

I Ain't Marching Anymore - Phil Ochs

PEOPLES SCHOOL FOR MARXIST-LENINIST STUDIES™



The My Lai Massacre

PSMLS 03/18/25



What we'll be learning today:

- Causes and Conditions Leading to the Massacre
- The Event Itself
- Role of Journalism in Exposing War Crimes and Sparking Anti-War Movements



Causes and Conditions



The American Public's Understanding of My-Lai

On March 16, 1968, two companies of US Army troops belonging to the American Division entered the My Lai and My Khe hamlets of Son My village, in Quang Ngai province, and killed 504 Vietnamese civilians—overwhelmingly women, children, and old men—in cold blood. The national press and political elites have long learned to treat the massacre as a tragedy that did not reflect official US policy. And ever since the Peers Commission report on My Lai was finally released to the public in November 1974, the press and public have believed that the commission, not only revealed the extent of the massacre but exposed the cover-up.

What the press and public have never understood is that the Peers Commission was involved in an even bigger cover-up: It exonerated the commander of US forces in Vietnam, Gen. William Westmoreland, from any responsibility for My Lai, despite the fact that the policy Westmoreland conveyed to his subordinates, was to treat Vietnamese Civilians In Viet Cong (VC) base areas like My Lai, as **enemy combatants**.

(G.Porter,2018,<https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/the-untold-story-of-my-lai-how-and-why-the-official-investigation-covered-up-general-westmorelands-responsibility/>)





“The order was to destroy My-Lai...”

The Peers Commission learned from squad leaders who were briefed on the mission that day, that the company commanders had told them that they were to consider civilians as the enemy. As one squad leader, Sgt. Charles West, recalled, company commander Capt. Ernest Medina told squad leaders that the village “consisted only of North Vietnamese army, Vietcong, and VC families” and “the order was to destroy My Lai and everything in it.” Another squad leader who attended Medina’s briefing also recalled that Medina had told the company that My Lai was a “suspected VC stronghold and that he had orders to kill everybody that was in that village.” A second company commander, Capt. Earl Michles, conveyed the same message to squad leaders.

Two days after the My Lai massacre, a South Vietnamese government field worker reported from Son My village that 427 people had been killed in My Lai and the other hamlets, including both civilians and guerrillas. Lieut. Col. William Guinn, read a translation of the report. He later testified to the Peers Commission that he had not believed the report, but That, even if it were true, he “didn’t consider it a war crime,” because “these people had been killed by an act of war...because that was a free fire zone out there...”

If the people are in relocation camps, they’re green, so they’re safe. We leave them alone. The Vietcong and NVA are red, so we know they’re fair game. But if there are people who are out there—and not in the camps—they’re pink as far as we’re concerned. They’re Communist sympathizers. They were not supposed to be there. - Gen. Westmoreland (G. Porter, 2018, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/the-untold-story-of-my-lai-how-and-why-the-official-investigation-covered-up-general-westmorelands-responsibility/>)





The Inevitable Result of U.S. Policies

...violence against civilians in Vietnam was not an aberration, but rather “pervasive and systemic.” The inevitable and often intended result of US policies. Among the worst of these policies was an insistence on “body counts” as a measure of military success. The more “kills” a unit called in, the better its position in the field. Trigger-shy troops were punished with “less support in the form of airlifts—resulting in long, hot, dangerous hikes through treacherous terrain instead of helicopter rides to or from the base.”

After learning in training that the “enemy is anything with slant eyes who lives in the village,” US troops massacred the very South Vietnamese civilians for whom they were purportedly fighting.

The real story of what the Vietnamese rightfully call “the American War” is not so much unknown as it is untold. In 1988, Alexander Cockburn wrote in *The Nation* that “My Lai remains a symbol, just an intimation of what happened in that destroyed land.” (R. Kreitner, 2013, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/our-orbit-my-lai-rules/>)





Discussion



The Massacre Itself



Early on March 16, 1968, a company of soldiers in the United States Army's Americal Division were dropped in by helicopter for an assault against a hamlet known as My Lai 4, in the bitterly contested province of Quang Ngai, on the northeastern coast of South Vietnam. A hundred G.I.s and officers stormed the hamlet in military-textbook style, advancing by platoons; the troops expected to engage the Vietcong Local Force 48th Battalion—one of the enemy's most successful units—but instead they found women, children, and old men, many of them still cooking their breakfast rice over outdoor fires.



