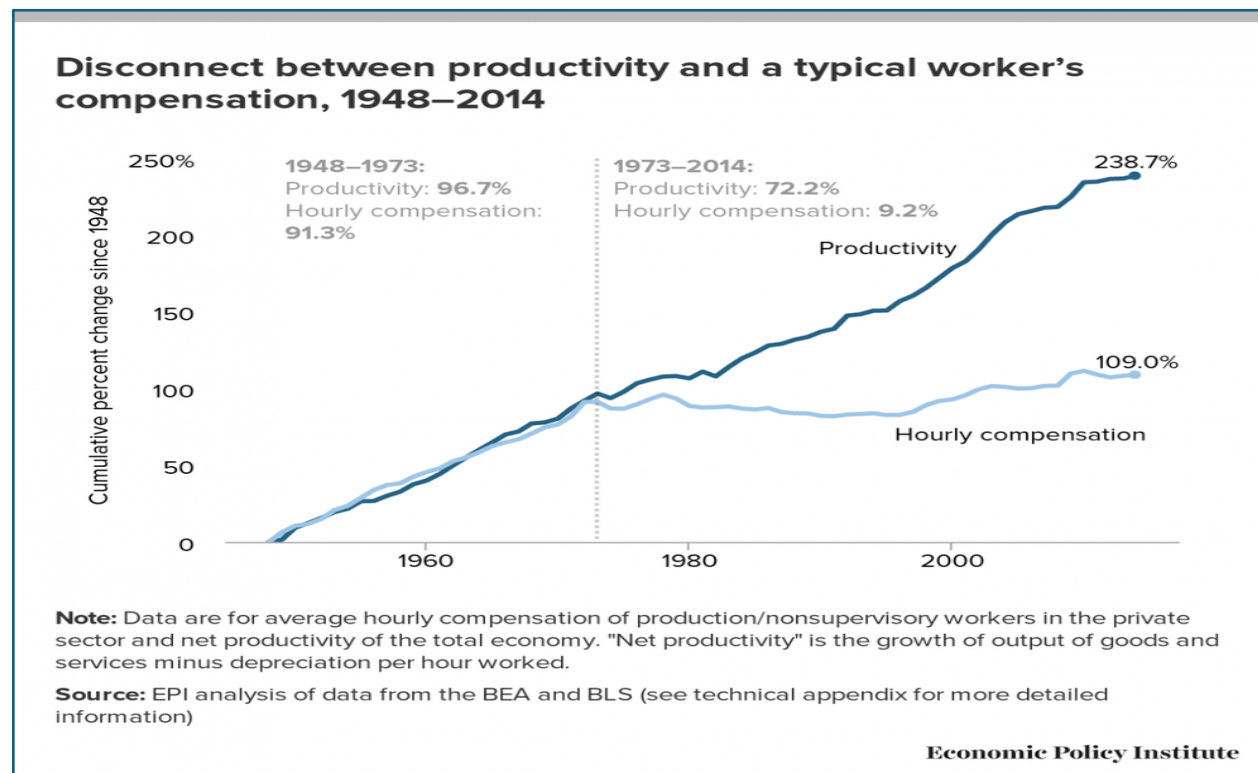
operations pay the costs in the form of devalued property, health harms and infrastructure degradation.

