

'THE STRUGGLE OF A LIFETIME' (CONTINUED)

"Ours is not the struggle of one judicial appointment or presidential term. Ours is the struggle of a lifetime, or maybe even many lifetimes, and each one of us in every generation must do our part."

—U.S. Representative John Lewis (1940–2020)¹

By Mark Harrington and Erica Lessem

When we opened *TAGline* with the words above one year ago, we could not have remotely predicted either the specifics or the scale of struggles of the year to come. These struggles continued to be against all-too-predictable evils: the utter failure of governments around the world to respond adequately to crises; blatant disregard for human life; unconscionable institutionalized violence, racism, sexism, and classism; the prevailing of political assertions over fact; and the prioritization of power and profit over people. During the ongoing, still growing, and out-of-control COVID-19 pandemic, "essential workers" continue to be treated as expendable. Banks and airlines receive huge bailouts and titans of industry and big corporations turn record profits, while old people are left to die isolated and alone in institutional settings, people experiencing homelessness are more vulnerable and stigmatized than ever—including by New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo²—and incarcerated people are sitting ducks in prisons and jails, where large outbreaks have infected over 242,000 people and killed at least 1,400 (likely a vast underestimate given low testing coverage).³

At the time of writing, over 2 million human beings who were alive in January 2020—including courageous Chinese whistleblower Dr. Li Wenliang, HIV researcher Gita Ramjee, and many of our loved ones—have died from COVID-19 and the lack of appropriate government preparation for and response to it. This year—as throughout U.S. history—police violence, racism, and transphobia have ended so many Black

lives, so many trans, Latinx, and Indigenous lives. In recent months, we have lost activists, pioneers, and national leaders: performing artist Nashom Wooden, aka Mona Foot (1970–2020); harm reduction activist Elizabeth Owens (1959–2020); Representative John Lewis himself (1940–2020); Representative Elijah Cummings (1951–2019); Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg (1933–2020); and the courageous Timothy Ray Brown (1966–2020), the first person ever to be cured of HIV infection. Working within and for the struggle until they died, these people gave more than their example, work, or lives—they give us inspiration, lessons learned, strategies and tactics, and hope. We dedicate this issue of *TAGline* to all of them.

In the U.S., we continue to struggle with the vicious and violent forces that go back to the country's origins, when colonists seized land from Indigenous nations and entrenched the institution of slavery. The parameters of the struggle have morphed over the years, taking different such as genocide, slavery, massacres, lynching, Jim Crow, the confinement of Native Americans to reservations, the confinement of people of color—particularly Black Americans—by the carceral state, redlining, the war on people who use drugs, and voter suppression and disenfranchisement. Yet these various presentations harbor a continuous underpinning of vigilante and police violence and other forms of political, economic, and social discrimination and segregation.

To overcome these and other injustices, movements were formed, grew, expanded, fragmented, and branched throughout American history. These movements had a range of focuses: Native American rights and survival, abolition, labor, anti-war, women's rights, LGBTQ+ rights, civil rights, the Movement for Black Lives, the #MeToo movement, and movements for the rights of immigrants, prisoners, and people who use drugs.

TAG's particular struggle—the movement against AIDS and its deadliest coinfections—centers on the intersection of human rights, public health, and social justice. Our struggle, both scientific and political, is inherently intersectional, multidimensional, and multigenerational. Our movement builds on the legacy and intersects with the past, present, and future of these historic movements toward justice, liberty, and equality for all.

These movements have achieved so much, but gains can be taken away. The Supreme Court gutted the Voting Rights Act;⁴ the Affordable Care Act has been under attack for the past 10 years; abortion rights continue to be eroded and could be further curtailed by the determined fiat of a reactionary Supreme Court. Progress has been far from linear. Labor movements grew in strength from the mid-1800s to the mid-1960s but are now significantly weakened (with the notable exception of police and prison worker unions). And many of the touted gains along the way belied insidious injustices—even in its strength, the labor movement usually recapitulated the racism of broader society. Before the Civil War, slavery abolitionists and suffragists formed an alliance; this movement fragmented as Black men—but not women of any color—got the vote, and racism pervaded parts of the women's suffrage movement, denigrating Black men and leaving Black women behind and invisible.

As we prepare to emerge from one of the most fraught election cycles in U.S. history, we reflect on what this means for sustaining and gaining progress in our movement. Elections themselves do not solve problems, they only reposition them, raising new sets of issues and reframing the injustices of history. The role that elections are supposed to play—one of national catharsis, because they symbolize the chance to achieve closure in one political cycle and begin another—is belied by the persistent obstacles and inequities in access to the simple right to vote.