American military helicopters in flight during the My Lai massacre on Mar. 16, 1968 in My Lai, South Vietnam - Ronald L. Haeberle



During the next few hours, the civilians were murdered. Many were rounded up in small groups and shot, others were flung into a drainage ditch at one edge of the hamlet and shot, and many more were shot at random in or near their homes. Some of the younger women and girls were raped and then murdered. After the shootings, the G.I.s systematically burned each home, destroyed the livestock and food, and fouled the area's drinking supplies.



American Soldier burning down house in My Lai. The thatched roof made it easier to ignite.



The G.I.s mainly kept to themselves what they had done, but there had been other witnesses to the atrocity—American helicopter pilots and Vietnamese civilians. The first investigations of the My Lai case, made by some of the officers involved, concluded (erroneously) that twenty civilians had inadvertently been killed by artillery and by heavy cross fire between American and Vietcong units during the battle.

Within four months, many details of the atrocity had been uncovered by Army investigations, and in September, 1969, William L. Calley, Jr., a twenty-six-year-old first lieutenant who served as a platoon leader with Charlie Company, was charged with the murder of a hundred and nine Vietnamese civilians. No significant facts about the Calley investigation or about the massacre itself were made public at the time, but the facts did gradually emerge, and eleven days after the first newspaper accounts the Army announced that it had set up a panel to determine why the initial investigations had failed to disclose the atrocity.

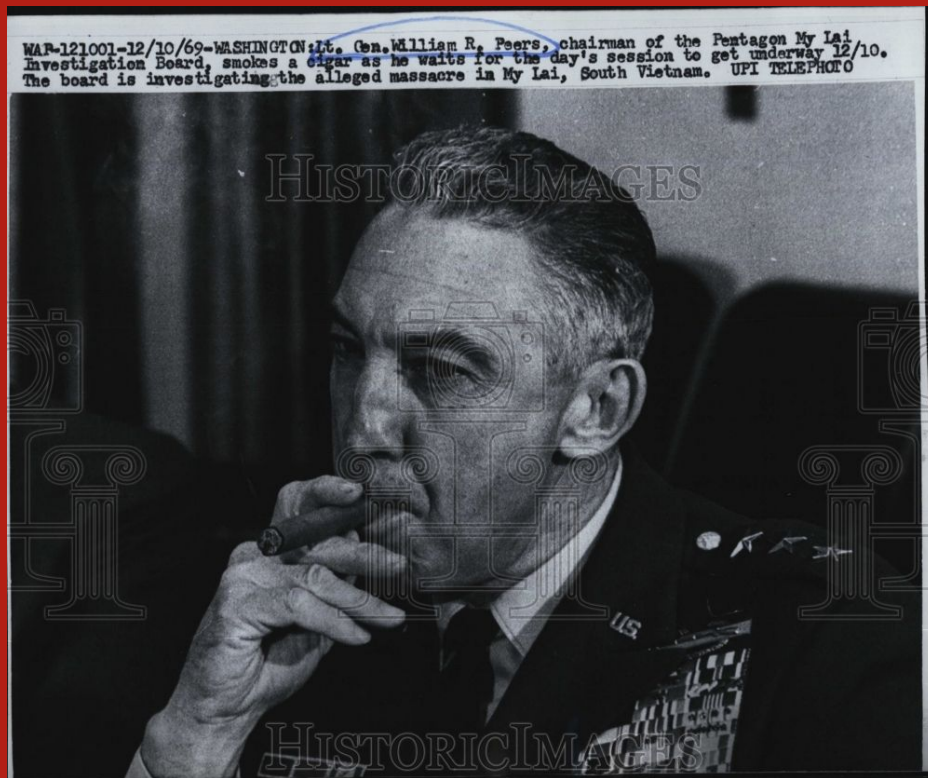


Lt. William L. Calley Mugshot in 1969



The panel was officially called the Department of the Army Review of the Preliminary Investigations into the My Lai Incident, and was unofficially known as the Peers Inquiry, after its director, Lieutenant General William R. Peers, “who was Chief of the Office of Reserve Components at the time of his appointment

Peers and his assistants, who eventually included two New York lawyers, began working in late November, 1969, and they soon determined that they could not adequately explore the coverup of the atrocity without learning more about what had actually happened on the day the troops were at My Lai 4.



