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Go Deep - Go Red! Thoughts on the Labor Movement in the Age of Trump

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Go Deep - Go Red! Thoughts on the Labor Movement in the Age of Trump

Abstract

I argue that a defection of working class voters to Trump was key to the loss of historic battleground states, and thus the election. Accordingly, I argue that the defection of union households is an important issue, and accounts for the marginal shifts that proved definitive in those Midwestern states. However, there is potential on the margins to shift significant sections of the electorate as the Trump anti-worker, anti-union realities set in.

Keywords

2016 Election, Labor, Trump, Organizing

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Cover Page Footnote

Peter Olney is the retired Director of Organizing for the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU). Olney has been part of the labor movement for over 40 years. He has worked for numerous labor unions as an organizer and negotiator. Since coming to California in 1983, he has focused his work on building organization in the immigrant working class. From 2001 until 2004, Olney was the Associate Director of the University of California's Institute for Labor and Employment (ILE). Olney has a Master's in Business Administration from UCLA. He resides in San Francisco, California.

In the wake of the Trump electoral triumph of November 8, newspapers, the blogosphere, and public seminars have debated an analysis of the Republican victory and its root causes. Diagnostics range from emphasis on the racist character of the Trump vote to the failure of the Democratic Party to campaign with a candidate and a message that resonates with the working class, particularly the white working class. There is now a whole genre of books penned to explain to the coastal elites the pathos of the fly over states—among others, see Hochschild, 2016; Isenberg, 2016; Vance, 2016. Some analysts, such as Steve Philips (2016), continue to believe that demographics are the tidal wave that will carry a progressive agenda forward if only there is a determined voter registration and get out the vote effort in communities of color. Others argue for a laser like focus on the disgruntled white voters who may have voted Obama twice and Bernie once, but couldn't stomach Hillary ever!

Bill Fletcher and Bob Wing for example have written an important post-election analytical essay with many excellent recommendations on the path forward. “Fighting Back Against the White Revolt” is a must read for all people of good will concerned about the future of humanity. Throughout the election period, both authors provided clear and clarion voices on the importance of uniting all to vote for Hillary to stop Trump, and did education on the left to convince skeptics in the movement to vote for the lesser of two evils to stop the racist, misogynist, xenophobic, authoritarian Donald Trump. Everything in Trump's behavior since November 8 upholds the wisdom of that advice.

Serious engagement in electoral politics is not the sum total of the struggle, but as we are witnessing in the aftermath of November 8, 2016, elections do have real consequences. Therefore, any strategy must take into account the “winner take all” and Electoral College features of our politic. As Fletcher and Wing point out, Trump won the election by a razor thin margin in three battleground states: Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania by a total of 77,000 votes: this is the size of a large union local or a less than sellout crowd for a Michigan home football game. Labor's turnout effort and union household votes clearly could have made an enormous difference in the outcome. That's why it is so important to critically examine how organized labor failed to carry union households in 2016 to the degree that Barack Obama did in either 2008 or 2012.

I argue that a defection of working class voters to Trump was key to the loss of historic battleground states, and thus the election. The change in Ohio is stunning: from a 23% margin for Barack Obama in 2012 to a Trump margin of 9% in 2016 among union households (Hesson and Levine, 2016). These are voters who have been voting for change at least since 2008, and they haven't gotten it from a corporatist Democratic Party.

Obviously, I disagree with Fletcher and Wing's analysis, as they argue that the election did not reflect a defection of working class voters from the Democratic column but, as the title of their essay suggests, a “White Revolt.”

The problem in Fletcher and Wing's analysis of the lack of working class support for Trump is that they resort to income as a proxy for class. The working class is a many splendored thing, but the traditional Marxist definition of someone who works for a wage and does not own the means of production still resonates.

