
THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE



a newsletter for Iowa's Democratic Left

August 2023

Freedom to flourish?

As I write, some 30,000 riders and thousands of friends of the ride have converged to cross the state of Iowa. It's the season of RAGBRAI, the *Des Moines Register's* annual bike ride, marking 50 years.

What they will see, as always, is a very particular Iowa, heaped with plates of pie, served up with giant helpings of "Iowa nice." It's a picture of gentleness, calm, and beauty. But it's hardly the full story.

This year, a symbolic heat wave will provide the fiercest temperatures of the year. It will also serve to remind us of the torrid issues rocking the state politically, just behind the ride's bucolic scenes. The temperatures in this furnace, for now, are largely controlled by our political head chef, Governor Kim Reynolds, and her party, Iowa's radicalized and rampant Republicans.

Just this week a new slogan for the state was rolled out. *Iowa, Freedom to Flourish*. As reported in the *Des Moines Register*, Reynolds revealed her hope to reintroduce Iowa to the world at a Capitol rotunda news conference with these words: "Iowa's national profile is on the rise, our reputation is strong and Americans have taken notice."

All I can say is, she has some cheek. She proved it by adding the following: "I want to promote Iowa as an employment destination so we can attract top talent nationwide and build Iowa's workforce across all industries...I can't wait to just remind them and show them all that Iowa has to offer now." Oh, let's do.

Employment destination? Her loony legislature just passed a labor law allowing minors to work with few restrictions, throwing us back into the 19th century. At the insistence of Democrats, they added some sexual harassment protections and oversight for those under-18 female bartenders we'll be seeing out on the town. Also, Iowans as young as 14 can only work six hours a day.

Want to bring people to the state? Passing a six-week abortion ban is not the welcome mat most young people starting families want to see. For medical professionals it's even more repulsive, as is the now-declared war on trans persons being waged by the GOP. Both are intrusions by a centralized state power into the private medical lives of Iowa families. Physicians can be criminalized for practicing medicine as they were taught in caring for these families. Both laws will serve to keep people away from the state.

And how about Iowa's water and waterways? This year, our legislature defunded water sensor programs across the state. The budget bill, as described by UI professors Erin Irish and Sylvia Secchi [*Des Moines Register*; May 5, 2023], "included removal of funding that would support water quality monitoring through the Iowa Institute for Hydrologic Research. Just as was the case for Leopold Center, the justification was 'we know what to do.'" Yes, our GOP legislators know what to do alright – hide the dirty laundry, and the dirty water in which we wash it.

The professors cited the work of colleague Chris Jones, author of what may be the definitive book on Iowa's water, *The Swine Republic: Struggles with the Truth about Agriculture and Water Quality*. Jones is retiring early, and suddenly. It is no secret that our current invasive politics, combined with a besieged community of academics led by unnerved and cowed administrators, may have something to do with it.

It also hinges nicely with a final area in which Republicans have teed Iowa up for degradation of education: libraries. They passed an 'education' bill making parents the arbiters of the contents of our school libraries and making librarians potential offenders against parental sensibilities. The bill allows no student representation on any 'review' committees for library materials cited by parents as objectionable. A legal K-12 library is now defined as one that "contains only age-appropriate materials and supports student achievement goals of the total school curriculum."

So no child will have access to materials above their age, none will be able to reach for those shelves holding books on advanced sciences, or a grim history of the world's evils, or even great adult fiction. High school students who hope for admission to a university will be stunted by removal of material that gives them an edge or allows them to grow, to reach beyond their little school in their little town.

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Go on with the work

*T*ell them you're a realist with high ideals.

That's what Jesse Jackson said to me in 1987 when I asked him how to respond to friends and acquaintances who, somewhat mockingly, called me an idealist for supporting him for President. In the minds of many, only unrealistic, naïve, hopelessly optimistic idealists would work for Jackson in the overwhelmingly white state of Iowa.

"A realist with high ideals." I've tried to live up to that description for thirty-five years.

Many other words of Rev. Jackson I still remember after all this time. Some I heard after a campaign event at a hotel in Cedar Rapids. I was with Iowa campaign manager John Norris in a van picking up Rev. Jackson at the front entrance. As we pulled into the circle driveway, Jackson was pacing in the big lit-up doorway of the hotel. He got in the van without a word. Usually, he was exuberant after a successful event, but this time he seemed angry. We were only a few seconds late, I thought to myself—it shouldn't be that big of a deal. Finally, Jackson turned to Norris and said, "Don't ever leave me exposed like that."