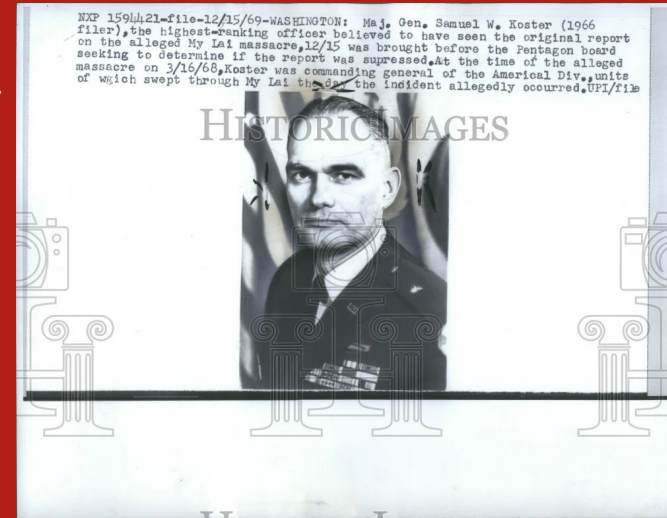


On December 2, 1969, the investigating team began interrogating officers and enlisted men in each of the units involved—Charlie Company, Task Force Barker, the 11th Brigade, and the Americal Division. In all, four hundred witnesses were interrogated—about fifty in South Vietnam and the rest in a special-operations room in the basement of the Pentagon—before Peers and a panel of military officers and civilians that varied in size from three to eight men. The interrogations inevitably produced much self-serving testimony. To get at the truth, the Peers commission recalled many witnesses for further interviews and confronted them with testimony that conflicted with theirs. Only six witnesses who appeared before the commission refused to testify.





By March 16, 1970, when the investigation ended, the Peers commission had compiled enough evidence to recommend to Secretary of the Army Stanley R. Resor and Army Chief of Staff William C. Westmoreland that charges be filed against fifteen officers; a high-level review subsequently conducted by lawyers representing the office of the Judge Advocate General, the Army's legal adviser, concluded that fourteen of the fifteen should be charged, including Major General Samuel W. Koster, who was commanding general of the Americal Division at the time of My Lai 4. By then, Koster had become Superintendent of the United States Military Academy, at West Point, and the filing of charges against him stunned the Army. One other general was charged, as were three colonels, two lieutenant colonels, three majors, and four captains. Army officials revealed shortly after the charges were filed that the Peers commission had accumulated more than twenty thousand pages of testimony and more than five hundred documents during fifteen weeks of operation.





The testimony and other material alone, it was said, included thirty-two books of direct transcripts, six books of supplemental documents and affidavits, and volumes of maps, charts, exhibits, and internal documents. Defense Department spokesmen explained that, to avoid damaging pre-trial publicity, none of this material could be released to the public until the legal proceedings against the accused men were completed, and officials acknowledged that the process might take years. In addition, it was explained, when the materials were released they would have to be carefully censored, to insure that no material damaging to America's foreign policy or national security was made available to other countries.

By 1971 charges against thirteen of the fourteen initial defendants had been dismissed without a court-martial.

Weather
Ade. Forecast
Mon. To Wed. Fair
THUR. TO SAT. Partly
SUN. Partly
SUN. Partly

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Death Decreed for Manson, Girls CALLEY GUILTY IN MY LAI CASE

Judge Ejects All 4 Before Penalty Read

Premeditated Murder Conviction Brought In

State Senators 'Boy's Crushed,' Lawyer Says; Jury Meets Today To Decide Its Sentence

Guinn and Stier Take Senate Floor To Urge Decision

Teacher Bill Passes House

Threats Worry Potter, Gregg Sued in End

Pollution Control Bill Clears Senate

New Tax Compromise Eyed

Calley's Sentence Read

By the Associated Press

SAIGON, Vietnam (AP) — A judge today ejected four defendants from the courtroom before reading the death sentence for the premeditated murder of a U.S. Army sergeant in the My Lai massacre. The judge also convicted the defendant, Captain William Calley, of premeditated murder. The judge's decision was a surprise to many observers who expected a more lenient sentence for Calley. The judge's decision was a surprise to many observers who expected a more lenient sentence for Calley.



