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Contextualizing Trump: Education for Communism

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Abstract

In this article, Dr. Malott challenges the conclusion that the primary factor that led to Trump's victory in the 2016 United States presidential election was the racism of poor whites. Rejecting this position for its capitulation to bourgeois caricatures of segments of the working class, Malott points to the fall of communism for a more historically contextualized understanding of how we got to where we are. That is, this essay notes that the rise of the socialist bloc after World War II was so inspiring to the world's oppressed and colonized that it slowed down capitalism's tendency toward an extending rate of exploitation. After the fall of the Soviet Union and the socialist bloc, and an aggressive anti-communist campaign, capitalists unleashed a more aggressive capitalism called neoliberalism. After nearly five decades of neoliberal wealth redistribution, and the destruction of the communist movement, right-wing demagoguery has risen in European country after European country. Meanwhile, the white middle class—like other segments of the work force—has experienced significant downward mobility and is therefore desperate for economic relief. Because the white middle class tends to see their interests as the same as the capitalist class compared to those of the white working class, this group of more privileged and pampered workers—as has been the case historically—is increasingly susceptible to racist and fascist ideology. It was within this context that Trump and the so-called alt-right (i.e., neofascists and neo-Nazis) gained marginal influence, which is quickly eroding evidenced by Trump's falling approval rating. As a response to Trump, neofascism, and capitalism more generally, this essay argues for a communist education and the organization of the party form.

Contextualizing Trump: Education for Communism

On November 8, 2016, as the election for the 45th president of the United States got underway, many pollsters had Hillary Clinton barely ahead in the key states needed to secure 270 Electoral College votes. However, major media outlets interpreted this slight lead as an indicator of extreme confidence, giving Clinton an 80% chance of beating Trump. Given that Trump's campaign was marked by consistently racist, Islamophobic, misogynistic, and violent language, these numbers—to a wide swath of the political spectrum, despite the evidence—seemed accurate. However, by around 10 p.m. Eastern Standard Time, wishful thinking gave way to facts as Trump's victory began to appear inevitable. Hours after midnight, Donald Trump was officially declared the president-elect.

Interpreting the result as a major political upset by the most unpopular candidate in U.S. history, a candidate associated with neo-fascist rhetoric, millions of progressive people—convinced that so-called “love” would “trump hate,”—were, among other things, shocked, saddened, scared, and enraged. So many people, horrified by the fact that a

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sexist, racist, Muslim-hating, bigoted, capitalist would soon be taking the White House, desperately wanted to know what had happened. Before turning to the debate around why Trump won, I will pause for a moment and address the issue of fascism.

Is this Fascism?

One of the most visible signs that emerged within the crowd of protestors who came to the Act Now to Stop War & End Racism (ANSWER) Coalition's "Inaugurate the Resistance" demonstration at the January 20th presidential inauguration of Donald Trump simply read "FASCISM." The black-and-white fascism sign, broken up into three roughly two-foot-by-three-foot sections, would receive thunderous cheers from thousands of protestors when raised. But does the election of Donald Trump signal the emergence of fascism in the United States? This is a hasty conclusion with potentially dangerous consequences (Party for Socialism and Liberation, 2016).

Fascism is simply the capitalist class' last resort to control or regain control of the bourgeois state and the working class when bourgeois, democratic channels no longer function in that capacity. Through the anti-communist demagoguery of fascist rhetoric, the capitalist class "sets in motion the masses of the crazed petty bourgeoisie and the bands of demoralized lumpenproletariat—all the countless human beings whom finance capital has brought to desperation and frenzy" (Trotsky, 1996, p. 9). After employing all manner of fascist terrorism and civil war, "finance capital directly and immediately gathers into its hands, as in a vise of steel, all organs and institutions of sovereignty, the executive, administrative, and educational powers of the state" (p. 9). For Trotsky, the emergence of fascism does not just mean that bourgeois democratic governance is eradicated, but that "workers organizations are annihilated" (p. 10).