But let's put any doctrinaire disputes aside and look at the income argument. In their essay, Fletcher and Wing cite a Mike Davis (2016) post-election Verso blog post that says that there was no massive defection of white working class voters to Trump. To support this position, Fletcher and Wing point to the fact that Clinton won the majority of voters earning under \$30,000 a year (53% to 41%), and voters making between \$30,000 and \$50,000 (51% to 42%). By that line of reasoning, half the unionized workers in American would be cut out of the working class! A fourth-year International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) apprentice has just been displaced from the proletariat because his/her income is \$30,000 over the threshold that Wing and Fletcher use. The pollster Nate Silver used the figure of \$70,000 to debunk the working class support for Trump argument. Do the math. Divide \$70,000 by 2087 annual work hours and you get \$32 dollars per hour, hardly an outrageous hourly rate and not even a labor aristocrat's rate!

Accordingly, I argue that the defection of union households is an important issue, and accounts for the marginal shifts that proved definitive in those Midwestern states.

The distinction is important because, going forward, there is plenty of work to be done among these workers who voted for Trump, many of them union members. Fletcher and Wing acknowledge that: "A key starting point (in combatting racism) will be to amplify the organization and influence of whites who already reject Trumpism. Unions will be one of the key forces in this effort." There is cause for hope in the fact that the largest group in the more than 100 local unions that decided to support Bernie Sanders in the Democratic primaries were IBEW locals, where a journeyman in the Bay Area can make \$125,220 a year. Of the thirty-six IBEW locals that endorsed Bernie, twenty-eight were construction locals. The construction sector of the labor movement has always been considered (along with Police and Fire unions) the most conservative and often racist and exclusionary segment. The fact that Sanders' message resonated so strongly among these craft workers holds out hope for an economic democracy project in the USA.

None of this means that the points that Fletcher and Wing raise are to be negated, but it does mean that there is potential on the margins to shift significant sections of the electorate as the Trump anti-worker, anti-union realities set in.

GO DEEP! GO RED!

Based on this analysis of working class defection from the corporate Democratic Party, I present a trade union-based program that I modestly call "Go Deep - Go Red!" I base it in the trade unions because they remain the largest potential membership base for social justice in America. In his excellent essay "Building a Mass Socialist Party," retired Canadian Autoworkers leader Sam Gindin (2016) articulates the centrality of the trade unions in radical social change:

One is the centrality of the working class and unions. Much of the Left reserves its enthusiasm for the social movements while denigrating unions. But if the working class cannot be organized as an exemplary democratic social force, then social transformation is likewise impossible. While social movements are critical to social change, their ability to build the kind of sustained social power that might lead a challenge to capitalism has historically been disappointingly limited. Moreover, social movements remain dependent on the organizational capacities, independent resources and leverage of the working class (Gindin, 2016).

Many have written epitaphs for labor in the wake of the Newt Gingrich election in 1994, after the George Bush election of 2000 and, now, post Trump. The discourse goes something like this: labor is a shrunken carcass with dramatically declining density numbers and limited influence so new forms will rise from the ashes of organized labor. Invariably, this mantra gets repeated while the left wing singers in this neo-liberal chorus insist that the existing membership bankroll their latest crusade to save labor (see Rolf, 2016; Yeselson, 2016). It is certainly true that globalism has disrupted and impacted often very negatively the lives of working class people, but it is not true as many pundits of the left and right suggest that the role of trade unions is no more. With careful and persistent organization, unions can still leverage power in key segments of the global economy in manufacturing and logistics.

Organized labor in the US, while reduced as a percentage of the private sector workforce, remains a force with 14.6 million members in 2016, although admittedly down from its membership total in 1983 of 17.7 million. The task at hand is not to despondently rue labor's demise, but to struggle within the existing institutions and organize like hell in an overtly political fashion.

Organizers must go to the Red¹ states, to the Red counties, and to the Red members! "Organize or Die!" doesn't just refer to external organization; it also applies to the singularly important task of organizing our existing members. Ignoring this challenge is one factor that led us to the colossal disaster of a Trump presidency.

