On February 18, 2010, Joseph Andrew Stack crashed his small plane into an office building in Austin Texas, hitting an IRS office, committing suicide. He left a Manifesto explaining his actions.\(^1\) It was mostly ridiculed, but it deserves much better, I think.

Stack’s manifesto traces the life history that led him to this final desperate act. The story begins when he was a teenage student living on a pittance in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania near the heart of what was once a great industrial centre. His neighbour was a woman in her 80s, surviving on cat food, the ‘widowed wife of a retired steel worker. Her husband had worked all his life in the steel mills of central Pennsylvania with promises from big business and the union that, for his 30 years of service, he would have a pension and medical care to look forward to in his retirement. Instead he was one of the thousands who got nothing because the incompetent mill management and corrupt union (not to mention the government) raided their pension funds and stole their retirement. All she had was social security to live on’; and Stack could have added that there have been concerted and continuing efforts by the super-rich and their political allies to take even that away on spurious grounds. Stack decided then that he couldn’t trust big business and would strike out on his own, only to discover that he couldn’t trust a government that cared nothing about people like him but only about the rich and privileged; or a legal system in which, in his words, ‘there are two “interpretations” for every law, one for the very rich, and one for the rest of us’. A government that leaves us with ‘the joke we call the American medical system, including the drug and insurance companies [that] are murdering tens of thousands of people a year,’ with care rationed largely by wealth, not need. All in a social order in which ‘a handful of thugs and plunderers can commit unthinkable atrocities … and when it’s time for their gravy train to crash under the weight of their gluttony and overwhelming stupidity, the
force of the full federal government has no difficulty coming to their aid within days if not hours.’ And much more.

Stack tells us that his desperate final act was an effort to join those who are willing to die for their freedom, in the hope of awakening others from their torpor. It wouldn’t surprise me if he had in mind the premature death of the steel worker that taught him about the real world as a teenager. That steel worker didn’t literally commit suicide after having been discarded to the trash heap, but it’s far from an isolated case; we can add his and many similar cases to the colossal toll of the institutional crimes of state capitalism. There are poignant studies of the indignation and rage of those who have been cast aside as the state-corporate programs of financialization and deindustrialization have closed plants and destroyed families and communities. They reveal the sense of acute betrayal on the part of working people who believed they had fulfilled their duty to society in a moral compact with business and government, only to discover that they had been only instruments for profit and power, truisms from which they had been carefully protected by doctrinal institutions.

There are striking similarities in the world’s second largest economy, investigated by Ching Kwan Lee in her penetrating inquiry into Chinese labour.2 Lee draws the close comparison between working-class outrage and desperation in the discarded industrial sectors of the US and the fury among workers in what she calls China’s rustbelt — the state socialist industrial centre in the northeast, now abandoned by the state in favour of state capitalist development of the southeast sunbelt. In both regions Lee finds massive labour protests, but different in character. In the Chinese rustbelt workers express the same sense of betrayal as their counterparts here, but in their case betrayal of the Maoist principles of solidarity and dedication to development of the society that they thought had been a moral compact, only to discover that whatever it was, it is now a bitter fraud. In the sunbelt, the workers lack that cultural tradition and still rely on their home villages for support and family life. They denounce the failure of authorities to live up to even the minimal legal requirements of barely liveable workplace conditions and payment of the pittance called salaries. According to official statistics there were 58,000 ‘mass incidents’ of protest in 2003 in one province of the rustbelt, with 3 million people participating. Some 30–40 million workers who were dropped from work units ‘are plagued by a profound sense of insecurity,’ arousing ‘rage and desperation’ around the country, in Lee’s words.3 She expects that there may be worse to come as a looming crisis of landlessness in the countryside undermines the base for survival of the sunbelt workers, who lack even a semblance of independent unions, while
in the rustbelt, workers do not have anything like the civil society support that often exists here in the United States. Both Lee’s work and the studies of the US rustbelt make clear that we should not underestimate the depth of moral indignation that lies behind the furious and often self-destructive bitterness about government and business power.