LIQUOR REFLECTS 'War More Than Hell'

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Teacher Bill Passes House

By the Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House today passed a bill to create a new federal agency to oversee the nation's schools. The bill was passed by a vote of 350 to 100. The bill would create the Department of Education, which would be responsible for overseeing the nation's schools. The bill would also create the Office of Education, which would be responsible for overseeing the nation's schools.



Threats Worry Potter, Gregg Sued in End

By the Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A federal judge today ordered the government to pay \$100,000 in damages to a man who had been threatened with a court-martial. The man, who had been threatened with a court-martial, had sued the government for damages. The judge's decision was a surprise to many observers who expected a more lenient sentence for Calley.



Pollution Control Bill Clears Senate

By the Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate today passed a bill to create a new federal agency to oversee the nation's schools. The bill was passed by a vote of 80 to 10. The bill would create the Department of Education, which would be responsible for overseeing the nation's schools. The bill would also create the Office of Education, which would be responsible for overseeing the nation's schools.

New Tax Compromise Eyed

By the Associated Press

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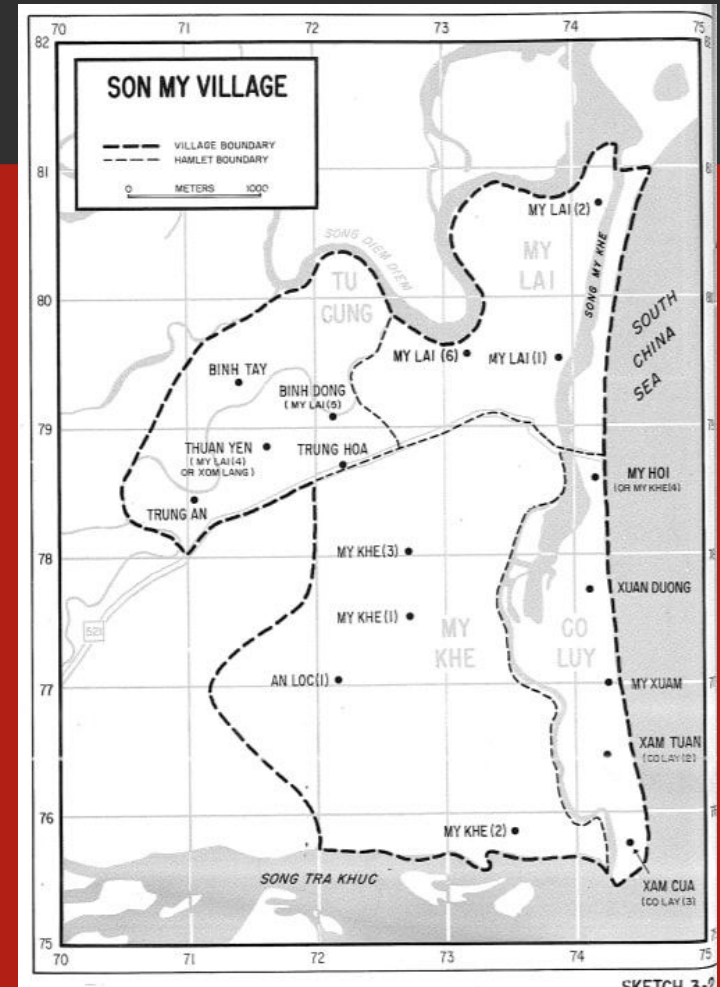
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Over the past eighteen months, I have been provided with a complete transcript of the testimony given to the Peers Inquiry, and also with volumes of other materials the Peers commission assembled, including its final summary report to Secretary Resor and General Westmoreland. What follows is based largely on those papers, although I have supplemented them with documents from various sources, including the Army's Criminal Investigation Division, which had the main responsibility for conducting the initial investigations into both the My Lai 4 massacre and its coverup. In addition, I interviewed scores of military and civilian officials, including some men who had been witnesses before the Peers commission and some who might have been called to testify but were not. I also discussed some of my findings with former members of the Army who had been directly connected with the Peers commission.





