

Obama, Trump and the working class

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US President Barack Obama, speaking to NPR's Steve Inskeep earlier this month in the White House, blamed the misdirected anger, frustration and fear of "blue-collar men" for the rise of the billionaire real estate mogul and media figure Donald Trump to the top of the Republican presidential primary field.

Without even a cursory acknowledgement of the consequences of the policies pursued by his administration over the last six years, Obama dispassionately listed the sources of workers' frustrations including, "all the economic stresses that people have been going through because of the financial crisis, because of technology, because of globalization, the fact that wages and incomes have been flatlining for some time."

He continued by noting that "particularly blue-collar men have had a lot of trouble in this new economy, where they are no longer getting the same bargain that they got when they were going to a factory and able to support their families on a single paycheck."

From the combination of stagnant wages and a decline in industrial employment, the president concluded "that there is going to be potential anger, frustration, fear. Some of it justified, but just misdirected. I think somebody like Mr. Trump is taking advantage of that. That's what he's exploiting during the course of his campaign."

As is always the case when he makes any references to the devastating conditions facing the bulk of the population, Obama speaks as if neither he nor the party that he presently leads has anything to do with it. But what is most striking is that the president accepts entirely the racial stereotypes that characterize bourgeois politics, and particularly the identity politics in which he embedded himself during his days in Chicago, namely that white workers are hopelessly backward and racist and are looking to be led by a demagogue.

The reality is that there is not in fact a mass racist movement among American workers, and polls show widespread disgust for Trump among all sections of the population. But to the extent that they fail to respond to

those identity issues presented as "left" by the bourgeoisie and the more affluent middle class, such as gay marriage and affirmative action for women and racial minorities, white workers are denounced as reactionary.

Any ability that Trump has to exploit grievances and deep anger and focus them in a reactionary direction is due above all to what passes for "left" in official American politics. This is an expression of the social interests of privileged layers of the middle class, who have nothing but hostility and contempt for the working class.

It was only a matter of time before a demagogue like Trump stepped in to take advantage of the political vacuum created by the absence of any outlet within the official political set up for the mass grievances of the working class to find expression.

Not only does Obama propose nothing to ameliorate the dire situation faced by millions of people, he expects the American people to forget that his administration has overseen an immense assault on the working class that has resulted in the greatest transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich in world history.

Social and economic inequality has soared as the top one percent has monopolized the overwhelming majority of income gains since 2009. Through Obama's program of quantitative easing, trillions of dollars of virtually free money have been injected into the stock market. The implementation of Obamacare, presented as a major domestic "reform," has involved a massive attack on health care services.

As for "blue-collar men [who] have had a lot of trouble in this new economy," it is the Obama administration that set the mold for lower living standards through the government-backed bankruptcies of General Motors and Chrysler in 2009, during which the wages of new autoworkers were cut in half and health care and retirement benefits were decimated.

Far from being a racially determined process, vast portions of the industrial working class of every race, gender and sexual identity have been subjected to the fate

of declining living standards over the last period. Under the terms of the most recent contracts enforced by the UAW at the Big Three, workers will continue to make wages that do not even allow them to buy the vehicles they produce.

The Obama administration is the culmination of a longer historical process, during which the Democratic Party has abandoned the program of social reform with which it had previously been associated. For much of the 20th century, the Democrats advocated certain social programs as a means of containing the class struggle and warding off the danger of socialism: Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal (including Social Security), Harry Truman's Fair Deal, and Lyndon B. Johnson's "war on poverty" (including Medicare and Medicaid).

Over the past four decades, the Democratic Party has moved sharply to the right, as the ruling class as a whole responded to the decline in American capitalism by dismantling all the gains won by the working class in an earlier period. While the economic demands of the working class have been dismissed by the existing political structure, great effort has been made to channel popular energy into secondary cultural and identity issues.

The trade unions, for their part, abandoned the working class, including many white workers who reside in what are now Republican-dominated states. The unions worked closely with the companies and the Democratic Party in dismantling entire industries, wiping out hundreds of thousands of jobs.

The more the Democratic Party abandoned and repudiated a program of significant socioeconomic reform, the more it allied itself and made itself the champion of the interests pursued by the affluent middle class as they emerged out of the politics of the New Left in the 1960s and 1970s. The Democratic Party and its hangers-on worked to redefine "left" politics to focus entirely on issues of identity, gender, race and sexuality.

This process reached a certain culmination in Obama, presented as a "transformational" candidate who, because of his race, would permanently alter the trajectory of American politics. Many workers, including white workers, supported Obama in 2008 on this basis. Illusions, however, were quickly shattered. The Democratic Party is now associated even more directly with Wall Street and hedge fund operators than the Republicans, the traditional party of the banks and big business.

The Republicans pursued a different strategy during this period, intensifying efforts to use religion and cultivate

various forms of backwardness to develop a broader political foundation, while working with the Democrats to implement the demands of the corporate and financial aristocracy. Their ability to win a base of support was facilitated by the rightward shift of the Democrats.

For his part Trump seeks to exploit the hypocrisy and absurdity of so much of what underlies identity politics. More generally the Republicans benefit from the widely perceived insincerity of official "left" politics.

The real danger is that a demagogue such as Trump working on the same axis of racial politics as the Democrats could turn the anger of white workers in a reactionary direction. Indeed, the neo-fascistic ravings and increasingly open racism of Trump have their political counterpart in the obsessive focus on race by the Democratic Party and those in its orbit. In both cases, the function is to divide and misdirect the working class.

The self-absorbed preoccupation of the pseudo-left with various forms of identity and their complete indifference to the issues facing the working class *as a class* only facilitate Trump's exploitation of deep-rooted and largely ignored social grievances.

The more basic dynamic in the United States is the deep anger and hostility of the vast majority of the working class toward both political parties. However, what is ultimately required for this sentiment to find progressive expression—creating the conditions for dealing with the likes of Trump—is the building of an independent political movement of the working class, irreconcilably opposed to the Democratic Party and its "left" periphery, and to the Republicans and their ultra-right demagogy.



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