We find something similar in rural India, where food consumption has sharply declined for the great majority since the neoliberal reforms were partially implemented, while peasant suicides are increasing at about the same rate as the number of billionaires, amidst accolades for India’s fabulous growth. Fabulous growth for some, that is – but not so attractive for the workers transferred to India to reduce labour costs by IBM, which now has three-fourths of its work force abroad.4 Businessweek calls IBM the ‘quintessential American company,’ not inappropriately: it became the global giant in computing thanks in large part to the unwitting munificence of the US taxpayer, who also substantially funded the IT revolution on which IBM relies along with most of the rest of the high tech economy – mostly under the pretext that the Russians are coming.

There is much excited talk these days about a great global shift of power, with speculation about whether (or when) China might displace the US as the dominant global power, along with India – which, if it happened, would mean that the global system would be returning to something like what it was before the European conquests. Their recent GDP growth has indeed been spectacular. But there is more to say. In the UN human development index, India retains its place near the bottom, now 134th, slightly above Cambodia, below Laos and Tajikistan. China ranks 92nd, a bit above Jordan, below the Dominican Republic and Iran. By comparison, Cuba, under harsh US attack for 50 years, is ranked 52nd, the highest in Central America and the Caribbean, barely below Argentina and Uruguay. India and China also suffer from extremely high inequality, so well over a billion of their inhabitants fall far lower in the scale. Furthermore, an accurate accounting would go beyond conventional measures to include serious costs that China and India cannot long ignore: ecological, resource depletion, and others.

The speculations about a global shift of power overlook something that we all know: nations divorced from the internal distribution of power are not the real actors in international affairs, a truism brought to our attention by that incorrigible radical Adam Smith. He recognized that the principal architects of power in England were the owners of the society, in his day the merchants and manufacturers, who made sure that policy would attend scrupulously to their interests however ‘grievous’ the impact on the people of England and worse, the victims of ‘the savage injustice of the Europeans’
abroad: British crimes in India were the main concern of an old-fashioned conservative with moral values.

To his modern worshippers, Smith’s truisms are ridiculed as ‘elaborate theories of how world history was being manipulated by shadowy corporatist/imperialist networks,’ one of the tragic legacies of the ‘60s, to quote New York Times thinker David Brooks; actually the ‘70s, 1776 to be exact. One of many illustrations of how the intellectual and moral level of today’s ‘conservatism’ compares to what its heroes understood full well.

In the interests of full disclosure, I should mention that Brooks identifies me as the villain who adopts Adam Smith’s heresy.

Bearing Smith’s radical truism in mind, we can see that there is indeed a global shift of power, though not the one that occupies centre stage: a shift from the global work force to transnational capital, sharply escalating during the neoliberal years. The cost is substantial, including the Joe Stacks of the US, starving peasants in India, and millions of protesting workers in China, where labour share in national income is declining even more rapidly than in most of the world.

In their very illuminating work, Martin Hart-Landsberg and Paul Burkett observe that China plays a leading role in the real global shift of power, having become largely an assembly plant for a regional production system. Japan, Taiwan, and other Asian economies export parts and components to China, and provide most of the advanced technology. Much concern has been aroused by the growing US trade deficit with China, but less noticed is the fact that the trade deficit with Japan and the rest of Asia has sharply declined as the new regional production system takes shape. The Wall Street Journal illustrates with a Sloan Foundation study (2007) that ‘found that only $4 of an iPod that costs $150 to produce is made in China, even though the final assembly and export occurs in China. The remaining $146 represents parts imported to China.’ The Journal concludes that if only the value added by manufacturers in China were counted, the real US-China trade deficit might be reduced by as much as 30 per cent while the US trade deficit with Japan would rise by 25 per cent. US manufacturers are following the same course, providing parts and components for China to assemble and export, mostly back to the US.

For the financial institutions, retail giants, ownership and management of manufacturing industries, and sectors closely related to this nexus of power, all of this is heavenly. Not for Joe Stack and many others like him.