Back in 2008, some were quick to conclude that the election of President Barack Obama signified the U.S.'s transition into a post-racial state. The persistence of widespread racism in this country under both his tenure and the four years of the current presidency clearly and painfully proves the untruth of this proposition.

Instead, what history shows us is that—as the Honorable John Lewis wisely noted—struggles last for generations and pass through multiple cycles of presidents, Senate and congressional sessions, and Supreme Courts. The reality is that the changes we are trying to enact are extremely difficult no matter who is in office.

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The most productive and lasting changes are instigated, led, and supported by popular movements and are raised to national attention and action at critical times when the political configuration of the national government allows for substantive change. This was true in the wake of the Civil War, when radical Republicans dominated Congress because the Southern states that seceded had yet to regain representation, and during the New Deal, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt's coalition had supermajorities in both houses of Congress (though many New Deal programs, excluded Black Americans from their benefits, whether in access to federal home loans or participation in Social Security). Similarly, after President John F. Kennedy's assassination and Lyndon B. Johnson's landslide victory in 1964, Congress was able to pass historic civil rights, housing, and education legislation—not to mention establish

Medicare and Medicaid—which set the stage for a juster America. Tragically, the promise of Johnson’s Great Society was destroyed by the national conflagrations that ended the 1960s, including assassinations, urban uprisings, and the seemingly endless Vietnam War. Even the more moderate advances of the Obama-era Affordable Care Act were only possible because the Democrats controlled both houses of Congress for a brief period ending in the 2010 midterm elections.

This issue of TAGline exemplifies and extends the continued struggle for everything we’ve already won and the things we have yet to win—and the wisdom that government institutions and initiatives can only work with full ownership of the People.

This edition of TAGline delves into how to effect these profound changes through systems built for and by the people, starting with Annette Gaudino, Suraj Madoori, and Matt Rose’s visionary [article](#) on how the U.S. and governments around the world must transform to better prevent and respond to pandemics, and how communities must hold them to account. We see evidence for this community power—as well as the stubborn structural and social barriers and gaps—in Edric Figueroa’s [interviews](#) with community leaders working to end HIV in the U.S. Their work and that of the ACT NOW: END AIDS coalition brings community power to influence the implementation of the federal Ending the HIV Epidemic plan for equitable, meaningful, community-driven progress.

This need for community ownership and involvement extends to the research sphere. Richard Jefferys and Lindsay McKenna parse how [research equity](#) is fundamental for gender and racial equity in the response to COVID-19 and other conditions. And finally, Elizabeth Lovinger and Anthony D. So broaden our focus to the [global level](#), illustrating how community participation, and U.S. support and participation, are essential for an effective coordinated global health response by the World Health Organization.

This issue of TAGline exemplifies and extends the continued struggle for everything we’ve already won and the things we have yet to win—and the wisdom that government institutions and initiatives can only work with full ownership of the People. As James Baldwin wrote in 1963, “The future is going to be worse than the present if we do not let the people who represent us know that it is our country. A government and a nation are not synonymous. We can change the government, and we will.”⁵

As we enter the next phase of the struggle to cross the bridge from the injustices of our history and today’s society to achieve the vision of a just, equitable world, we close with words again from the Honorable John Lewis of his legendary participation in the 1965 voting rights march across the police-blocked Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama:

“We were beaten, we were tear-gassed. I thought I was going to die on this bridge. . . We cannot give up now. We cannot give in. We must keep the faith, keep our eyes on the prize.”

Endnotes

1. Lewis J. *Across that bridge: life lessons and a vision for change*. New York: Hyperion; 2012.
2. Bromwich JE, Cramer M, Gold M, et al. “Cuomo calls subway cars filled with homeless people ‘disgusting.’” *The New York Times*. 2020 April 28. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/28/nyregion/coronavirus-new-york-update.html>.
3. Almkhatar S, Aufrechtig A, Matthew Bloch M, et al. “Covid in the U.S.: Latest Map and Case Count.” *The New York Times*. 2020 October 21. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/us/coronavirus-us-cases.html>
4. Pérez M. “7 years of gutting voting rights.” Brennan Center for Justice. 2020 June 25. <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/7-years-gutting-voting-rights>.
5. Baldwin J. “We Can Change the Country.” 1963; reprinted in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*. Kenan R, editor. New York: Vintage/Random House; 2010. p. 64.