Look at the electoral map. We see slivers of blue on the coasts. And while there are a few exceptional inland pockets of blue, they are surrounded by a sea of red. What is to be done in these massive areas of Trump and Republican dominance in the most recent election? Unions have members who span the entire political spectrum. This is especially true in 22 states that are not yet “Right to Work,” where membership as a condition of employment is still legal under the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA).

The first part of “Going Red” is being willing to work in the “Red” states, that is, those that Trump carried. Many of those who voted for Trump are loyal trade unionists. The corporate right already has a clear and longstanding agenda of pushing Right to Work, outlawing compulsory membership dues under both the NLRA for most private sector employees and the Railway Labor Act (RLA) that governs railroad and airline employees. The Supreme Court with Associate Justice Gorsuch on board will hear very soon a public sector case similar to the Friedrichs case out of California that would have eliminated compulsory dues for teachers and other public employees, but was left in waiting when Antonin Scalia died suddenly in February 2016. Therefore, before the hammer of legislative and court initiatives shatter the legality of compulsory membership, we have a superb opportunity to speak to the sons and daughters of New Deal Democrats who voted in key electoral states like Ohio, Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin for Trump and helped him carry those states.

These discussions cannot be approached as rectification and remedial sessions with “wayward” members, but must be part and parcel of massive internal organizing involving their issues, their contracts and their concerns. It’s time to go home and patiently build organization from the bottom up. And when union leaders and activists face their members often for the first time, they should be prepared to hear some harsh critiques and serious questions.

This internal organizing cannot be accomplished by inviting members to meetings. Rather, we need to embed newly trained worker leaders into worksites. Those leaders—Business Agents, Field Reps, Shop Stewards—responsible for contract enforcement cannot carry out this task. New armies of internal organizers are needed to talk to their sister and brother members about unions, politics, and the future of the working class. This is obviously a huge internal political hurdle because many entrenched leaders have no interest in stirring up the existing members, even with the specter of mass defections looming. In situations, however, where the crisis is deep enough and leadership political will exists, there is a ripe opportunity to rebirth a strong membership culture in many unions. This internal organization on a massive scale must begin immediately to move this program because the resources for it may be considerably diminished within a year after the onslaught of “right to work” under the National Labor Relations Act and the Railway Labor Act.

The second part of “Going Red” is labor’s new political project. Union leaders’ comfort with—and access to—the Democratic Party’s neo-liberal establishment just isn’t going to cut it. Our future lies with the exciting political movement within labor that we witnessed in support for Senator Bernie Sanders, the Democratic Socialist from Vermont. Not since Eugene Debs and his 1920 race from prison for President has there been a candidate who espoused anti-corporate, pro-working class values like Senator Sanders. He captured 13 million votes, won the endorsement of six major unions—Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU), American Postal Workers Union (APWU), Communications Workers of America (CWA), International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), National Nurses Union (NNU), and United Electrical workers (UE)—and was supported by more than one hundred local unions, many of whom defied their national union’s support for Clinton. Many Clinton supporters now realize that Bernie, with his “outsider” message, an uncompromising record, and decades of political integrity, would have been a far better choice to beat Trump. The combustible mix that gave rise to the remarkable Sanders phenomenon was his unflinching and uncompromising integrity and populist program combined with his decision to run in the Democratic primaries rather than marginalizing himself in a third party effort.

The wise and talented Tom Gallagher, a former State Representative from Massachusetts and a longtime Democratic Socialist, wrote a wonderful political pamphlet in the tradition of Tom Paine called “The Primary Route” (Gallagher, 2016). The first sentence clearly states the thesis of the Gallagher

pamphlet: “This book is all about a simple argument that a group of people that I'm rather generically calling the American left absolutely has to figure out how to work its way into presidential politics if it is to be taken seriously.” Gallagher argues that participating in the Democratic primary process is one key way for the Left to be active in the biggest most spotlighted arena of American politics.