Based on Trotsky's definition of fascism, it is clear that the United States is not yet fascist. That is, although they may be waning in influence, democratic systems of bourgeois governance are still functioning as an effective form of social control. Trotsky (1996) points to an important danger in prematurely announcing the arrival of fascism: "To insist that fascism is already here, or to deny the very possibility of its coming to power, amounts politically to one and the same thing" (p. 15). Pointing toward the extreme importance of rebuilding the communist movement in the current period of mass mobilization, Trotsky, referring to Germany, offers an important clarification:

If the Communist Party is the *party of revolutionary hope*, then fascism, as a mass movement, is the *party of counterrevolutionary despair*. When revolutionary hope embraces the whole proletarian mass, it inevitably pulls behind it on the road of revolution considerable and growing sections of the petty bourgeoisie. Precisely in this sphere the election revealed the opposite picture: counterrevolutionary despair embraced the petty bourgeois mass with such a force that it drew behind it many sections of the proletariat. (p. 18)

Hordes of White Racists?

While not directly invoking the notion of fascism, a common explanation for why Trump won the 2016 election offered by the (neo)liberal media is that hordes of uneducated, ignorant, racist, poor whites festering in the rural United States successfully

voted for their preferred racist candidate. Ignored in this story is the fact that much of the white working class who voted for Trump also voted for Obama in 2012 (and 2008). Although there is no doubt that institutional racism continues to function in the U.S., and that white racism certainly played some role in the election of Trump, it does not automatically follow that racism was the only or the most determinate factor that led to Trump's victory. So what is a more plausible explanation?

The first indicator is the fact that nearly all of the precincts that flipped from Democrat to Republican were economically more depressed in 2016 compared to 2012. In an interview with *Liberation News* (Bergsten, 2017), Noah Carmichael, Secretary/Treasurer of the International Union of Bricklayers and Allied Craftworkers Local no. 7 in Akron, Ohio, reflected on his perception of why some workers voted for Trump in these deindustrialized, drug-ridden areas:

Trump resonated with a lot of working people even if they don't really believe that U.S. manufacturing is coming back. . . . Everybody understands that the bridges and roads are falling apart and that there's work to be done here. We could also convert to green energy and create jobs that way, and Trump is clearly not moving in that direction. I think that part of his message resonated with some people, in that there is work to be done and they thought he could help them do it. I think that's where they saw a lot of the hope, even if it was hope with not very much confidence. (p. 2)

Beyond the skeptical hope that Trump could help put people to work, another factor helping to explain why Clinton lost in 2016 is that nearly seven million registered Democrats who voted in 2012 stayed home in 2016. One explanation for this is that millions of people of color, who have historically voted Democrat, chose to stay home rather than vote Democrat. Why? If the rate of poverty and state-sponsored terrorism continued to increase under the country's first African American president, then what could be expected from Hillary Clinton with her war crimes; the combined effect of her comments referring to African American youth as "super predators" and Bill Clinton's 1994 crime bill, which has been harshly critiqued for negatively impacting African American communities; and the Clintons' record of advancing neoliberal economic policies? Consequently, voter turnout for the 2016 election was exceptionally low (Party for Socialism and Liberation, 2016).

Low voter turnout is an indicator of political and economic alienation. That is, the most impoverished and oppressed communities within capitalism tend to consistently have the lowest voter turnout. Experience teaches non-capitalists, especially the most exploited or neglected, that no election will ever really change their lives. This low voter turnout should not be confused with cynicism or hopelessness. Rather, it is evidence of understanding about whose interests the bourgeois state is designed to serve. At the other end of the voting spectrum is socialist Cuba, where consistently close to 100% of voters turn out, reflecting the low levels of alienation indicative of labor-controlled, workers' states (La Riva, 2015).

Trump's win therefore points to the economic and political alienation that kept millions of people at home and the economic desperation that led others, mostly whites, to take a chance on Trump's promise of bringing back jobs (despite, perhaps, his bigotry).

However, in the unlikely event that Trump succeeds in transferring manufacturing jobs from China or Mexico (for example) to the U.S., the average U.S. wage—far higher than in current centers of manufacturing (e.g., China)—would be transferred to consumers, thereby leading to a huge spike in the cost of commodities and a deepening crisis of realization (Wolff, 2016). However, a more important and influential factor that Trump does not identify in understanding the redundancy of growing segments of the working class is the development of labor-saving technologies (e.g., automation). Labor-saving technologies, in this stage in their long development, especially since the mid-19th century, have replaced thousands of workers with robots and other computerized devices. Although it might appear on the surface that labor-saving technologies would result in massive, unimpeded increases in profit margins since they reduce labor costs, in reality they lead to the falling rate of profit. That is, if new value can only be created by exploiting human labor, then the goal of the capitalist is to put as many labor hours into motion simultaneously as possible. To make up for reductions in the number of labor hours set in motion as a result of labor-saving technologies, the capitalist employs counteracting measures, such as speeding up machines, reducing the hourly wage rate, extending the length of the workday, and seeking out more exploitable sources of labor in other markets. In other words, labor-saving technology leads to the further immiseration and enslavement of the working class. However, under a socialist economy driven not by exchange value, but by the satisfaction of need, labor-saving technologies can do what they intuitively seem like they could do—reduce the length of the workday and lessen the burden of social reproduction. Solutions to today’s deepening economic crisis therefore point beyond capitalism and therefore beyond the U.S. presidency.

