

The war against street merchants

written by Stephen Millies
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Street vendors march across Brooklyn Bridge to protest police harassment and demand COVID relief in New York City, Nov. 12. Photo: Sam Bloch / The Counter

Jobless men sold apples during the Great Depression. Ninety years later, many city sidewalks are lined with street merchants trying to sell food, clothing and other needed goods.

Why are these women and men willing to stand in all sorts of weather for 10, 12 or more hours a day? Because they have to.

That's the only way the sellers can eat and pay the rent, not only for themselves but also for their children. Many street merchants send money to their families in other lands, keeping them alive.

Even during periods of capitalist "prosperity," millions are unemployed. Discrimination in hiring, particularly against the undocumented, drives many immigrants to sell on the street. The current coronavirus pandemic and economic crisis [have forced many more](#) to become street merchants.

Deliberate deindustrialization is another reason. Black workers in Baltimore who used to have union jobs at the now closed Sparrows Point steel mill or GM plant can be found selling goods.

None of these workers are criminals, yet they are victimized by police.

In 2019, 319 street merchants [received a \\$188,531 settlement](#) in New York City after cops stole their property.

The big-hearted Los Angeles City Council voted in March to [ban unlicensed street vending](#). As many as 50,000 people are to be driven off the streets, sidewalks and parks.

“Don’t put fines on us, let us work,” [responded one worker](#), Aureliano Santiago. Thousands of street merchants have exhausted their savings because of the coronavirus pandemic.

The same city government gave L.A. real estate developers and hotel owners around [\\$1 billion in tax abatements](#) from 2005 to 2018.

Long standing hate

Donald Trump always hated street merchants. He tried to [drive out disabled veterans](#) from selling near Trump Tower on Manhattan’s posh Fifth Avenue.

GIs can be saluted, paraded and buried after they come home from another war for Big Oil. But cops are to be sicced on them when they try to earn a living.

[The New York Times](#) — now an opponent of Trump — also demanded the vets’ removal in a 1991 editorial. The Times lamented that “merchandisers of cut-rate ties, scarves, jewelry, counterfeit Rolexes, Bart Simpson T-shirts and other cheap goods have recruited a sales force of disabled veterans.”

Why didn’t the newspaper try to recruit veterans for decent-paying jobs? Over the past 60 years, nearly 900,000 manufacturing jobs in New York City have been destroyed.

Along Junction Boulevard in Queens, N.Y., this writer hasn’t found any “counterfeit Rolexes” or, horror of horrors, “Bart Simpson T-shirts” for sale. Instead, winter clothing, housewares and plenty of tasty food, including pupusas, are being offered.

It wasn’t any different a century ago in Manhattan’s Lower East Side — today’s Loisaida — with the exception of knishes being sold. Streets were filled with pushcarts operated by Jewish and Italian poor people trying to survive.

Police fired 41 shots at Amadou Diallo on Feb. 4, 1999, murdering the unarmed immigrant from Guinea. [Right-wing commentator Heather Mac Donald](#) dismissed the African victim as “a peddler of bootlegged videos and tube socks.”

Does selling tube socks deserve the death penalty? For displaying a complete lack of humanity, Mac Donald has become a fixture at the anti-union Manhattan Institute.

Hilter didn't like peddlers, either. Nazis targeted Jewish peddlers to divert people's hatred away from big capitalists like the Krupps.

Landlords want to get rid of street merchants because they don't collect rent from them. The same goes for the banks that own the landlords' mortgages.

It's Amazon, not street merchants, that is ruining thousands of retail stores. It's owner Jeff Bezos, with his \$186 billion fortune, who's responsible for emptying out the shopping centers.

What do you have to sell?

In a capitalist society like the U.S., everybody has to sell something. For the vast majority of the population, this means selling one's ability to perform labor.

Karl Marx, the founder of scientific socialism, called this ability “labor power.” Skilled labor is compounded simpler labor.

Capitalism couldn't exist if everyone was “their own boss.” The capitalists need you to work for them.

Andrew Carnegie wanted his tombstone to read, “Here lies a man who knew how to get other men to work for him.” Tens of thousands of “other men” worked in Carnegie's steel mills 12 hours a day, seven days a week.

It took centuries in Western Europe to force people to work for capitalists. They had

to be cut off from their means of sustenance.

The reason there's been no British king named Henry since the 1500s wasn't because Henry VIII had six wives. It's because this tyrant hanged 72,000 homeless people, who were called "vagabonds." Rudy Giuliani would have been one of Henry's lawyers.

British colonizers forced Africans to work for them by violence and imposing taxes. It was the African Holocaust that supplied the U.S. with the enslaved labor that produced most of the country's exports until the Civil War.

Millions of farmers in the U.S., including sharecroppers, have been driven off the land since the Great Depression. But not everybody could find a job.

That includes activists who were put on "do not hire" lists. Martin Irons, a leader of a 1886 railroad strike, was forced to sell peanuts on the streets of St. Louis to survive. The Black communist organizer Hosea Hudson had to sell shaving goods during the 1950s anti-communist witchhunt.

The tens of millions who sell their labor power to capitalists and the millions of people who are forced to sell on the streets are natural allies.

Defending street merchants goes hand-in-hand with fighting police terror. It's part of the same struggle as fighting for health care and unemployment compensation during the coronavirus crisis.