Gallagher argues that “the primary route” is an additive rather than a subtractive process. This is his political science contribution. In other words, participation in the primary adds to the power of the Left and does not subtract its power electorally, as a third party effort potentially does in helping to elect a candidate that is further from the interests of the supporters of the third party. In making his argument, Gallagher details the history of third parties back to the 1800s, and tells us the story of the origins of the modern primary system; ironically in the year 1912 when Eugene Debs, the Socialist candidate for president, got over 6% of the vote. He tells us the recent history of an independent Green Party effort by Ralph Nader, and the Democratic primary efforts by Jesse Jackson and Dennis Kucinich. Some may remember the forgotten entrant in the 1992 primaries, the Mayor of Irvine California at the time, Larry Agran, who was dramatically arrested for showing up at the Democratic primary debate that had excluded him, but Gallagher discusses his efforts.

There is a fascinating chapter that compares the Electoral College system to other countries in the world where third parties have been more viable, notably Germany. Here is the history of the Greens (Die Grunen) and the Left party (Die Linke). Gallagher highlights the experience of the Europeans with a parliamentary system that apportions representation based on strength of party, not a winner-take-all approach. In fact, *The Daily Kos* did a 2015 analysis of what a hypothetical US parliament would have looked like based on the results of the Democratic and Republican primaries (Donner, 2015): the (Sanders) Social Democratic forces would have had over 20% of the seats and potentially made a coalition government with Hillary's Democratic Party.

Gallagher was prophetic in a book that was published prior to Bernie's entry into the race. Over and over again his advice and analysis presages phenomena we witnessed in the “Feel the Bern” candidacy. After October 13, the *New York Times* (see Martin, 2015) and other pundit paper and media outlets of the status quo said that Hillary won the debate even though polls and focus groups resoundingly supported Bernie. Here is Gallagher: “On the conceptual level, the argument will be made that the more intense the ideological gauntlet we force the presidential candidate to run in the nominating process, the more we threaten the vitality of the ultimate nominees in the fine election. Implicit in this is the argument that we will be better off simply accepting the candidates that recognized ‘opinion leaders’ present us with.”

The question about Bernie and any primary route challenges is what is left behind? How does the left and labor build on the excitement and momentum and grow it and sustain it? Here is Gallagher on “Beyond”: “Eventually we could imagine or at least hope, that if presidential candidates of the left were ever to become a routine and expected thing, the ad hoc, self-selecting aspect of the current nominating process might come to be seen as insufficiently democratic. We might envision a desire for something of a more participatory candidate selection process down the road, perhaps some form of organization that could maintain a measure of continuity from one presidential cycle to the next.” Gallagher does not preclude action on the local state and regional level; he just suggests and the Sanders campaign confirms the importance of entering the big tent and putting socialist ideas on the front burner.

“The Primary Route” is a pamphlet that Antonio Gramsci would have been proud of; a simple articulate and humorous discourse that challenges status quo and “common sense” thinking on the American left. This is a left often plagued by electoral infantilism and abstensionism that refuses to understand that the two party system enables very narrow operating margins for growing a left political force. But when the left recognizes its limitations and maximizes its freedom as many did with the Sanders campaign, there is the room for dramatic growth of a left political project. By taking “The Primary Route,” the Democratic primary route, new possibilities for the American Left have arisen in the wake of the Sanders groundswell.

Bernie Sanders' new Our Revolution organization needs a strong union core in order to sustain itself financially and organizationally.² Unions that supported Bernie should consider coalescing in a new formation around Our Revolution.³ Unions that didn't support Bernie should do some serious self-examination, consider a new path forward, and hopefully join with the Bernie unions. A new "Labor for Our Revolution" could be a network of national and local unions that actively engage their members in electoral politics at both the primary and general election levels to support Our Revolution-endorsed candidates who reflect labor's values. The Labor for Our Revolution network could link its political work with member mobilization around local and national labor struggles to defend workers' rights and contribute to building a broader movement for social and economic justice.