To understand the public mood it is worthwhile to recall that the conventional use of GDP to measure economic growth is highly misleading. There have been efforts to devise more realistic measures, such as the General
Progress Indicator, which subtracts from GDP expenditures that harm the public (crime, pollution, etc.) and adds estimated value of authentic benefits (volunteer work, leisure, etc.). In the US, GPI has stagnated since the 1970s, though GDP has increased, the growth going into very few pockets. That result correlates with studies of social indicators, the standard measure of health of a society. They tracked economic growth until the mid-1970s, then began to decline, reaching the level of 1960 by 2000 (the latest figures available). The correlation with financialization of the economy and neoliberal socio-economic measures is hard to miss, and not unique to the US by any means.

It’s true that there is nothing essentially new in the process of deindustrialization. Owners and managers naturally seek the lowest labour costs; efforts to do otherwise, famously by Henry Ford, were struck down by the courts, so now it is a legal obligation. One means is shifting production. In earlier days the shift was mostly internal, especially to the southern states, where labour could be more harshly repressed. Major corporations, like the US steel corporation of the sainted philanthropist Andrew Carnegie, could also profit from the new slave labour force created by the criminalization of black life after the end of Reconstruction in 1877, a core part of the American industrial revolution, continuing until the Second World War. It is being reproduced in part during the recent neoliberal period, with the drug war used as a pretext to drive the superfluous population, mostly black, back to the prisons, also providing a new supply of prison labour in state or private prisons, much of it in violation of international labour conventions. For many African-Americans, since they were exported to the colonies life has scarcely escaped the bonds of slavery, or sometimes worse.

In the ultra-respectable *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, we can read that the ‘prison system in America has grown into a leviathan unmatched in human history,’ making the US ‘the home to the largest custodial infrastructure for the mass depredation of liberty to be found on the planet,’ mostly black, a product of the past 30 years, as is the fact that the US ‘leads the world not only in incarceration rates but in executive compensation,’ facts that are increasingly recognized to be linked, a Harvard Business School professor points out, as is the fact that the US is lagging far behind much of the world, particularly China but Europe as well, in green technologies.9

It is easy to ridicule some of the ways in which Joe Stack and others like him articulate their very genuine and just concerns, but it’s far more appropriate to understand what lies behind their perceptions and actions, and particularly, to ask ourselves why the radical imagination is failing to
offer them a constructive path while the centre is very visibly not holding, and those who have real grievances are being mobilized in ways that pose no slight danger, to themselves and others.

Stack’s manifesto ends with two evocative sentences: ‘The communist creed: From each according to his ability, to each according to his need. The capitalist creed: From each according to his gullibility, to each according to his greed’.

Stack minces no words about the capitalist creed. We can only speculate about what he meant by the communist creed that he counterposed to it. It’s not unlikely that he regarded it as an ideal with genuine moral force. If so, that would not be too surprising. Some of you may recall a poll in 1987, on the bicentennial, in which people were given a list of statements and asked which they thought were in the Constitution. At that time, no one had a clue what was in the Constitution, so the answer ‘in the Constitution’ presumably meant: ‘so obviously correct that it must be in the Constitution’. One statement that received a solid majority was Joe Stack’s ‘Communist creed’.

I qualified the comment with the phrase ‘at that time’. Today, a segment of the population memorizes and worships the Constitution — the words at least. The Tea Party has produced its catechism for political candidates: one requirement is that they must agree to scrap the tax code and replace it with one no longer than 4,543 words — to match the length of the Constitution, unamended. Only some amendments share this holy status, particularly the Second under the recent interpretation by the Supreme Court reactionaries, but the First Amendment is more questionable because of what it might be taken to imply about separation of Church and State. Meanwhile, Texas announced its new textbook requirements, which apply to the whole country because of the size of the Texas market. Jefferson was cut from the list of those who inspired 18th and 19th century revolutions, replaced by Thomas Aquinas, Calvin and Blackstone. The decision reflects the distaste for Jefferson because, among other heresies, he coined the phrase ‘separation between church and state’. For today’s version of conservatism the US is a Christian country, something like the Islamic Republic of Iran, or the Jewish State of Israel. In that connection, Golda Meir is listed as required learning for children, but no Hispanics. Along with normal racism, that reflects the curious amalgam of extreme anti-Semitism and support for Israel among right-wing religious sectors. Such matters are of no slight significance when we try to look ahead.