What Does NAFTA Have to Do With It?

Clinton’s inability to beat the least favorable candidate in U.S. history represents a referendum on neoliberal capitalism and a repudiation of the Democratic Party for joining the Republican Party and the capitalist class in a bipartisan assault against the working class. Among the many other anti-worker, neoliberal actions, the Clintons were behind the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) signing, thereby further capitulating to the dictates of Wall Street.

NAFTA, among other things, allowed U.S. manufacturing corporations to transfer their production to Mexico. There, they have exploited a more depressed and devalued labor market and then brought their products back across the border into the U.S. without paying tariffs. In the process, many U.S. labor unions have lost their leverage in holding back capital’s incessant drive to increase the rate of exploitation. That is, the threat of a strike lost much of its strength when more vulnerable sources of super-exploitable labor were brought into the fold.

NAFTA therefore leveled a major blow to U.S. labor unions and lowered the standard of living for workers on both sides of the border. Because NAFTA is a treaty designed to redistribute wealth from workers to capitalists through deregulation, it is part of capitalism’s neoliberal turn. This neoliberal assault on workers, from capital’s perspective, became less risky after the demise of the communist movement. Communist labor organizing demonstrated to the global working class how the contradictions of capitalism could be resolved. With the demise of the workers’ movement, capital has

been able to super-exploit labor, pushing the wage far below what is socially necessary (i.e., below subsistence wages).

In essence, neoliberalism should be understood as a way to increase profit margins while simultaneously disciplining labor. Further, neoliberalism has privatized public services and offered corporations massive tax breaks and welfare thereby, yet again, redistributing wealth upward. Consequently, the capitalist class is as wealthy as they have ever been, while those who rely on a wage to survive are increasingly impoverished.

Therefore, one of the factors that led to Trump's victory is that, on his campaign trail, he consistently argued against NAFTA. Consequently, Trump represented, if only rhetorically and theatrically, a change, or something other than the status quo. That Trump has had any appeal at all among the working class is likely due to the poverty and suffering that only continued to escalate during Obama's administration.

Neoliberal capitalism's disciplining of the labor movement, especially within imperialist countries like the U.S., is part of a larger capitalist-class counter-offensive against the global working class, workers' states, and the global movement for communism. The history of this anti-communist, counter-offensive represents the larger context in which I will now situate Trump's victory.

The Historical Context

If Trump won the election because his campaign, compared to Clinton's, was more capable of offering white workers the kind of protectionist rhetoric that speaks to a white-nationalistic chauvinism embedded in the promise of a brighter economic future, the question is: Why? Specifically, I am less concerned with why Trump was more able to offer an appealing line than Clinton than with why that line was appealing in the first place.

Searching for an answer, I refuse to settle for explanations, as presented by some, that suggest that white workers are just backward and racist. I also find theories of whiteness as a political system in itself that exists for the sole purpose of benefitting white people to be inadequate. These types of narratives tend to be decontextualized and of little use in understanding how we got to where we are. A more useful explanation can be found within the history of the war against communism.

Although earlier manifestations of imperialism's anti-communism are important and could be pointed to, it was not until after World War II that the competing imperialist countries acknowledged that their deadly, self-destructive feuds had nearly destroyed capitalism. Consequently, they agreed to settle their differences and unite their forces against the global proletarian class camp, of which the center of gravity was the Soviet Union. In this context, the so-called Cold War was not a struggle between countries, but rather a struggle between classes. On one hand, you have the capitalist class and the imperialist countries. On the other, you have the worlds' workers' states and the working classes within the imperialist countries.

Communism's threat to imperialist hegemony stems from its ideological foundation, which is internationalism and, thus, its anti-racism. With the communist movement playing a major role in global affairs by the end of World War II, a form of collective, class-conscious subjectivity existed as a counterweight to capitalism's competitive, individualist subjectivity. Only a united working class organized through the party could

defeat bourgeois rule and allow the transformation of capitalist production relations into socialist ones. The communist movement therefore challenged “American workers” to reject the conception of self that positioned them as being in competition with each other and with workers in other nations.