By having a face-to-face conversation with all our members and launching a new political project, "Going Red" joins two tasks with each other. Without re-establishing an allegiance with members who supported Trump, progressive electoral victories backed by working class union members will be much harder to achieve. Without giving those members an alternative political vision, like that of Bernie Sanders, there is no moving them politically.

The alternative political vision must include the fight for multi-racial unity by recognizing and combatting the pervasive effects of systemic racism. The fight for multi-racial unity must be understood as a real world dynamic, not as a purity litmus test. Many union organizing drives have been won despite white workers harboring racist resentments towards people of color. Strikes have been won despite the fact that white strikers are backward on the race question. And some organizing drives and strikes have been lost because of the same racial dynamics. There is no blueprint as to when and how to combat racism within the ranks. The key is that organizers and leaders recognize the history of and the ever-present pervasiveness of racism, and struggle for ways to educate and train workers on its damaging effects on long-term class unity and progress. Again Sam Gindin: "In this context, class politics is not a stand-in for setting aside the injustices of racism but rather a reminder that categories abstracted from class—like "white," "black," and "Latino"—obscure the imbalances in power internal to each group; that only a class orientation can unify an otherwise fragmented working class; and insisting on class unity implies the committed, active support for full equality within the class. Fighting racism inside the class and in society as a whole is fundamental to building class power" (Gindin, 2016).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, "Going Red" means being ready to make sacrifices to defend our brother and sister immigrant workers, Muslims, People of Color, and all those who are hatefully targeted by the Trump administration. We can take inspiration from the recent efforts of thousands of veterans to stand with the Standing Rock native peoples. We can take inspiration from unions like the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) that sent their members to the Dakotas to stand in defiance of the energy companies (see <https://nwlaborpress.org/2016/12/unions-stand-at-standing-rock/>). More of these kinds of sacrifices will be necessary to win the allegiance of all people to the cause of labor and the defeat of Trump.

The United States was abuzz with talk of a Day without Immigrants prior to May 1, 2017. This movement recalled the giant mobilizations of May 1, 2006 that occurred in response to proposed draconian anti-immigrant federal legislation called the Sensenbrenner Immigration Bill (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Border_Protection,_Anti-terrorism_and_Illegal_Immigration_Control_Act_of_2005).

May Day has its historic origins in the nineteenth century struggle in the USA for the eight-hour day (see Chase, 1993). In many cities on May Day in 2006, the marches and rallies proved to be the largest in history. Industries that relied on immigrant labor were paralyzed as millions of workers responded to the call for a Day without Latinos (also called the Great American Boycott; see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_American_Boycott). Labor participated unevenly in these rallies and mostly in places where the membership in service unions was predominately Latino. *This year, in the turmoil surrounding the Trump Presidency, May 1 was a great opportunity for the labor movement to flex its muscles and build its future.*

Labor's participation is important to the future of American politics. For example, look at the history of politics in California (the United States' mega state). Turn back the clock 23 years to the fall of 1994, when then-Republican Governor of California Pete Wilson faced a fierce re-election battle. He launched a "Trump-like" assault on "illegal" immigration, replete with videos of masses of Mexicans streaming across the border and threatening California. It was a brazen racist ploy called Proposition 187, (see [here](#)) introduced to bolster his reelection bid. Union leaders in California faced a critical decision about whether to participate in the massive Los Angeles mobilization against Prop 187.

In a meeting of labor leadership, some union leaders argued that it was important not to participate in the Los Angeles march so as not to alienate "Encino Man"—the Reagan Democrats of the San Fernando Valley and elsewhere. In the midst of a heated discussion, AFL-CIO Regional Director David Sickler (see [here](#)) made a dramatic plea to Los Angeles' trade unionists: "If we don't march with these Latin workers, we will lose the confidence and trust of a whole generation of Latinos."

Sickler's argument won the day, and Los Angeles' labor turned out for the march. That action, and many others, solidified the labor/Latino nexus. In one generation, California went from "Reagan-land" to solid Blue Democratic (see Krishnakumar, Emandjoneh and Moore, 2016).