Unquestionably, a serious concern for the rights of possible court-martial defendants does exist at all levels of the Army. A careful examination of the testimony and documents accumulated by the Peers commission makes equally clear that military officials have deliberately withheld from the public important but embarrassing factual information about My Lai 4. For example, the Army has steadfastly refused to reveal how many civilians were killed by Charlie Company on March 16th—a decision that no longer has anything to do with pre-trial publicity, since the last court-martial (that of Colonel Oran K. Henderson, the commanding officer of the 11th Brigade) has been concluded. Army spokesmen have insisted that the information is not available. Yet in February, 1970, the Criminal Investigation Division, at the request of the Peers commission, secretly undertook a census of civilian casualties at My Lai 4 and concluded that Charlie Company had slain three hundred and forty-seven Vietnamese men, women, and children in My Lai 4 on March 16, 1968—a total twice as large as had been publicly acknowledged.





Morley Safer: Reporting On Search and Destroy Operations



Walter Cronkite's War Reporting and Anti-War Movement





Discussion



Role of Journalism in Exposing War Crimes and Sparking Anti-War Movements



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VIETNAM WAR

Asia Society Interviews Seymour Hersh on the impact of war reporting and its censorship



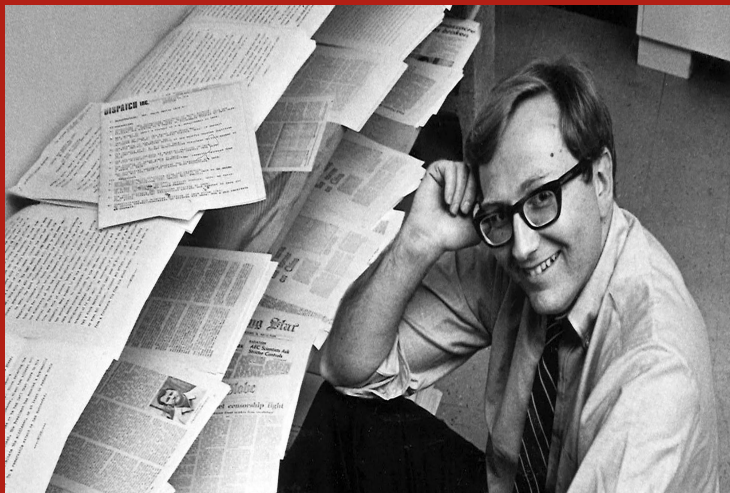
What in your view prompted the US government to alter the means of war reportage with embedded journalists in Iraq? Do you think that this was the natural culmination of a growing tendency since Vietnam to closely monitor the kind of information given to the public from war zones in which the US military is active?



After Vietnam, “Embedded Journalism” became the norm whereby the US military could more tightly control the narrative of war journalism

It was a brilliant move because this way you do control the media. With embedded journalists you only see what the government wants you to see. It's very hard, anybody who has covered the Pentagon will tell you that our soldiers are very likeable and our officers are likeable when they want to be. So you get the Stockholm Syndrome. And then you got the kind of reporting you wanted when you thought you were going to have a fast, quick war. And so everybody missed an awful lot about what was going on and I thought it was a brilliant stroke of genius, absolutely brilliant. I couldn't run a news agency because I would have been hard pressed to understand why we wanted to do it. But I would have been in a distinct minority because you're giving up so much control. You're basically giving up your right to be a discriminating viewer of the whole picture. We didn't get the whole picture.

But do you think that being embedded was a dramatic shift in war reportage? Or had this trend been developing, this way of monitoring information where US military were involved?



Seymour “Sy” Hersh is most famous for his investigative journalism around the My Lai Massacre but is also famous for his coverage of the Abu Ghraib Atrocity during the Iraq War as well as exposing the explosion of Nordstream II as a US false flag operation

There's always some tension with controlling information. I mean there was censorship in World War II and then there were complaints during Vietnam, so there is always that tension. I just think that we shouldn't voluntarily give up something. In other words, because we had access through a military unit didn't mean that we should give up the right, that we should allow them to censor our materials and feel that they're always right.