The anti-tax extremism of the Tea Party movement is not as immediately suicidal as Joe Stack’s desperate action, but it is suicidal nonetheless, for
reasons that need no elaboration. California today is a dramatic illustration. The world’s greatest public system of higher education is being dismantled. Governor Schwarzenegger says he’ll have to eliminate state health and welfare programs unless the federal government forks over some $7 billion, and other governors are joining in. At the same time a powerful states rights movement is taking shape demanding that the federal government not intrude into our affairs – a nice illustration of what Orwell called ‘doublethink’: the ability to hold two contradictory ideas in mind while believing both of them, practically a motto for the times. California’s plight results in large part from anti-tax fanaticism. It’s much the same elsewhere, even in affluent suburbs.

Encouraging anti-tax sentiment has long been a staple of the business propaganda that dominates the doctrinal system. People must be indoctrinated to hate and fear the government, for good reasons: of existing power systems, the government is the one that in principle, and sometimes in fact, is answerable to the public and can impose some constraints on the depredations of private power; the corollary to ‘getting government off our backs’ is groaning beneath the even greater weight of unaccountable private tyrannies. But business anti-government propaganda has to be nuanced: business of course favours a very powerful state that works for Adam Smith’s principal architects, today not merchants and manufacturers, but multinationals and financial institutions. Constructing this internally contradictory propaganda message is no easy task. Thus people have to be trained to hate and fear the deficit, a necessary means to stimulate the economy after its destruction at the hands of the dominant financial institutions and their cohorts in Washington. But at the same time the population must favour the deficits, almost half attributable to the growing military budget, which is breaking records, and the rest predicted to overwhelm the budget thanks to the cruel and hopelessly inefficient privatized health care system, a gift to the insurance companies and big Pharma.

Despite such difficulties, the propaganda tasks have been carried out with impressive success. One illustration is the public attitude towards April 15, when tax returns are due. Let’s put aside for the moment the thought of a much more free and just society. In a functioning democracy of the kind that formally exists, April 15 would be a day of celebration: we are coming together to implement programs that we have chosen. Here it is a day of mourning: some alien force is descending upon us to steal our hard-earned money. That’s one graphic indication of the success of the intense efforts of the highly class-conscious business community to win what its publications call ‘the everlasting battle for the minds of men,’ and like even the most
vulgar propaganda it has grains of truth that the Joe Stacks perceive.

Another stunning illustration of the success of propaganda, with considerable import for the future, is the cult of the killer and torturer Ronald Reagan, one of the grand criminals of the modern era, who also had an unerring instinct for favouring the most brutal terrorists and murderers around the world, from Zia ul-Haq and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar in today’s AfPak to the most dedicated killers in Central America to the South African racists who killed an estimated 1.5 million people and had to be supported because they were under attack by Nelson Mandela’s ANC, one of the ‘more notorious terrorist groups’ in the world, the Reaganites determined in 1988. And on and on, with remarkable consistency. His grisly record was quickly expunged in favour of mythic constructions that would have impressed Kim il-Sung. Among other feats, he was anointed as the apostle of free markets while raising protectionist barriers more than any postwar president – probably more than all others combined – and implementing massive government intervention in the economy. He is hailed as the grand exponent of small government and of law and order. Government grew relative to GDP during his years in office, while he informed the business world that labour laws would not be enforced, so that illegal firing of union organizers tripled under his supervision. His hatred of working people was exceeded perhaps only by his contempt for the rich black women driving in limousines to collect their welfare checks.

There should be no need to continue with the record, but the outcome tells us a lot about the intellectual and moral culture. For President Obama, this monstrous creature was a ‘transformative figure’. At Stanford University’s prestigious Hoover Institution, he is revered as a colossal figure whose ‘spirit seems to stride the country, watching us like a warm and friendly ghost’. We arrive in Washington at Reagan International Airport – or if we prefer, at John Foster Dulles International Airport, honouring another prominent terrorist commander. His achievements include installing the torture regime of the Shah and the reign of the most vicious of the terrorists of Central America, whose exploits reached true genocide in the highlands while Reagan praised the worst of the mass murderers, Rioss Montt, as ‘a man of great personal integrity’ who was ‘totally dedicated to democracy’ and was receiving a ‘bum rap’ from human rights organizations.

