

Reflecting on electoral catastrophe: What lessons can we take away from Trump's victory?

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Trump's minions have already made it clear that organised labour will be among their immediate targets. Public sector workers, who are the main pillar of organised labour's strength, will be attacked early. Turning the National Labor Relations Board into a thoroughly anti-labour organisation will make union certification, via officially sanctioned elections, close to impossible. Another obvious agenda item is a national 'right to work' law which will remove the requirement that workers represented by a union pay membership dues. I will not try to exhaust the list of likely attacks here, although projecting the disastrous details of Trump's regime will be a crucial part of figuring out how to mount some kind of defense.

Trying to think about how it might be possible to change the political landscape is a different sort of task. It requires a careful debate on the structural circumstances that produced so many Trump voters. Theories of 'The Trump Voter' abound, and sorting them out will require a careful analysis of exit polls that has yet to be done. But two preliminary themes have already emerged.

The first centers on the 'basket of deplorables': Trump gave racists, white nationalists, xenophobes and misogynists a clear champion and they responded. The second is the 'revenge of the rustbelt' theme: having been pounded by neo-liberal capitalism, white working class men (and many women) finally found someone who was not part of the political establishment and would condemn the full gamut of established politicians (Democratic or Republican) that working class voters held responsible for their declining communities and beleaguered families.

Racism and xenophobia were fundamental to Trump's success, but the electoral effectiveness of racism was constructed in the course of the campaign. Survey data shows racism among white Americans holding steady or decreasing over the last quarter of the 20th century and the early years of the 21st century. Trump's shameless exploitation of racism for political advantage built an explicitly racist xenophobic constituency and rode it to power. If there is anyone left in the ranks of organised labour who doubts that labour must make a priority of fighting racism and xenophobia in order to defend its long term collective interests, the success of Trump's strategy should be a wake-up call.

Responding to racism and xenophobia is essential, but ignoring the economic dynamics of disaffection would be a head-in-the-sand mistake. The economic shifts propelled by neo-liberal capitalism have, for half a century, pounded the economic well-being and self-esteem of the working class (understood not as former industrial workers but as all ordinary workers). No one denies that the real minimum wage has fallen by a third in the past half-century, after having increased more than two and a half times in the past 30 years. Those who joined the workforce in the mid-20th century expected their economic well-being would improve over the course of their working lives. For the lowest-paid workers, wages fell instead. Real household incomes for the majority of U.S. households are lower today than they were at the turn of the millennium. The shrinking life expectancy of the least-educated white Americans (about 4 years of decrease between 1990

and 2008) is a hard indicator that the globalised economy is delivering negatives, not positives.

U.S. voters are not economic reactionaries. When they had the opportunity, in the 2016 election, to endorse positions clearly in the economic interests of working people, they generally responded positively. They voted to increase the minimum wage in all four states where it was on the ballot. A proposal to reduce the minimum wage in South Dakota was crushed by a 71% margin, despite the fact that voters simultaneously chose Trump over Hillary at 60% to 30%.

Nonetheless, the contradiction between expectations of better lives and disappointing economic realities creates anger. The political question is where the anger is directed. The Occupy movement fingered the 1% whose incomes rose obscenely, but had a harder time dramatising the fact that the rising incomes of the 1% and the distress of the 99% were a natural product of the fact that the global economy is a system run in the interests of large corporations (a.k.a. global capital) - corporations that have an interest in minimising their expenses (a.k.a. workers' wages) and therefore in making sure that workers' incomes don't rise too fast. The anti-capitalist extension of Occupy never made it into political debates. Advancing the proposition that a capitalist economy - dominated by those whose wealth and incomes come from their ownership of (primarily financial) property - might be the culprit for the woes of ordinary Americans goes beyond of the limits of what the U.S. political establishment is willing to consider.

The lack of debate over globalisation is a telling example. Democratic politicians, long before Bill Clinton and extending seamlessly to Obama, have faithfully argued that a global capitalist economy benefits everyone, and that therefore trade agreements that reduce 'government interference' in the flow of global investment and trade are good for the people of Michigan and Wisconsin. Careful economic analysis does not support this claim, but liberal political elites follow the Chamber of Commerce anyway. Bernie Sanders, one of the few who felt free to be a heretic, won both Wisconsin and Michigan in the democratic primaries. Hillary was a post-Sanders convert to trade skepticism. Trump took full advantage of her latecomer status.

Once the anti-capitalism option is off the table, the disaffected find other targets. Blaming immigrant workers of colour is a simple option. 'The government' is a long standing favourite American target. Putting the blame on the government is a theme that comes through clearly in the exit polls. Only a third of all 2016 voters, Democratic or Republican, felt positive about their government, and only one out of six among these - 5% of all voters - were enthusiastic. Seven out of ten voters felt negative toward their government and two thirds of these described themselves as 'angry'. Of those who were negative, about four out of five voted for Trump. Liberal political elites, including Hillary, make it easier for people to believe that their woes are

the government's fault because they avoid critiquing capitalism.

What about the labour movement? Faithful support for the Democratic Party has seemed like the only option given the rapacious reaction that prevails among their Republican opponents. But this strategy has resulted in only the most limited defensive victories. At the same time, labour's political clout has been gradually undercut by declining union membership and relentless ideological attacks. This year represented a new 21st century low in the effects of union membership on elections. Union households are now a minor portion of the electorate, and in 2016 the votes of union households were more similar to those of non-union households than in any other election for a generation.

To improve its lot, labour must take the sources of Trump's success and turn them around. If racism and xenophobia are key resources for reaction, the energy and determination of workers of colour are key resources for the labour movement. The success of Las Vegas Culinary Union Local 226 in the 2016 election in Nevada illustrates the point. The Culinary is not only the largest union in Nevada. It is also the largest immigrant organisation and the largest African-American organisation in Nevada. The Culinary's 60 000 members knocked on 350 000 doors and talked to 75 000 voters. They helped turn a 'battleground state' into one of the few bright spots of 2016. Trump lost the state and Nevada elected the first Latina to the U.S. Senate.

The second thread is more controversial, but may well be unavoidable. Fighting for the immediate interests of members must always be the foundation of labour's struggles, but without an overarching political analysis that goes beyond electing liberal politicians, labour will always be on the defensive. Lack of an anti-capitalist analysis robs progressives in the labour movement of the sharp edge that they need in order to energise the angry and disaffected. If established political elites are unwilling to offer an analysis that critiques the consequences of private economic power, labour may have no choice but to take the initiative in introducing the debate. Who better than the labour movement to blame the power of corporate capital for the failure to deliver sustained improvements in welfare to ordinary Americans?

The debate over what is to be done is just getting started. Its contours will shift as the specifics of the Trump regime's attacks are revealed. One thing is clear: the ability of the labour movement to formulate and execute a counter-strategy will be a key determinant of how bad things get and for how long.

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