Was there overt censorship? I don't think there was. I think everybody understood that you don't describe where you are and all but still it's a great big inhibitor. It's very hard when you're with a group of guys for two weeks or three weeks or a month before they go into combat and the third day of combat, they panic and shoot up a carload of people at an intersection. You're not going to tell that story because if you do it right, you're not going to be with that unit anymore. You're going to be a rat. You have ratted them out. So these are all very complicated matters that cut into the ability of reporters to be reporters.



National Coalition Against Censorship on the Effects of War Reporting and its Absence

The role of the media in fueling anti-Vietnam war sentiment may be exaggerated, and there certainly was no lack of government pressure, secrecy, and self-censorship in that era. Nevertheless, media exposure of American activities in Vietnam plainly helped spark opposition to the war; there is no better proof of this than the subsequent efforts to keep war coverage under close government control.

We watched the First Gulf War as if it were an abstraction seen from far away, involving bombs and machines, but not humans. Fast forwarding to post 9/11 war coverage: we now saw reporters “embedded” with troops, living in close quarters with them and allowed tightly controlled access to military action and its consequences for civilian populations; we had staged media events like the bringing down of the Saddam Hussein statue in Baghdad, or President Bush’s Mission Accomplished press spectacle; and we had a reprise of the First Gulf War rules against the photography of coffins of soldiers killed in action.





National Coalition Against Censorship on the Effects of War Reporting and its Absence Cont.

In a word, the war story coming through big media was carefully controlled. At the same time, however, there has been a virtual explosion of first person reports filmed on cellphones and distributed online.

The battle over control of information is never finally won or finally lost. While government is exercising more control over mainstream media's war reporting, there are many more alternative sources of information. There are citizen witnesses, independent reporters, bloggers, whistleblowers, and leakers of inconvenient information. These provide the raw materials for many a contradictory narrative. But in terms of influencing public opinion and provoking a public response, the main media outlets still lead: the revelations about torture of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib were widely publicized through easily shared images on cellphone cameras, but it was the investigative reporting of Seymour Hersh published in and featured on CBS that made it a public scandal. The news that most often shapes policy is still the news that enters the living room, and this news is more controlled than ever.

NATIONAL [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] **COALITION**
AGAINST [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] **CENSORSHIP**



Discussion & New Members Introductions



New Member Introductions

- What is your name, pronouns and state (or country/territory)?
- Where do you work? Is it unionized?
- How did you find out about the People's School?
- What do you think about tonight's class?



Discussion & Wrap Up



Announcements

- The PSMLS has recovered our old Youtube account we lost to wreckers in 2022 and we have re-uploaded all our old videos. Like, subscribe, and check out what subjects we covered prior and what we aware saying in the past.
- PCUSA Cell Chairs need to call members of their cells to remind them about attendance.
- The next issue of New Masses (2025) has begun production. If you have art you want us to feature, email it to info@partyofcommunistsusa.net.



Volunteers Needed!

We are in need of volunteers for the staff of the People's School! Here's a few roles we need filled:

- People to help manage posting on our social media and podcast platforms
- Video Editors, Audio Editors, Graphic Designers, Artists, Narrators
- Facilitators, Web Controls, Moderators

Email info@peopleschool.us if you're interested and try to attend our next staff meeting on Nov 2nd if possible.




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but your chains - start
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Materials to help promote the school!

What is the Peoples School?

The *Peoples School for Marxist Leninist Studies* is part of a long-line of American Communist Party sponsored schools, such as the *Jefferson School of Social Science* and the *People's School of Marxist Studies*.

The PSMLS was initiated by and is sponsored by the *Party of Communists USA*, but it is not a party school, which allows a wide variety of perspectives that don't necessarily reflect the party line.

We hold classes online every week on Tues at 8 PM EST - 9:30 PM EST and Thurs at 9 PM EST - 10:30 PM EST. These are public classes on Zoom that are organized into sections of presentations, and discussion periods. Join our classes and participate in collective education!