Painfully to record, many of the Joe Stacks whose lives the ‘warm and friendly ghost’ was ruining join in the adulation, and hasten to shelter under the umbrella of the power and violence that he symbolized.

All of this evokes memories of other days when the centre did not hold. One example that should not be forgotten is the Weimar Republic: the peak
of western civilization in the sciences and the arts, also regarded as a model of democracy. Through the 1920s the traditional liberal and conservative parties that had always governed the Reich entered into inexorable decline, well before the process was intensified by the Great Depression. The coalition that elected General Hindenburg in 1925 was not very different from the mass base that swept Hitler into office eight years later, compelling the aristocratic Hindenburg to select as Chancellor the ‘little corporal’ he despised. As late as 1928 the Nazis had less than 3 per cent of the vote. Two years later the most respectable Berlin press was lamenting the sight of the many millions in this ‘highly civilized country’ who had ‘given their vote to the commonest, hollowest and crudest charlatanism’.15 The centre was collapsing. The public was coming to despise the incessant wrangling of Weimar politics, the service of the traditional parties to powerful interests and their failure to deal with popular grievances. They were drawn to the forces dedicated to upholding the greatness of the nation and defending it against perceived threats in a revitalized, armed and unified state, marching to a glorious future, led by the charismatic figure who was carrying out ‘the will of eternal Providence, the Creator of the universe’, as he orated to the mesmerized masses. By May 1933 the Nazis had largely destroyed not only the traditional ruling parties but even the huge working-class parties, the Social Democrats and Communists, along with their very powerful associations. The Nazis declared May Day 1933 to be a workers’ holiday, something the left parties had never been able to achieve. Many working people took part in the enormous patriotic demonstrations, with more than a million people at the heart of Red Berlin, joining farmers, artisans, shopkeepers, paramilitary forces, Christian organizations, athletic and riflery clubs, and the rest of the coalition that was taking shape as the centre collapsed. By the onset of the war perhaps 90 per cent of Germans were marching with the brownshirts.

The world is too complex for history to repeat, but there are nevertheless lessons to keep in mind, and even memories. I am just old enough to remember those chilling and ominous days of Germany’s descent from decency to Nazi barbarism, in the words of the distinguished scholar of German history Fritz Stern, who tells us that he has the future of the United States in mind when he reviews ‘a historic process in which resentment against a disenchanted secular world found deliverance in the ecstatic escape of unreason’.16

That is one possible outcome of collapse of the centre when the radical imagination, though powerful at the time, nonetheless fell short.

The popular mood today is complex, in ways that are both hopeful and
troubling. One illustration is attitudes towards social spending on the part of those who identify themselves in polls as ‘anti-government’. A recent scholarly study finds that by large majorities, they support ‘maintaining or expanding spending on Social Security, child care, and aid to poor people’ and other social welfare measures, though support falls off significantly ‘when it came to aid to blacks and welfare recipients’. Half of these advocates of reducing the role of government believe ‘that spending is too little [on] assistance to the poor’. In the population as a whole, majorities, in some cases substantial, feel the government is spending too little to improve and protect the nation’s health, and on Social Security, drug addiction, and child care programs – though again, there is an exception on aid for blacks and welfare recipients, partly a tribute to Reaganite thuggery, I suspect.

The results give some indication of what might be achieved by commitments even far short of the radical imagination, and of some of the impediments that will have to be overcome for these and much more far-reaching purposes.

The Massachusetts election in January 2010, which undermined majority rule in the Senate, gives some further insight into what can happen when the centre does not hold and those who believe in even limited measures of reform fail to reach the population. In the election to fill the seat of the Senate’s ‘liberal lion’, Ted Kennedy, Scott Brown ran as the 41st vote against health care, which Kennedy had fought for throughout his political life. A majority opposed Obama’s proposals, but primarily because they gave away too much to the insurance industry. Much the same is true nationally.