I looked back at the front of the hotel. Sure enough, the brightly lit double doors provided a perfect frame for an assassin's bullet. It drove home to me the ever-present danger that Rev. Jackson lived with, and the awesome courage it took to face that ever-present danger nearly every single day.

At the recent reunion at the Rainbow PUSH Community Hall in Chicago celebrating the 35th anniversary of Jackson's 1988 campaign for President, I was

reminded of his courage by Carlos Welty, a farmer from Boot Hill, Missouri. Welty recalled the dozens of tractors he helped line up to surround a Jackson event. Former Jackson staffers and volunteers told similar stories of other states where lines of twenty or more tractors formed barricades "to keep him from getting hurt." Jackson's daughter Santita recounted some of the dangers Jackson faced, leading him to tell his children in 1983, "Go on with the work, no matter what happens to Daddy."

Every veteran of the 1988 campaign (and some from 1984) at the reunion had stories of unforgettable experiences with Jackson. One of the most moving memories came from New York City anti-war and LGBT organizer Leslie Cagan. When AIDS was devastating the country and President Reagan did nothing to stop it, activists invited the presidential candidates to meet with them. Jackson was the only one to show up.

According to Cagan, "Two hundred people were there, literally some of them dying at that very moment. He went from person to person and gave whoever wanted it the biggest hug I could imagine. It was not about pity. It was rather one of the clearest statements of solidarity that I have ever witnessed. He was expressing his love and support for people being shut out by their own government."

"A realist with high ideals." Was it unrealistic to articulate genuinely democratic ideals? Was it naïve to challenge the other business-as-usual candidates with a progressive agenda? Was it hopelessly optimistic to bring together urban and rural, Black and white, farmers and workers, gay and straight, into a dynamic coalition?

Jesse—as most of us Iowans called him—invigorated the Democratic

Party. He confronted all types of bigotry at every turn. He registered millions of new voters. He educated audiences of all kinds (every speech I heard him give was a lesson in American history). Against all odds and expectations, he won 9% of Iowa caucus-goers statewide. He finished a close second to Paul Simon in my county of Johnson, well ahead of Dukakis, Gephardt, and Babbitt. Jesse plowed the Iowa ground to make Barack Obama's caucus victory, and presidency, possible twenty years later. As Jesse's wife, Jaqueline, said at the reunion, "It's easier to walk through a door after it's been cracked open."

John Norris artfully used his speaking time at the reunion to remind the mostly urban attendees of Jackson's strategic brilliance in locating his official campaign headquarters in Greenfield, Iowa. The town embraced Jackson, turning out hundreds of people at every event, even on a cold Super Bowl Sunday, despite having only one Black resident (the adopted child of the Methodist minister). The door cracked open a little more when Iowans – and Democrats nationwide – saw this Adair County town of less than 2,000 people treat Jackson with love and respect.

I've worked on many campaigns. None were as exhilarating, inspiring, and illuminating as the Jackson campaign of 1988. The reunion in Chicago was more than nostalgic. It was a call to action and a charge to never give up, especially in the face of a growing fascist movement in Iowa and the United States. More than ever, we need the kind of coalition Jackson assembled.

And we need realists with high ideals.

—Dave Leshtz

Black ants and red ants

I attended the annual Netroots Nation conference July 13-15 in Chicago. For those of you who are unfamiliar, Netroots is an offspring of the Daily Kos website. Daily Kos was founded in 2002 by Markos Moulitsas as a way for progressive Democrats to push back not only against Republicans, but also against the “Blue Dog” wing of the Democratic Party.

The makeup of Netroots Nation breaks down something like this: people from nonprofits (think ACLU, Sierra Club, etc.), groups like Act Blue and Move On, labor, political consultants, tech specialists, journalists, and elected officials. Over the last couple of years, they have made a strong effort to include more local activists; this conference had a VERY strong Chicago feel.