Economic Disparities

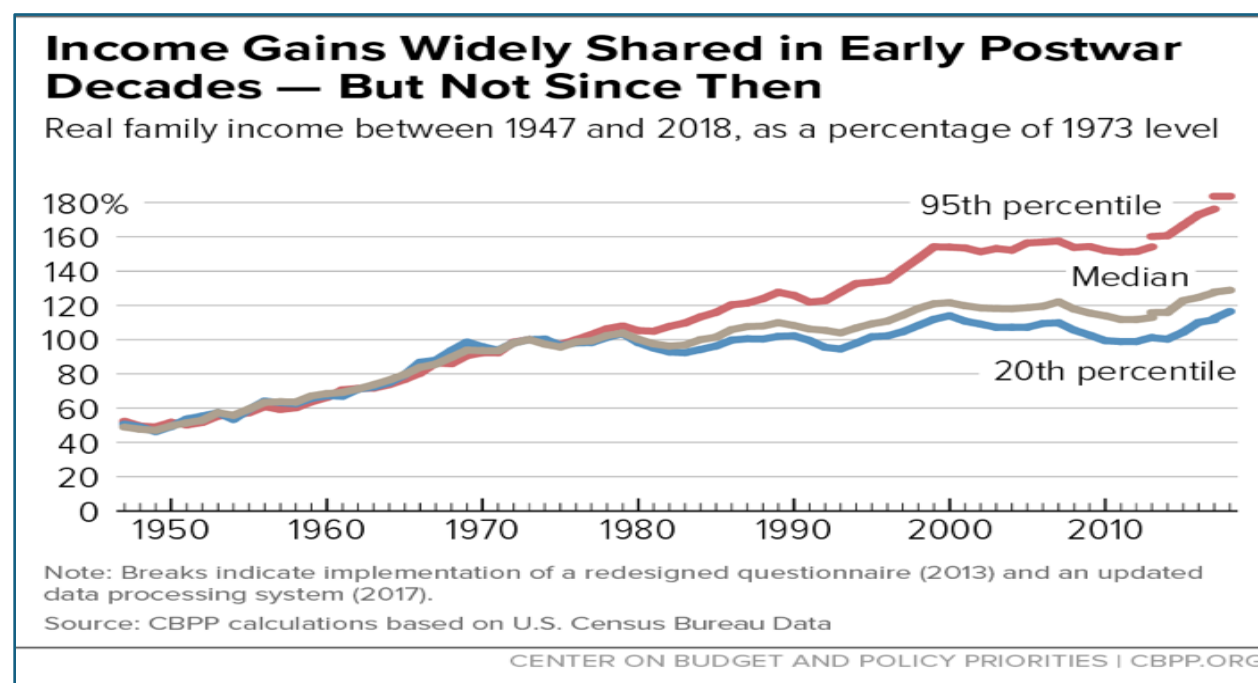
These accumulating crises exacerbate an underlying institutionalized disparity in the expectations and lived experience of Americans based on the increasingly unfettered capitalist economic system. Institutionalized poverty prevails in America as the programs and policies put in place in the 1930s under the Roosevelt New Deal are being systematically attacked and weakened. American policy driven primarily by the profit motive has become increasingly cruel and insensitive to the needs of all but the wealthiest in our society. It is time to face the wealth disparity in our country and address the root causes. The prevailing system of the economy has not been working for 80% of Americans for a long time.¹⁹

Economic Determinism and Neo-Liberal Policy

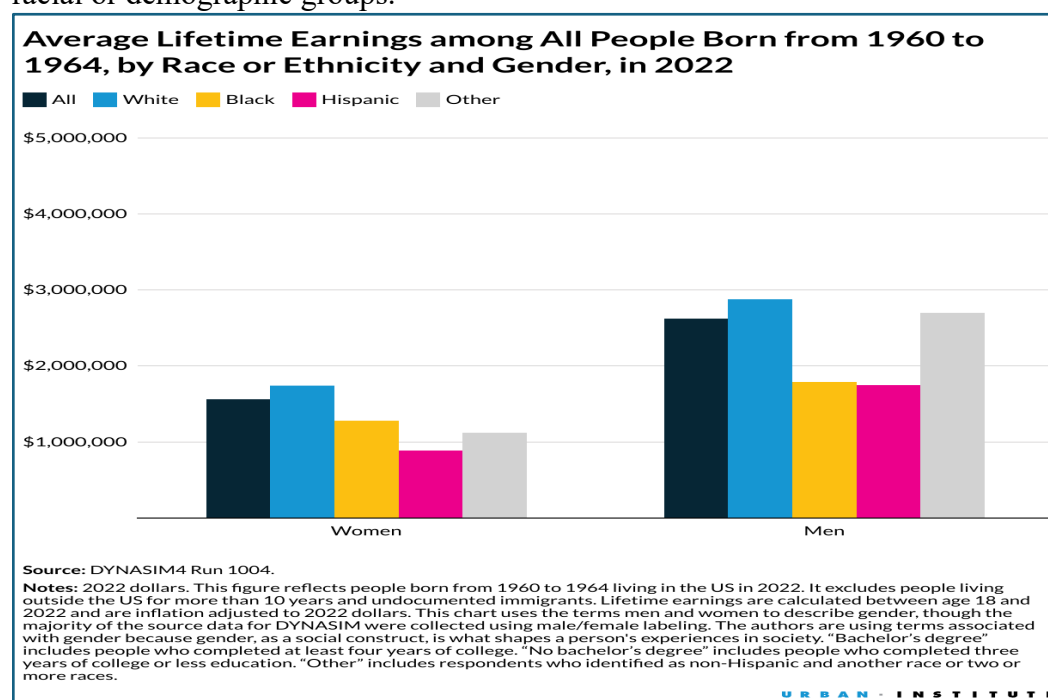
The roots of the wealth disparity can be traced to the Tax Reform Act of 1986 and Ronald Reagan's shift toward economic determinism as the standard for public policy. His dismissal of science as a basis for decisions began to erode confidence in fact-based public policy. The push toward globalization with the North American Free Trade Agreement and Pacific Free Trade Agreement solidified the de-industrialization of America and sent the middle class into a nosedive.^{20,21} Multi-national corporations sent primary production offshore to escape labor laws and environmental laws designed to protect the health and safety of workers and citizens. The income disparities grew at a steady pace as productivity increased, but wages and benefits remained constant in the face of rising costs to consumers.²²