Contact Info

Website: peopleschool.us
Email: info@peopleschool.us
Phone Number: 1 (541)-217-3269 West Coast
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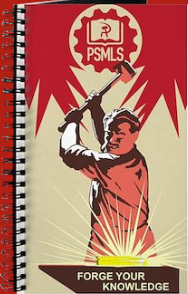
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"With no revolutionary theory, there can be no revolutionary movement"
- V. I. Lenin



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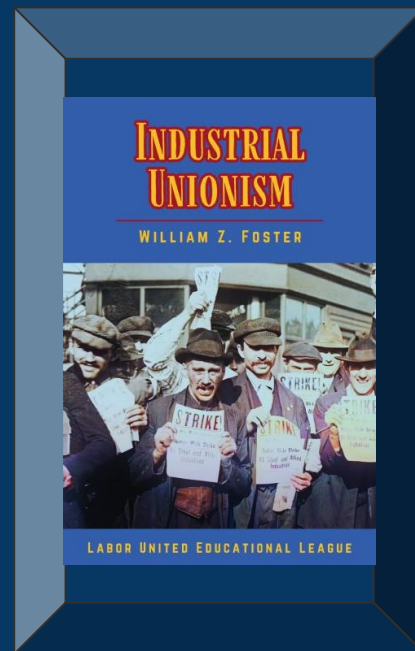
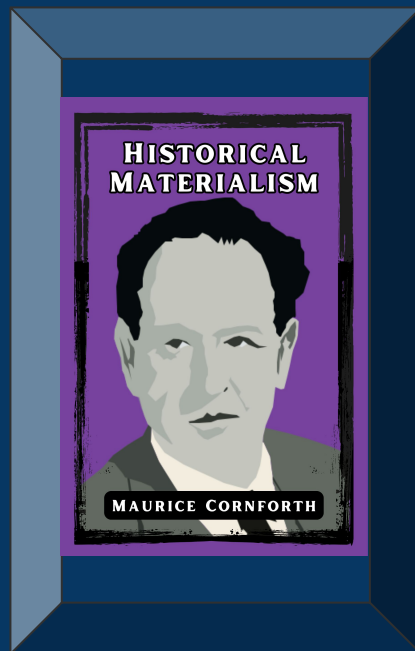
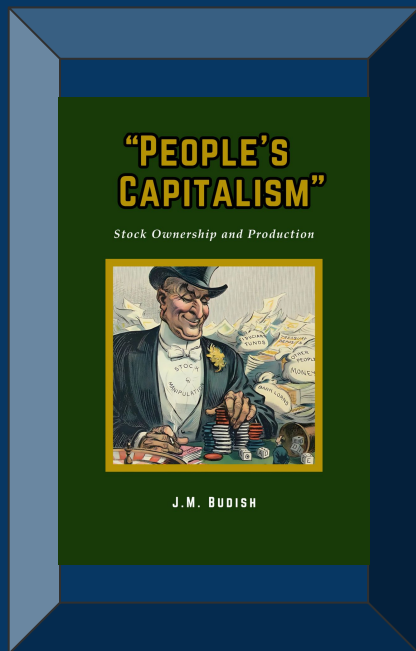
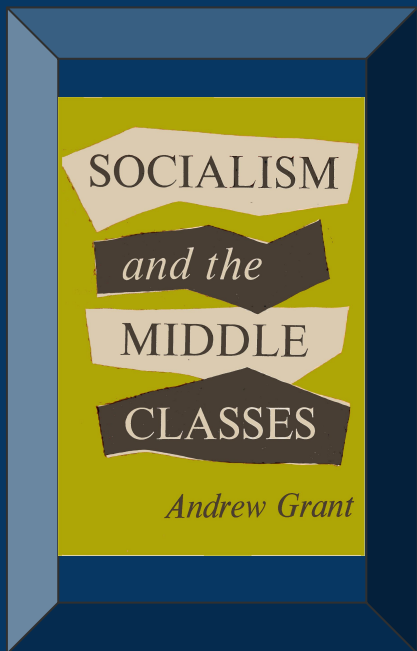




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Latest Releases





Harry Bridges School of Labor

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The Harry Bridges School of Labor is a monthly class held 2x per month. Classes cover a variety of topics aimed at building class conscious among union members.

April's class is "History of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (C.I.O) Part 5" and is April 2, 2025 at 9pm EST/6pm PST and Saturday April 5, 2023 at 7pm EST/4pm PST.





No More War- Jacqueline Sharpe