Moulitsas spoke during one of the General Sessions, and noted how much progress has been made since 2000. Today there are over 100 members of the House Progressive Caucus; only 6 Blue Dogs remain. Rather than Joe Lieberman as a VP candidate, we had Kamala Harris. The Democratic Party has flipped the script when it comes to the issues of choice, drugs, LGBTQ+, labor, healthcare, and much more. The late 90s and early 2000s were NOT good times for progressives! Yes, we have done much better.

Now for the tough part. Moulitsas was doing an interview with three members of Congress – Pamala Jayrapal of Seattle, Chair of the Progressive Caucus; Chuy Garcia, Congressman from Chicago; and Jan Schakowsky, Congresswoman from Chicago. They were going to speak about the more progressive direction the Democratic Party has taken over the past 20-25 years, how it

happened, why it has been good, and what the future holds.

Suddenly, the session was interrupted. A large group of mostly young, mostly Muslim conference participants began protesting Schakowsky’s record on Israel and Palestine. No one could see, and no one could hear. The conference was at a standstill.

Moulitsas tried to intervene. I thought he did so very poorly. Schakowsky addressed the group, saying, “I promise to talk to you after the session.” She got booed loudly. She said to Jayrapal, “I’ll just leave,” but Jayrapal asked her to stay.

Jayrapal then started speaking and explained the Progressive Caucus stance on the topic. During this, she called Israel “a racist state.” The next day she walked that back, saying that she meant Netanyahu and his party were racist, not all the people of Israel.

Meanwhile, the crowd began breaking down along lines of “identity.” A number of Jewish attendees came to Schakowsky’s defense. A number of Latinx attendees got agitated because they felt Garcia (who said nothing) had been disrespected. This led to loud and angry shouting between some Muslim and Latinx folks that had to be broken up.

A large man named Reggie who is on the Netroots board came out and attempted to calm everyone. He told the protesters, “You have been heard.” He encouraged everyone to follow the lead of MLK, and “Give the respect you seek.” It fell on deaf ears. The session ended – it never actually occurred, but time was up.

The amount of irony here was almost too much to comprehend. Earlier that same day, crowds cheered as Tennessee State Representative Justin Jones talked about how he failed to follow the rules of protest. Many people noted, rightfully so, that protesters are always policed as to where they can protest and when.

The three members of Congress are all minorities. They are also three of the most progressive members of Congress. I looked at Schakowsky’s record on Israel and Palestine – I found it to be remarkably progressive for an older Jew whose district is home to thousands of Jews. Her stance is in agreement with Jayrapal about 80%. Schakowsky herself has been a target of hateful rhetoric by the Oath Keepers and other hate groups.

Do the young folks have a right to demand more from her? Of course! Do they owe her a certain amount of respect? More than she received that day? I think so. Is protest of this sort OK? Yes. How much is too much, and who gets to decide?

Later that day, a meme began making the rounds at the conference. It goes like this: “If you put black ants and red ants together in a terrarium, they leave each other alone. If you shake the terrarium, the ants begin to kill each other. But the other ants aren’t the enemy. It is someone else who is shaking the terrarium. As humans, we do the same thing. We turn on each other, when we need to be thinking about who is shaking the terrarium.” Amen to that!

—Rod Sullivan is a Johnson County Supervisor.

Starbucks pride

What is it that drives corporate managers to give up every ounce of morality they possess?

As I write this and try to find the answer to that question, Iowa's governor has filed an appeal to overturn the Iowa Supreme Court's granting of an injunction which halts, at least temporarily, the state's six-week abortion ban. This is just one of many attacks on our personal freedoms that Iowa's government is leveling against us.

There is an endless amount of fatigue that comes from trying to be a person in this state – someone with thoughts, feelings, and opinions that contradict what our governor decides is acceptable. We've all felt this sort of fatigue. It weighs you down. Makes it hard to get out of bed in the morning. To leave the house with a smile on your face. To be present.

This fatigue is magnified tenfold in those targeted by the state. And yet, it is the people who are targeted repeatedly who give all they can to hold each other up.

When the Starbucks I work at unionized, we received an outpouring of support from our community. We received more support when we went on strike in June. These months haven't been easy – but we got through them with the help of people who care about us.

The day after our strike, a Pride flag appeared in our store. Our strike was centered around the fact that we were told we couldn't decorate for Pride Month. Starbucks denies any change in its company policy, but this year we weren't allowed to decorate, although we had been able to in previous years.

