

# Slouching Toward Sirte, et al

By [Various Reviewers](#)

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**Book  
Reviews**

## **Slouching Towards Sirte: NATO's War on Libya and Africa**

by **Maximilian C. Forte**

*Baraka Books 2012, 352 pp.*

## **The Illegal War on Libya, Ed. Cynthia McKinney**

*Clarity Press, 2012, 308 pp.*

## **Arab Spring, Libyan Winter by Vijay Prashad**

*Oakland: AK Press, 2012, 168 pp.*

### **Reviews by Jeremy Kuzmarov**

We came, we saw, he died,” a jubilant U.S. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton triumphantly shouted in front of a reporter, moments after hearing of the death of long-time Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi. This response was reminiscent of celebrations that followed the killing of Osama bin Laden and reflects a vengeful spirit and a turn away from the rule of law in the United States.

The U.S.-NATO war on Libya was packaged by Western leaders as a humanitarian intervention in support of pro-democracy forces. Many liberal progressives in the United States bought into this myth. Three recent books, however, show that U.S.-NATO forces committed significant war crimes in “liberating” the country and backed



rebel leaders bent on opening Libya's economy to foreign exploitation and who were linked to Islamic fundamentalist groups, including Al-Qaeda, opposed to Qaddafi's shift away from the Arab world in favor of Africa. Western leaders and their media acolytes spread disinformation that Qaddafi was giving his soldiers Viagra to carry out rape and was employing black foreign mercenaries. In fact, many in Libya's black population supported Qaddafi as he had long championed their interests. While Qaddafi had suppressed anti-regime demonstrators in the wake of the Arab Spring, the protests were of a different character to those in Tunisia and Egypt, as they were predominantly regional and sectarian in character, were backed by the CIA and British intelligence and were violent almost from the outset. The rebels' weakness was reflected in their begging for foreign intervention, which resulted in the dismembering and destruction of their country.



A Bedouin born of humble origins, Qaddafi came to power in a bloodless revolution in 1969, overthrowing the pro-Western King Idris, who gave favorable concessions to Western oil companies and granted the U.S. control of the Wheelock air base. Qaddafi reversed Idris's policies by closing down Wheelock and took control over Libya's oil resources, using the profits to promote infrastructural development and to establish among the best health and education systems in Africa—life expectancy shot up from 54 to 72 years.

Western opposition stemmed primarily from Qaddafi's defiance of their neocolonial dictates. The Nixon administration had first contemplated assassinating Qaddafi in 1969. In 1986, under the flimsy pretext that Qaddafi had supported the bombing of a West Berlin discotheque (proof was never established), the Reagan administration dropped 60 tons of ordnance over Libya in a 19-minute raid which allegedly killed Qaddafi's 15-month-old adopted daughter and set Benghazi's skyline "ablaze with secondary fires from the downtown areas."

The 1986 bombing served as a precedent to the 2011 U.S.-NATO war which accomplished the long-sought-after goal of removing the "mad dog of the Middle-East," as Reagan called Qaddafi. *The Illegal War on Libya*, edited by Green Party leader and former congressperson Cynthia McKinney, details how the war was fought in violation of the War Powers resolution limiting the executive branch's ability to wage war without the consent of Congress, and exposes its high "collateral damage," epitomized by the bombing of refugees in Zlitan resulting in the death of 33 children, and targeting civilians only loosely linked to Qaddafi's regime. U.S. and NATO-backed forces murdered Qaddafi and members of his family in violation of international law and carried out pogroms against blacks who had benefitted from Qaddafi's economic policies. U.S.-NATO also bombed the water pipe infrastructure, creating the conditions for a "human and environmental disaster."

In *Slouching Towards Sirte*, Maximilian Forte focuses on the terrible consequences of the U.S.-NATO onslaught in the town of Sirte, a Qaddafi stronghold which was nearly completely destroyed. Forte documents the use of indiscriminate firepower by rebels, the targeting of civilians and civilian rescuers, and abuses committed at checkpoints designed to control population movement. The media failed in its duty by feigning outrage at any abuses attributed to pro-Qaddafi forces while under-reporting U.S.-NATO backed atrocities or blaming them on

the use of human shields. The West's hostility to Qaddafi stemmed not from any humanitarian concern but because Qaddafi had picked up the mantle of Ghana's late-president Kwame Nkrumah, an advocate of African unity who had been overthrown in a CIA-backed coup in 1965. As chair of the African Union (AU), Qaddafi provided 15 percent of its operating budget over the past decade and promoted the development of an African Court of Justice and Central Bank capable of lessening Africans' dependency on the International Criminal Court (ICC), International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank. Much like Hugo Chavez of Venezuela, Qaddafi called for economic integration as a means of undercutting Western exploitation of labor and mineral resources, and invested millions of dollars in building up Africa's industrial infrastructure in order to raise the price of its exports. He also refused to cooperate with the expansion of the U.S. military's African command (AFRICOM), stating that he preferred the giant military base to remain "headquartered in Europe."



