

Populist demagoguery and immigrant-bashing in the US: The case of Lou Dobbs

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Right-wing politicians and media pundits in the United States are seeking to use immigrant workers as a scapegoat for the increasingly difficult social and economic conditions facing the working class and considerable sections of the middle class. They claim that immigrant workers are “stealing” the jobs of native-born Americans, and that the low-wage exploitation of immigrants is responsible for declining living standards in the US.

This pretended sympathy for the plight of working people is occasionally combined with rhetorical attacks on American corporations for hiring large numbers of immigrant workers or shifting production to low-wage regions outside of the US. In this way, populist and patriotic demagoguery is used to cover up the ugly racism and chauvinism of their political appeal. Perhaps the foulest representative of this trend is CNN anchorman Lou Dobbs, who has become the loudest media immigrant-basher.

Once a shill for Wall Street as the host of a business news program during the 1990s stock market boom, Dobbs has sought to reinvent himself as scourge of American business—but from a definite and extremely right-wing standpoint. He now anchors a daily newscast on CNN that includes regular segments on corporations he denounces for “exporting jobs” from the United States. His condemnation of business is strictly nationalistic in character: there is little criticism of companies that attack American workers by slashing their wages and benefits, so long as they carry out this super-exploitation within the borders of the United States.

Dobbs’s most strident comments are posted on CNN’s web site each Wednesday. This week he railed against Bush and the majority of the US Senate for supporting an immigration bill that provides a limited

path to legalization for some undocumented workers, denouncing them for being allied with “corporate supremacists” (a reference to the support for the bill by the US Chamber of Commerce and other business lobbies).

He went on to cast the significance of the immigration bill in quasi-apocalyptic terms, saying it “could determine the financial and social fate of nearly every American for the next 20 years.” If the Senate approach prevails over the far more repressive approach backed by the Republican majority in the House of Representatives, Dobbs warned, “11 million to 20 million illegal aliens will receive amnesty, and at least 60 million new immigrants will be allowed into the country over the next two decades,” at a cost of “around \$50 billion per year in administrative, social and health care costs.”

These figures are wildly inflated. Suffice it to say that the figure on new immigrants would require nearly half the population of Mexico—men, women and children, young and old—to pack up and move north of the Rio Grande. The figure on the social costs ignores countless studies which demonstrate that immigrants make a huge net contribution to the US economy, and even to the budget for social spending. They pay far more in taxes than they receive in benefits, in part because the majority of immigrants are employed workers rather than dependents, and in part because they are not eligible for many benefits or are afraid to seek them.

Dobbs attempts to pose as an advocate of “our middle-class working men and women and their families,” whom he describes as “our largest and least represented group of citizens in Washington.” As in the most effective demagoguery, there is an element of truth here: American working people are indeed effectively disenfranchised under the existing political system,

even though they represent the vast majority of the population.

But this is not because, as Dobbs goes on to say, “illegal aliens are more important to this Congress” than American citizens. Working people in the United States are disenfranchised by a political system that gives exclusive power to two political parties, the Democrats and Republicans, that defend big business and the interests of the financial elite—an elite to which Lou Dobbs, as a millionaire anchorman for CNN, very definitely belongs.

The peculiar reference to “corporate supremacists” underscores another element of Dobbs’ demagoguery—an attempt to give a populist, even “left” cover to extremely right-wing views.

The use of the word “supremacist” harks back to the discredited white supremacists of the segregationist South, and represents an appeal to popular resentment of the domination of big business.

But the term is meaningless: all bourgeois politicians and pundits, including Dobbs himself, are “corporate supremacists,” in the sense that they uphold the capitalist profit system, whose contemporary incarnation is the giant transnational corporation. The only genuine opposition to corporate domination is based on the socialist perspective of public ownership and democratic control of the major corporate and financial institutions.

An inveterate opponent of socialism, Dobbs would perhaps suggest that he represents an anti-corporate version of capitalism, rooted in small independent businesses. But by the logic of the profit system, as Karl Marx long ago explained, “one capital kills many.” The competition of rival capitalists has led inexorably to consolidation and the formation of giant corporations, first on a national and then on a global scale. The question is whether these huge economic entities will remain under the dictatorship of a tiny minority, the capitalist class, or whether they will come under the democratic control of the working population.

It is appropriate, however distasteful, to consider a more extended quote from Dobbs, which gives the full flavor of his populist posturing. In another commentary posted on the CNN web site, he writes, again referring to the Senate immigration bill: “This is an outright assault in the elitist war on the middle class. And

working men and women who’ve already borne the pain of losing good-paying manufacturing jobs and having middle-class jobs outsourced to cheap foreign labor markets are faced with the onslaught of more illegal immigration and cheap labor into the American economy. This president and Congress talk about bringing illegal aliens out of the shadows while they turn out the lights on our middle class.”

Again, he seizes on a genuine and powerful grievance—working-class distress over the loss of jobs and incomes—but seeks to divert popular anger in a reactionary direction. Hence the constant references to the middle class, never to the working class. This is a hallmark of the right-wing populist demagogue, who seeks to split the working class along social or racial lines—employed vs. unemployed, black vs. white, or, as in Dobbs’s case, native-born vs. immigrant.

There is a name for the perspective advanced by Dobbs, which combines appeals to real social grievances and utterly false and nationalistic solutions, based on the scapegoating of a particularly vulnerable section of the population—the name is fascism. Lou Dobbs may not be a Hitler, but the politics he propounds, which aims to mobilize the discontent of oppressed sections of the population and divert it into racist and chauvinist channels, follows a similar path to that blazed by the likes of Hitler and Mussolini.

The fact that CNN promotes him and gives him free rein must be taken as a warning that the American ruling elite, in the face of ever more intractable problems and contradictions, is testing the waters for a future fascist movement to be thrown against the working class.



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