(Interestingly, Starbucks continues to sell Pride-themed merchandise.)

The majority of workers at Starbucks are LGBTQ+ identifying. Starbucks specifically courts trans workers through the promise of providing gender-affirming care. Starbucks extended a promise to workers to provide abortion access compensation for partners in abortion-restricting states. Nevertheless, company policy dictates that workers cannot stand up for their own rights.

We can't hang up a Pride flag because Starbucks prefers to present itself as a sanitized machine for every single consumer that could possibly exist. We can't express our support for the people who support us, because Starbucks prefers to appeal to the masses that hate, threaten, and wish death upon its workers.

But the workers want to stand up for our community just as they've stood up for us, and we're committed to doing what's right.

We put our flag up on July 1st. On July 10th, it was taken down by the District Manager.

"Pride Month is over," she said.

Pride Month. The month we weren't allowed to acknowledge at all.

Pride Month is over, and we're supposed to act like we're not living under Governor Reynolds' constant crusade to snuff out anything that even looks a little queer.

Our District Manager seems to live in an entirely different world. A world where she can forego any sense of community for the sake of looking good for a corporation that has totally abandoned her to handle our unionization on her own.

As Iowa slides further and further into a theocratic state, I'm left knowing two things for certain. The people who stand up for their principles will continue to do so until they are forced down, and the people who find it all too easy to abandon theirs will justify it with the paltry defense of "I'm just doing what I'm told." It's happened before, it will happen again, and when the time comes for everyone to decide which side they are on, some of us may be surprised at the vast amount of people that are all too eager to cash in on their principles.

The answer to my initial question, I suppose, is money. Greed. The drive for new outfits, new cars, new lives will always keep these weak-willed middle managers in line. They'll be happy little cogs in a machine as long as that machine keeps printing checks.

I believe most of us know the truth that these people aren't willing to face. One day, that machine will stop.

I'm not worried about that day. I have a union behind me that is committed to fighting for me and my coworkers. As our contract negotiations push on, new workers join our movement every day.

Our Strike with Pride didn't just raise awareness for shifting policies. It showed workers in similar situations that we are willing to fight for what's right. In mid-July, the Chicago Starbucks Roastery Reserve filed for a union vote. The Chicago Roastery is the largest Starbucks in the world. We take heart that their employees are ready to stand in solidarity with workers across the country in a growing show of force.

—Abigail Scheppmann lives in Iowa City.

Providing medicine in the name of efficiency

Imagine you are never allowed to choose your doctor. Imagine you are never allowed to choose your health insurance company. Instead, the insurance company you did not select picks the doctors you are allowed to see. The client is someone other than the patient. Who does the doctor work for and who does the doctor serve?

This has long been the reality for any Iowa worker injured on the job. The workers' compensation healthcare system exists as an alternate healthcare system you hope never to utilize. An occupational physician is akin to your general practice physician. The occupational physician is the gatekeeper. They decide whether anything is wrong with you; they decide whether you are allowed to see a specialist. Unless you are injured at work you will never see an occupational physician; 100% of their work is handed to them by an insurance company who would prefer there is no injury. The people who pay an occupational physician's bills want the treatment to be short and cheap.

Even if the occupational physician decides you should see a specialist, the insurance company can intervene. Maybe they don't think you need to see a specialist who will provide care just yet. They may first send you to a doctor to evaluate whether you need care. Insurance companies like to call this an "independent medical evaluation" (IME). The irony is thick. A doctor agrees to take money from an insurance company to see a person one time and provide answers to the insurance company questions. Do they really need care? What about that pre-existing condition?

A referral to a specialist does not exactly get you back into the mainstream of healthcare. Insurance companies learn the tendencies of

specialists. Moreover, specialist physicians can have one foot in the workers' compensation field and one foot out of it.

A good example is the Work Injury Recovery Center (WIRC) at University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics. They advertise, "If one of your employees is injured on the job, you have multiple goals. You want them feeling better quickly and back to work as soon as they're healthy enough to return. You also want your company's workers' compensation cases handled as efficiently as possible." Read that again. The goal is not, "we will heal them." Your University of Iowa Hospital is telling insurance companies, "we will get your injured workers back to work as quickly as possible, as cheaply as possible."

