

Race, class and the election of Trump

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Media pundits and Democratic Party operatives are presenting the electoral rout that gave Donald Trump the presidency as an expression of pervasive racism and sexism in the “white working class.”

Typical of the post-election attempts to make race the central issue are the remarks of CNN commentator and former Obama aide Van Jones, who said of Trump’s victory: “This was a white-lash against a changing country” and “against a black president.”

The *New York Times*’ Eduardo Porter wrote in Wednesday’s edition that the collapse of Clinton and the Democrats “paints a troubling portrait of American society.” It is, he declared, “one dominated by racial hostility, which stands above any other consideration...”

The interpretation of the 2016 election through the prism of race and, to a lesser extent, gender, stands in glaring contradiction to the facts. The electorate that defeated Clinton—the multimillionaire personification of the political status quo—had voted twice to put Barack Obama in the White House.

Trump owes his victory largely to a surge in voting by non-college-educated whites aged 45-64, particularly men. This demographic voted by a lopsided margin for the Republican billionaire.

These people, born between 1952 and 1971, entered the work force between 1970 and 1989. They therefore experienced mass layoffs, declining wages and worsening working conditions throughout their working lives.

They are the workers who were most involved in the bitter struggles of the late 1970s and the 1980s against union-busting and wage-cutting. They were the younger militant workers who manned picket lines at Hormel, Phelps Dodge, Greyhound, PATCO, AT Massey, Pittston and auto and steel plants throughout the industrial Midwest. Their struggles were systematically isolated and betrayed by the trade unions.

Clinton’s share of these voters fell sharply as compared to the percentage won by Obama in 2012. In the key industrial “battleground” states of Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania, her vote was down 13 points, 10 points

and 9 points, respectively.

That economic issues were the central concern of working class voters is shown in the fact that eight years after the official end of the Great Recession, 62 percent of voters, according to exit polls, rated the economy’s condition negatively, rising to 85 percent of Trump voters.

Three-quarters of white voters without a college education said the economy was “not good” or “poor,” and nearly 8 in 10 said their personal financial situation was the same or worse than it had been four years before.

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For this broad section of the working population, the past four decades have brought a continuous erosion in living standards. According to Census data analyzed by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, white male workers without a college degree saw their median incomes fall by more than 20 percent, after adjusting for inflation, between 1975 and 2014.

Between 2007 and 2014, under Obama, their incomes fell 14 percent.

What was the decisive factor in Tuesday’s election? Large industrial states that have been economically devastated by plant closures and the destruction of decent-paying jobs, which voted for Obama in 2012, shifted into the Republican column and gave the election to Trump. This was largely a vote by working people, most of whom happen to be white, in protest against pro-corporate and anti-working class policies that have been continued and intensified by Obama.

These states include Michigan, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Ohio and Iowa. Other industrial states that were formerly solidly Democratic but have in recent years become Republican, such as West Virginia and Kentucky, added to Trump’s margin of victory.

There is a correlation between the industrial states that flipped to Trump and the closure of auto plants under the Obama administration’s 2009 GM-Chrysler bailout. That restructuring, in addition to a 50 percent wage cut for all

new-hires, included the shutdown of 14 factories and the elimination of 35,000 jobs. Seven of the closed plants were in Michigan and three were in Ohio. Wisconsin saw the closure of the Janesville GM plant.

Another expression of the deep anger expressed in the Trump vote is the number of states voting for the Republican candidate that had voted for Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders in the Democratic primary race, including Michigan, Wisconsin, West Virginia, Indiana and Idaho. Sanders' shameless capitulation to Clinton, the inevitable result of his promotion of the Democratic Party, played a major role in Trump's victory.

Breakdowns of the voting in states such as Michigan, Wisconsin and Ohio show that smaller industrial towns and cities that went for Obama in 2012 voted for Trump on Tuesday, tilting the states into the Republican camp.

On the other side of the ledger, the racist interpretations are belied by the sharp fall in voter turnout in heavily African-American cities such as Detroit, Cleveland and Milwaukee, which sealed Clinton's defeat.

In Wayne County, Michigan, which includes Detroit, turnout was down by 78,000 from 2008. In Detroit itself, Clinton received 48,000 fewer votes than Obama in 2012. In Genesee County, Michigan, which includes Flint, voter turnout declined by 27,000.

In Cuyahoga County, Ohio, which includes Cleveland, the Clinton vote was down by more than 50,000, with the sharpest decline in Cleveland itself. In Milwaukee, voter turnout dropped by 58,000. In Philadelphia, Clinton polled 18,000 fewer votes than Obama.

The lack of enthusiasm for Clinton was not limited to any race. It was fundamentally a class response to a crony of Wall Street with a record of militarism and corruption. Nationally, Clinton polled 6 million fewer votes than Obama in 2012. And Obama's vote total in 2012 was less than his vote in 2008, even though he was opposing Mitt Romney, a private equity CEO who epitomized the Wall Street speculators who had crashed the economy four years before.

There is little doubt that future post-mortems of the 2016 election will conclude that far more significant for the outcome than the FBI's intervention into the Clinton email controversy was the announcement two weeks before Election Day that Obamacare health premiums would rise by an average of 25 percent in 2017. This new and crushing burden on working family incomes underscored the reality that Obama's signature domestic program was a profit windfall for the insurance companies and corporations based on sweeping increases

in out-of-pocket costs for workers.

All the Midwest industrial states that shifted from the Democrats to the Republicans were targeted with double-digit premium hikes, including Pennsylvania's brutal increase of 32.5 percent.

These facts make abundantly clear that it was economic and class issues, not race or gender, that underlay the defeat for Clinton and the Democrats.

The victory of Trump is a historic debacle not only for the Democratic Party, but also for the trade union bureaucracy. The industrial states that were critical to the Republican sweep are those that have been most devastated by the betrayals carried out by the United Auto Workers, the United Steelworkers, the United Mine Workers and the AFL-CIO. Their decades-long alliance with the Democratic Party and suppression of the class struggle turned former auto, steel and mining centers into economic wastelands.

When the racist and pseudo-populist demagogue George Wallace won the Michigan Democratic primary in 1972, the Workers League and the *Bulletin*, the forerunners of the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site*, explained that this dangerous development was the outcome of the UAW's bankrupt political alliance with the Democratic Party. The union's role in maintaining the stranglehold of this big business party over the working class, we stressed, created the conditions in which workers facing attacks on their jobs and living standards could be lined up, on the basis of economic nationalism, behind the most reactionary representatives of the ruling class.

Nearly 45 years later, under conditions of a far more advanced crisis of American and world capitalism and a far greater intensity of attacks on the working class, this danger is finding malevolent expression in the coming to power of a government of the far-right.

The working class is the only social force that can defeat the drive to war and dictatorship supported by both the Democrats and Republicans. A critical question is the rejection of all forms of racial and identity politics. The task is to forge of the unity of the American and international working class in the struggle against capitalism.



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