One interesting feature was the voting pattern among union members, Obama’s natural constituency. Of those who bothered to vote, a majority chose Brown. Union leaders and activists reported that workers were angered at Obama’s record generally, but particularly incensed over his stand on health care. As one reported, ‘He didn’t insist on a public option nor a strong employer mandate to provide insurance. It was hard not to notice that the only issue on which he took a firm stand was taxing benefits’ for the health care won by union struggles, retracting his campaign pledge.

There was a massive infusion of funds from financial executives in the final days of the campaign. That was one part of a broader phenomenon, which reveals dramatically why Joe Stack and others have every reason to be disgusted at the farce that they were taught to honour as democracy.

Obama’s primary constituency in the 2008 election was financial institutions, which have gained such dominance in the economy since the ’70s. They preferred Obama to McCain, and largely bought the election for him. They expected to be rewarded, and were. But a few months ago,
responding to the rising anger of the Joe Stacks, Obama began to criticize the ‘greedy bankers’ who had been rescued by the public, and even proposed some measures to constrain their excesses. Punishment for his deviation was swift. The major banks announced prominently that they would shift funding to Republicans if Obama persisted with his offensive rhetoric.

Obama heard the message. Within days he informed the business press that bankers are fine ‘guys’. He singled out for special praise the chairs of the two leading beneficiaries of public largesse, JP Morgan Chase and Goldman Sachs, and assured the business world that ‘I, like most of the American people, don’t begrudge people success or wealth’, such as the huge bonuses and profits that are infuriating the public. ‘That’s part of the free market system,’ Obama continued; not inaccurately, as ‘free markets’ are interpreted in state capitalist doctrine. His retreat however was not in time to curb the flow of cash to help gain the 41st seat.

In fairness, we should concede that the greedy bankers have a point. Their task is to maximize profit and market share, in fact that’s their legal obligation. If they don’t do it, they’ll be replaced by someone who will. These are institutional facts, as are the inherent market inefficiencies that require them to ignore systemic risk. They know full well that this oversight is likely to tank the economy, but such externalities are not their business, and cannot be, for institutional reasons. It is also unfair to accuse them of ‘irrational exuberance’, to borrow Alan Greenspan’s brief recognition of reality during the tech boom of the late 90s. Their exuberance was hardly irrational: it was quite rational, in the knowledge that when it all collapses, they can flee to the shelter of the nanny state, clutching their copies of Hayek, Friedman, and Rand. The same is true of the Chamber of Commerce, the American Petroleum Institute, and the rest of the business leaders who are running a massive propaganda campaign to convince the public to dismiss concerns about anthropogenic global warming – with great success; those who believe in this liberal hoax have reduced to barely a third of the population. The executives dedicated to this task know as well as the rest of us that the liberal hoax is real, and the prospects grim. But they are fulfilling their institutional role. The fate of the species is an externality that they must ignore, to the extent that market systems prevail.

Returning to the very instructive Massachusetts election, the major factor was voting patterns. In the affluent suburbs, voting was high and enthusiastic. In the urban areas, heavily Democratic, voting was low and apathetic. The headlines were right to report that voters were sending Obama a message: the message from the rich was that we want even more than what you are doing for us. And from the rest, the message was Joe Stacks’s: in his
words, the politicians are not ‘the least bit interested in me or anything I have to say’, though very much interested in the voices of the masters. Doubtless there was some impact of the populist image crafted by the PR machine (‘I’m Scott Brown, this is my truck’, ‘regular guy’, nude model, etc.). But this appears to have had only a secondary role. The popular anger is real and entirely understandable, with the banks thriving thanks to bailouts and many other gifts from the nanny state while the population remains in deep recession. Even official unemployment is at 10 per cent and in manufacturing industry at the level of the Great Depression, with one out of six unemployed, and with few prospects for recovering the kinds of jobs that are lost as the economy is being reshaped.