It is not just University Hospitals advertising how they provide medicine in a way that puts business interest first and patients second. UnityPoint St. Luke's WorkWell advertises, "We understand business – your business. We partner with more than 400 companies to solve their business health needs." Mercy Occupational Health summarizes its philosophy as "after a workplace injury, the longer an employee spends off the job, the lower their likelihood of returning to work." No citation of an authority is provided for that claim.

If you are hurt, the insurance company chooses who will treat you. Hospital systems have built an alternative medical system designed to meet the needs of business, not the actual people who are supposed to receive care. Perhaps it should not surprise us that medical providers are willing to advertise that they limit their providing medicine in the name of efficiency and business needs.

There are actually four modern versions of the Hippocratic Oath. One says to remember that a physician treats a sick human being whose illness also affects the person's family and economic stability. Another states, "I shall charge only for my professional services and shall not profit financially in any other way as a result of the advice and care I render my patients."

None of them mention insurance companies.

— *Nate Willems lives in Mt. Vernon and practices law in Cedar Rapids.*

Freedom to flourish? cont'd from Page 1

So, as you bike across Iowa on your pie and coffee buzz, or visit farm families serving up sweet corn, by all means enjoy it. It is one truth about us – it is our second beating heart, full of warmth and natural beauty and love of the land. But remember that other skulking, conniving heart that pumps harder each legislative session. It plots nothing less than the diminishment of the freedoms that might improve us. And we must fight it with everything we have.

—*Kim Painter is a proud product of the Midwest.*

Show me the money

It started with George H. W. Bush's "1,000 points of light." American generosity to nonprofits and community groups would make up for a slashed federal government.

You see, privatization isn't just about evil corporations sucking at the government trough. It's about those 1,000 points like Lutheran Services of Iowa, Goodwill Industries, Practical Farmers of Iowa, the Iowa Food Bank, food pantries, and the list goes on. Almost any nonprofit receiving state or federal grants is privatized government. They are performing functions that should be, and once were, performed by federal employees with pensions, health insurance and job security. Those employees stayed, they learned, and their years of experience paid off with some of the most reliable service Americans ever enjoyed. Nonprofits on 3-year grant cycles can't promise that, and that's no coincidence.

I'm guessing—prove me wrong—that we have less (non-military) government per person than in more than a century. Ayn Rand would be pleased.

So why do you, dear reader, think that \$100 a year to the ACLU, Sierra Club, or even my beloved Sustainable Iowa Land Trust (SILT) is going to make up for that? Do you really think there are thousands of others just like you helping cover the true cost? Your tax bill has dropped each year. There is a price to pay for that. It ain't \$100 a year. If you think it is, then you're buying into Bush's BS.

Privatized government is here to stay. No electing Democrats is going to change that. It's time

for people with means to take direct action. That's you, by the way. How do I know it's you? Because you have the luxury of time to read this lovely, scrappy, diehard newsletter. Working parents with two jobs each, three kids, a mortgage, car payments, and threadbare health coverage do not. Let's add anyone who is not a member of the Pale Male Club or who doesn't have a college education facing even greater challenges. Every. Single. Day. Time is money and you have it. I say share it.

I spent the last decade developing and sharing the vision of the Sustainable Iowa Land Trust. We'd find landowners who wanted and could afford to leave a legacy of sustainable food production. We'd build an Iowa with cleaner water, healthier soils, food security and affordable land for farmers to grow table food in a climate-smart way. We were decolonizing land wealth, ending the farm crisis, and redistributing wealth one acre at a time - permanently. Pretty powerful stuff.

There wasn't a money tree I didn't shake locally and nationally (while sometimes getting stabbed in the back by nonprofit "allies" along the way, everyone scrambling for the same scraps). Those small donations told me we were on the right track, but they didn't cover gas money, much less a property closing. And I volunteered most of my time and talent. I learned there are no grassroots in the Nonprofit Industrial Complex, only Redwood forests and Amazon jungles. One coastal millionaire told me their only concern is climate change, and that means solutions at scale. Replication doesn't count. Takes

too long. And frankly, they'd written off Iowa. We're a "sacrifice state."