The wealth gap is even more concerning when we recognize that this was not always the case. Before World War II, wealth was largely shared between companies and workers, especially in the period when unions stood strong as negotiating partners on behalf of workers to assure fair treatment and fair wages.²³



Race and gender disparities in wealth are also significant and persistent.²⁴ In 2022 the average lifetime earnings of all women trails that of all men, but Hispanic women earn less than all other racial or demographic groups.²⁵



Money saved from earnings is a source of wealth building for many workers, but earnings differ by race and gender. The average white man between ages 58 and 62 in 2022 earned \$2.9 million over his career, while the average Black man earned \$1.8 million and the average Hispanic man earned \$1.7 million. Women earn less overall but gaps remain: the average white woman earned \$1.7 million over her career, while the average Black woman earned \$1.3 million and the average Hispanic woman earned \$883,000.²⁶

Policies to address the institutionalized racism in America are hard won and fragile. The normalization of hate speech and disparaging people based on race or culture has contributed to the polarization of our country. “Liberty and justice for ALL” does not reflect the lived experience of many people in America, especially people of color. The latest national survey by Pew Research Center, conducted July 8-18, 2021 among 10,221 adults, finds sizable differences between parties – as well as differences within parties – over how to ensure equal rights for all Americans, regardless of their racial or ethnic backgrounds. About seven-in-ten Republicans (71%) say the U.S. has made a lot of progress over the last 50 years in ensuring equal rights for all Americans, regardless of their racial or ethnic backgrounds, while just 29% of Democrats say this; and Just 25% of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents say greater attention to the history of slavery and racism is a good thing; far more (46%) view it negatively, while 29% see it as neither good nor bad. Democrats and Democratic leaners – across racial and ethnic groups – express overwhelmingly positive views of increased attention to the topic (78% say it is good for society).²⁷ Racial disparities are central to the political divide, and require attention and constructive dialogue as well as specific attention to areas where institutionalized racism has become part of the fabric of public policy.

New Directions and Solutions:

“...man does not live apart from the world; he lives in the midst of a complex, dynamic interplay of physical, chemical, and biological forces, and between him and this environment are continuing, never ending interactions.” Rachel Carson²⁸

Democrats and Progressives need a better narrative of how we see the future as a nation of shared prosperity in a healthy, peaceful world. And we need to use the tools of the 21st century to communicate ideas and programs. We need to tell the success stories of taking paths of true and tested policies that support a return to an American Dream that includes everybody, not just the top 10 % of wealthy people. The solutions are beginning to work, as influenced by the Inflation Reduction Act and the Bipartisan Infrastructure and Jobs Act of 2021. Programs investing in communities, in domestic manufacturing and workforce development, communication and improved infrastructure, and clean energy and manufacturing have barely begun to be implemented. The EJ 40 Initiative specifically addressed the disparities in environmental justice communities.²⁹ How can we hear the needs of the true majority and create a better narrative for a way forward? How can we build common ground and build a true shared prosperity for the future?

We can take action at all levels of governance:

1. Recognize that the Laws of Nature are NOT Negotiable.

We must face the reality of climate change with compassion and realistic attention to the people most harmed by the continued (or probably expanded) reliance on fossil extractive industries. We must show that living in harmony with Nature is not only healthier for people and the environment but more cost efficient as well by documenting the cost of climate damage, health harms, and societal dislocation. The benefits and opportunities in the sustainable economy must be promoted, displayed and made more accessible: renewable energy systems; regenerative agriculture and land use; circular materials management from non-fossil resources.³⁰ The principle of preventing harm to the environment and to people promoted through the work of Rachel Carson was part of the foundation for the environmental regulations of the 1970s. The Clean Air Act, the Safe Drinking Water Act, the National Environmental Policy Act and the Toxic Substances Control Act have been periodically updated, but face constant erosion from industries seeking relief from control. Only direct economic benefits are computed in the analysis, while environmental degradation, health effects and loss of resources and species are not explicitly valued. Yet, the quality of life and the endurance and resilience of our civilization depend intimately on the healthy functioning of both environmental and social systems. Rebalancing the focus of our laws to align more closely in harmony with the laws of nature can guide policy decisions for a healthy and more equitable and prosperous future.