In *Arab Spring, Libyan Winter*, historian Vijay Prashad shows the double standards of the United States in backing the repression of pro-democracy demonstrators in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain and how the Arab Spring turned sour in Libya. The Western powers successfully exploited growing disaffection with Qaddafi's autocratic methods to pry open Libya's oil markets and advance neo-liberalism in a former socialist bastion. He writes that "behind the new electoral process, the technocrats who demonstrated their fealty to the international bond markets and the IMF will control the central bank and the oil company...the section of the old guard beholden to the revolution of 1969 has now exited from power." On the day Tripoli fell, he adds, the *New York Times* ran a story with the headline, "The Scramble for Access to Libya's Oil Wealth Begins" (August 22, 2011). This is the same word used to describe the scramble for Africa in the 1890s, when Bismarck had said that the "map of Africa is Europe."

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## **Lettuce Wars: Ten Years Of Work And Struggle In The Fields Of California**

**by Bruce Neuburger**

*Monthly Review Press, 2013, 350 pp.*

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**Review by Seth Sandronsky**

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What happens when farm workers try to form unions? Bruce Neuberger in *Lettuce Wars: Ten Years Of Work And Struggle In The Fields Of California* has answers in a memoir of sympathy, solidarity, and wry humor.



Upon losing a job as a cook in 1971, the author migrated to the Salinas Valley, a vast agribusiness area in the Golden State where the maltreatment of farm laborers—a tale of long, precarious hours for low pay—does not stop when the working day ends. Their national and racial oppression in the U.S. is 24/7.

Poignantly, Neuberger introduces readers to the women and men who make the state's agricultural profitable industry go. He gives them names, and fleshes out their histories. Neuberger also highlights the militancy of women farm workers in boycotts and general and wildcat strikes. Women also face pressure for sexual favors from labor contractors and growers. As he narrates, oppressive social ideas about and relations of producing food define the capitalist system. Meanwhile, the vital work of harvesting food such as asparagus, broccoli, celery, cucumbers, grapes, lemons and tomatoes, is invisible. How can this be?

In the case of food, the invisibility of those employed for bare subsistence pay in California agriculture masks them and their work. The state's growers like workers without documents who do not speak English—to better squeeze profits from them. At the book's opening, the author toils on a crew using a tool called “el cortito” to harvest lettuce. Its short length requires constant stooping.

Author Harry Braverman, in *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, analyzes how employers' choice of tools for workers is an integral element of bosses' control over the workplace. A lack of democracy at work, of course, is what makes the system tick.

Neuberger humanizes the farmworkers battling to win higher pay and improved working conditions. From this approach, we gain a clearer sense of the risks that these brave souls take, from attacks to arrests and layoffs. Further, Neuberger casts a critical eye on the United Farm Workers and the Teamsters. There is a lot of grey here, not all black and white, as unionization clashes in and out of the fields rage hot and cold.

Crucially, as Neuberger earns his pay harvesting crops, he also co-produces an independent paper, critical of both unions. He and fellow dissident journalists take a stance to the left of UFW leadership.

For Neuberger, the UFW's embrace of the Democratic Party is a fatal flaw. In his analysis, Democrats are the wing of the political system that expands capital and its empire, branded “democracy.” The author writes that this so-called “American Dream” obscures the “American Nightmare” of capitalist imperialism—the looting of foreign land, labor services, and resources to benefit ruling elites.

The rise and demise of the UFW under César Chávez is an outcome of a political compromise, in part over strikebreakers without documents. Partially as a result, the working and living

conditions of California's farm laborers are worse now, as some people interviewed say on recent visits to his former workplaces.

We read how growers fought, successfully, to remain union free and to roll back workers' organizing gains when they did win collective bargaining agreements. Meanwhile, state legislative victories evaporated as the growers' lobbies appointed and elected public officials.

In his first book, Neuburger does a public service in his eyewitness recounting of the strengths and weaknesses of farm laborers fighting for better lives. *Lettuce Wars* packs a punch.

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