National polls reveal much the same phenomenon. A recent survey, conducted in March 2010, shows a 21-point enthusiasm gap between the parties, with 67 per cent of Republicans saying they are very interested in the November elections, compared with 46 per cent of Democrats. In a major shift from the norm, by a 10-point margin registered voters with the highest interest in the November elections said they believe the Republicans are better at dealing with the economy, a combination of a solid Republican (mostly affluent) sector and disillusioned Democrats. Half of Americans would like to see every member of Congress defeated in the election, including their own representative. The public conception of democracy is almost as negative as that of the business world, which is now lobbying fiercely to ensure that even shareholders should have no say in choice of managers, let alone stakeholders, the workforce and communities; though some liberals are seeking to find ‘a fair position’ that straddles the divide between companies and shareholders,’ as the Wall Street Journal puts it, implicitly recognizing the decision of the courts a century ago that the corporation is identical to the management.

It is true that there was a stimulus, much too small but it had an effect – saving over 2 million jobs according to the Congressional Budget Office. But the perception of the Joe Stacks that it was a bust is not without basis. Over a third of government spending is by states, and the decline in state spending approximated the federal stimulus, so the aggregate fiscal expenditure stimulus was flat, according to a study by the prestigious National Bureau of Economic Research.

The centre is clearly not holding, and those who are harmed are once again shooting themselves in the foot. The immediate consequence in Massachusetts was a vote to block the appointment of a pro-union voice at the NLRB, which has been virtually defunct since Reagan’s successful war against working people. That is what can be expected in the absence of
constructive alternatives.

Do these exist? Let’s have a look at the industrial heartland, in Ohio, where GM continues to close plants. In March 2010, Louis Uchitelle of the New York Times, one of the few journalists who pays attention to labour issues, reported from the scene of one recently closed plant. He writes that President Obama ‘never sought to reopen the factory even after the federal government became controlling shareholder in GM during the auto bailout. What he has done instead is try to ease some of the pain by sending an ambassador as a salve for the community’s wounds, offer[ing] hope and aid’ – the aid mostly suggestions. Meanwhile another Ambassador, Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood, was in Spain, dangling the prospect of federal stimulus money for Spanish firms to produce the high speed rail facilities that the US badly needs, and that could surely be produced by the highly skilled work force that is reduced to penury in Ohio. Joe Stack’s experience in Harrisburg again.

In 1999, as a Republican Congressman, LaHood introduced a bill that would have provided federal financing for transportation infrastructure. It would have authorized the Treasury to provide $72 billion a year in interest-free loans to state and local governments for capital investments, including investment in transportation infrastructure, not borrowing the money but issuing US notes, much as Lincoln did to finance the Civil War and as FDR did during the Great Depression. Today’s LaHood is approving federal stimulus money to go to Spanish firms for the same purpose. Another sign of how the centre has been shifting to the right in the past 40 years.

The radical imagination should suggest an answer. The factory could be taken over by the workforce with the support of the communities that are left desolate, and converted to production of high speed rail facilities and other badly needed goods. The idea is not particularly radical. In the 19th century, it was intuitively obvious to New England workers that ‘those who work in the mills should own them,’ and the idea that wage labour differed from slavery only in that it was temporary was so common that it was even a slogan of Lincoln’s Republican party. During the recent years of financialization and deindustrialization there have been repeated efforts to implement worker and community takeover of closing plants. The ideas not only have immediate moral appeal to the affected workforce and communities, but should be quite feasible with sufficient public support. And far-reaching in their implications.

For the radical imagination to be rekindled and to lead the way out of this desert what is needed is people who will work to sweep away the mists of carefully contrived illusion and reveal the stark reality, and to be directly
engaged in popular struggles that they sometimes help galvanize. What we need, in short, is the late Howard Zinn, a terrible loss. There won’t be another Howard Zinn, but we can take to heart his praise for ‘the countless small actions of unknown people’ that lie at the roots of the great moments of history, the countless Joe Stacks who are destroying themselves, and maybe the world, when they could be leading the way to a better future.

NOTES

3 Ibid., p. 5, 6.
6 The year Adam Smith’s The Wealth of Nations was published.
16 Fritz Stern, Acceptance speech upon receiving the Leo Baeck Medal at the 10th annual dinner of the Leo Baeck Institute, November 14, 2004.
17 General Social Survey (GSS) from the National Opinion Research Center.