2. Elevate the importance of environmental justice and the social safety net. These are central to good governance in the public interest. The greatness of a country is judged by how well the least and most needy are cared for. Quality education for all citizens including the tools for critical thinking and basic knowledge about the rights and responsibilities of citizenship must become universal and valued as the foundation of a representative democratic republic. Health is a human right, not a privilege for those who can afford health insurance. Investing in the services that sustain a basic quality of life for every citizen ultimately lifts the entire country to greater levels of achievement and satisfaction. Look to the results of the G.I. Bill following World War II which produced one of the most productive and innovative periods in our history. Imagine if the investment in people across the board were to infuse that kind of increased capacity and innovation today in both trades and professions.

3. Preserve a free and fair press. Citizenship is not a passive condition but requires attention, engagement and information. The distortion of facts by opinion portrayed as news, conspiracy theories and prejudice must be balanced with objective analysis from the media. Without a fair and unconstrained press, we receive imperfect material for making decisions. Fact checking, documented data and two-source validation tools of sound journalism seem arcane attributes of today's "news" media. Entertainment is not news!

4. Listen to the people we serve. Give voice to their true concerns.

Help to organize and engage people at the local level to work on solutions where we can, but also to train people to run for office on a platform of science-based solutions. Look at successful Democratic campaigns in rustbelt states for examples- Chris DeLuzio in PA Elizabeth Slotkin in Michigan. Many young people feel frustrated to have little voice in decisions that will significantly affect their future. Lift up their concerns; help them run for office; speak to their fears. We can hold "Listening circles" to reach the real concerns and ideas of people. Tell the

success stories of local action, lifting up the parts of American capitalism that are not working for working class people, and have not been for a long time; face the reality that we need to address climate change -especially the effects on frontline communities- over 39 million people! Push the agenda of Health as a Human Right.

5. Push for Polluter Accountability legislation and climate action

These issues may need to devolve to the States now. Share success stories and model legislation at the state level. Organize multi-state regional efforts in airsheds and watersheds and in communities that share a common pollution source that crosses state lines. Lift up the lived experiences of people experiencing health harms in frontline communities and document their stories to share with similarly affected communities. Create a network of people calling for accountability against polluters, especially as regulatory actions are slowed or rescinded at the federal level.

Commitment and a Call for Solidarity

For me, the solutions are at the community level, because communities- Mayors, Church leaders, civic leaders - we are on the front lines, regardless of what mayhem is cast out from federal policies. Basic institutions have failed everyday people. But tearing down the government does not solve the problems. Returning to the policies of the “Gilded Age” will assure a greater divide in the wealth gap, and leave even more people falling into poverty and despair. We need to build a narrative of inclusion, hope for a better future, and justice for people exploited by this devolution of our society. We must stand together and rethink our way forward from the bottom up. In the United States of America it is not OK for children to go to school hungry, for the maternal and infant mortality rates to fall among the level of underdeveloped countries, for people to work three jobs and still not make ends meet. We need to revive the sense of caring for each other, creating a culture of celebrating the dignity of each person and giving true opportunities for all to thrive together.

Going forward we must hold those in power accountable. If our goal is to build an America where shared prosperity in a healthy world is a reality, not a pipe dream subject to derision and mockery, we must build solidarity. We must re-learn the lessons of the unions that brought safe working conditions and living wages to millions of workers. We need to prepare for meaningful resistance and constructive redirection. We need to study the history of our country and avoid the descent into chaos.

Freedom is not free; democracy comes at the price of citizen responsibility and respect for the rule of law. Freedom without accountability yields chaos. We need to sharpen the tools of resistance to tyranny. We need to sharpen the tools of organizing collective action. Could we mount a general strike or a rolling series of strikes these days? Do consumers have the knowledge and tools to harness boycotts to bring polluters to heel? Do we have a communication system to support organized resistance to discrimination, racism and suppression of rights? We need to step onto our power and build a New American Dream that makes liberty and justice for all a reality.

The more clearly we can focus our attention on the wonders and realities of the universe about us, the less taste we shall have for destruction. Those who contemplate the beauty

*of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts. Rachel Carson*³¹

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