So it's on us, folks. Here's what I know:

- We make choices every day with our money. We must make new ones.
- Cheap, rich liberals have a bad habit of pleading poverty. We've become a trope.
- We confuse frugality with poverty and plan our futures in fear. We can change.
- The wicked truth is that people with the least often give the most.

Retired professors, managers, public employees, political staffers, union workers—you are sitting on wealth this adjunct, gig economy will never generate. Did you inherit money or property? Add that to the ledger. Then start writing some real checks. Showing up at a rally is NOT a substitute. Sharing your wealth is a different kind of direct action, but in today's world, it's absolutely crucial if you want to make a real difference.

Small checks may be the heart of a nonprofit, but they are not the lifeblood. Consider concentrating much larger donations into fewer causes and pledging those funds over time. A smart nonprofit will leverage that commitment into something much greater with its biggest donors, multiplying your impact.

When we are willing to truly let go and give, Iowa will become a better place to live.

—Suzan Erem, suzan@lastdraft.com, is a retired organizer and writer living in rural Cedar County. She is a founder of SILT and the author of seven books including *Labor Pains: Inside America's New Unions*.

I think it's George

This story is from the solo show Undoing Time, reflections on 25 years of incarceration, by artist and storyteller Mark Dotson. We had the privilege of working with Mark for two years as he developed his writing into theatrical form.

—Ron Clark and Jody Hovland, co-founders of Riverside Theatre in Iowa City.

In my opinion, a ghost can be defined as an image or a cruel fact of reality that never really leaves your mind. One of the ghosts I live with is the image of George Eason being wheeled out of Living Unit B, also known as Animal House in Anamosa, after committing suicide. It was January 10th of 2010, exactly a month after his birthday.

George had been sentenced to Life Without Parole. No one can diminish what he did. He got blackout drunk and stabbed his nextdoor neighbor to death. She was in her 40s and fondly known as Goldie by the people who loved her. And he would have been upset with me if I didn't make that known.

George and I did everything together, and some of that had to do with the fact that we lived so close together. I resided in cell 1-59 and he resided in 5-59, two floors above me. We cooked "dips" together—just ramen noodles and whatever else you can find. We worked in the laundry together, did woodwork in hobby craft together, and went to the chow hall together for every meal.

I was working out in the weight yard when everything happened. We heard a code go off and saw COs running toward Living Unit B and just figured it must be "one of those days" in Animal House. Guys get jumped a lot in the stairwells 'cause there's blindspots where cameras can't see. It was 3:00 in the afternoon so it was cell line, which is always the best time for

shenanigans due to the whole cell house buzzing with people rushing to get a shower or get on the phone before they have to lock down again.

My workout was coming to an end, but I hung out and talked with my buddy for just a bit 'til the chaos cleared up. It usually doesn't take long to cuff up a couple of hotheads and throw them in the cooler. I made my way through the crowd 'til I was up by the door.

I have an image of another friend saying, "I think it's George." Like a mouth opening to answer a question, the doors of Animal House swung open. I don't remember moving, but I think I almost grabbed the gurney to help them get George down the little set of stairs there in the front. But I recoiled when I realized there was no need to be in a hurry; that wasn't George anymore.

That night when the cell door slammed behind me and all the insanity of the day was over, I remember shaking my head and saying "He was a Lifer, it was his choice to make." The next thing I remember is hearing screaming—and knowing it was me. When that vision of George flashed through my mind, years of denial came crashing down and I was exposed, sobbing alone in a cell for all those I saw suffer 'til they couldn't take it anymore.

The source of George's torment stemmed from a lie told to him by a public defender when he took Life Without Parole as a 17-year-old boy who had already sat in a county jail for a year and was willing to believe anything. He assumed that legislation

was coming down the pipe any day to make it unconstitutional to give a minor Life Without Parole. But even though studies showed that it was wrong on a scientific level because a person's brain doesn't fully mature 'til they're 26, it took 18 years to get it done. George lost hope after 17 years.

Before George died, he got a letter from a law firm asking him for details that might help them with the case. He said he had seen crap like that before and threw the letter in the trash. I started to say something else, but how do you instill hope in someone when you're hopeless too?

George made a rope out of the strings of his guitar, tied it to the conduit that ran across the ceiling of his cell, then put his head through the noose, getting it snug, before stepping off his sink into the Great Void. That is what losing hope looks like.

—Mark Dotson

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