Again the same challenge faces labor; however, now it's on a national scale. And the opportunity for the labor movement is equally huge. Supporting the May 1 protests, strikes and other actions would have clearly demonstrated that unions are ready to be a champion of the rising Latino demographic. Conversely, sitting on the sidelines marks labor as bystanders to racist repression.

Recently some building trades labor leaders have blindly and naively embraced the agenda of Donald Trump by meeting with him at the White House, just days after his inauguration and lauding his commitment to build infrastructure and oil pipelines—but with no commitment to pro-labor codes like prevailing wage or project labor agreements (see Schieber, 2017). AFL-CIO President Rich Trumka (usually a strong voice for racial justice), recently embraced Trump's talk of immigration reform after his speech to a joint session of Congress (Totor, 2017). Again, a major labor leader is blindly and equally naively playing into Trump's racist rhetoric. These actions by the building trades and the leader of the AFL-CIO undermine the U.S. labor movement's need to squarely be on the side of immigrants battling Trump's racist rhetoric, executive orders and travel bans.

There were many possible levels of participation for labor and unions on May 1. Each union had to determine what was the most appropriate way to participate based on its members needs and consciousness. In California, SEIU's United Service Workers West, representing over 60,000 janitors, security guards and airport service workers had announced on Facebook its support for a May 1 strike (see [here](#)). The United Food and Commercial Workers, representing supermarket workers in Southern California and the hotel workers' union (UNITE HERE) both participated in actions in California. California was fertile ground for these protests with a sympathetic and supportive political infrastructure and a demographic tidal wave that means that Latinos are now the largest ethnic group in the state—out numbering Anglos 39 to 38 percent (Panzar, 2015).

On the hastily organized February 17, 2017, "Day without Immigrants," tens of thousands of mostly Latino service workers in many cities and towns stayed home (in many cases with the support of their employers) (see [here](#)). Earlier in February, Comcast employees at the company's headquarters walked out to march and rally against Trump's immigration policies (Fernandez, 2017). There was some reason to expect similar dramatic actions on May Day. However, despite the robust participation of central labor bodies in cities like Los Angeles and San Francisco, there was nothing close to the mass participation of 2006. In 2006, over one million people marched in LA; this year the figure was about 30,000. Many veteran observers attributed this year's drastic drop off to the "fear factor." Many immigrants might have even struck or stayed home from work, but were fearful of marching publicly. The three big LA drive time Latino disk jockeys—El Piolin, El Mandril and El Cucuy—did not promote this year's march like they promoted the one that happened in 2006.

Nevertheless, it was significant that four of the national unions that endorsed Bernie issued a unity statement supporting immigrant workers on May Day (Cunningham, 2017).

Moreover, some unions have already begun “Know Your Rights” solidarity trainings to prepare workers for Immigration Control and Enforcement (ICE) raids that could take place in the community and the workplace. Union halls could become “Sanctuary Sites” for the undocumented. And now is a timely moment for always-appreciated contributions of money, materials and office space to immigrant rights groups.

CONCLUSION

These three components—the active engagement with incumbent members, the fostering of a new labor political project, and most importantly standing shoulder to shoulder with immigrants and others under attack from Trump—is a program for labor in the age of Trump.

“Go Deep and Go Red” to grow and win power!

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- 1 Traditionally, "red" referred to the left or the Democrats, but in the 2000 election, the electronic maps on TV employed Red for Republicans and Blue for Democrats. The origins of this switch is not clear, but it has drifted into popular nomenclature.
 - 2 See <https://ourrevolution.com/> (accessed May 22, 2017).
 - 3 For a list of unions that formally endorsed or recommended Sanders, go to <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1zmeldDF4PUtA0uwYOI7JYb0akyQ8VC916stIT0SHhyo/edit#gid=0> (accessed May 22, 2017).