The progressive working class movement, even within the centers of imperialist power such as the U.S., was influenced by communism’s notion of collective struggle and *commonness against* (for a theoretical elaboration of *commonness against* see Ford, 2016). By the 1940s, the Communist Party USA had over 100,000 members, significantly influencing the country’s political atmosphere. For example, the influence of communism was apparent within the reformist progressive education movement of the 1930s. Progressive education was focused on collective struggle and community solutions, as opposed to the corporate-endorsed social-efficiency model of education that reasserted capital’s individualistic form of subjectivity.

After being forcefully subverted and undermined by McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee in the 1950s, the communist movement all but vanished in the U.S. However, with a new economic crisis gripping the world economy, the socialist movement reemerged in the U.S. in the 1960s, led by the Black Panther Party. Again, the federal government, this time through the FBI’s counterintelligence program (COINTELPRO), sabotaged the movement through propaganda, political assassinations, agent provocateurs, imprisonment, and so on.

As a result of the success of the war against the workers’ movement, capitalists could push harder than ever before to squeeze as much value out of workers, exceeding all natural limits. This has been possible because of the absence of a communist counterweight. Today, after decades of the forceful absence of communism, the U.S. left tends to be driven by liberal notions of individual freedom and identity recognition. It is within this context that Trump’s ideological line has been forged, which has been confused for fascism due, in part, to its anti-communist and generally bigoted rhetoric. Although the mainstream of the reformist left is able to challenge Trump’s racism and Islamophobia, for example, it is less able to respond to his nationalism, protectionism, and pseudo-economic proposals, leading to incorrectly naming it fascist.

With no large-scale, progressive workers’ movement to offer an increasingly impoverished, imprisoned, and enlisted working class a viable socialist solution to capitalism, the far right is poised to rise to power. If traditional political forms of social control fail, fascism will become a real threat. The solution, I maintain, continues to be a mass socialist movement organized through a party form that is militant enough to oppose Trump and everything he tries to do, and sharp and flexible enough to offer a vision and strategy for moving toward socialism in a constantly changing global situation.

Educating for Communism

Challenging Trump, the racist, capitalist system that he is a product of, and the bourgeois state more generally, requires educating for communism. Such an education must include a deep understanding of the history of anti-communism. Analysis reveals that what remains of the U.S. left has largely abandoned a class analysis and turned its back on itself, the proletarian class camp. The left subsequently adopted a politics of identity, focused on identity recognition in place of the working class’ historical goal of

seizing state power and replacing the bourgeois state with a temporary proletarian state. Re-embracing a class analysis requires going deeper than racially mediated consumption patterns and other consequences of capitalism.

Yet being aware of the consequences of capitalism does not automatically lead to a systematic understanding of capitalism or an awareness of its counter-intuitive internal logic. Consciousness that capitalism exploits people, thereby creating poverty, also does not foster awareness that capitalist ideology produces subjectivity in ways that help normalize capitalism as natural and even inevitable. But subjectivity, while driven by capital, is also vulnerable to subversion (Ford, 2016). An education for communism must contribute to this subversion.

Because of the constantly changing global situation, Ford (2016) argues that a communist education must not only emphasize learning, which is characterized by predetermined outcomes, but it must foster a more creative and open-ended form of studying. However, Ford is clear that effectively organizing against any system is not a matter of pure, unrestrained experimentation, but rather requires fostering a deep understanding of it and closely following its development.

The Instability of Capitalism

At the same time, I dismiss the conception of Trump as somehow unusual or more savage than normal capitalism. We must be in solidarity with progressive peoples' legitimate fear of the instability a Trump presidency is bringing—fear of mass deportation, hate crimes, sexual violence, heightened restrictions on civil liberties, and more. Even though Obama deported more immigrants than any other president in U.S. history, for example, the bigotry being unleashed by Trump should not be dismissed.

However, it is also important to challenge the conclusion that Clinton would have equaled stability because Trump equals instability. Domestically, for example, the dramatic spike in white supremacist hate crimes immediately following the election offers substantial concrete evidence to support the conclusion that Trump's victory represents a win for the extreme right and a surge in instability. The white supremacist groups emboldened by Trump's victory and the far-right-wing cabinet members he is appointing are certainly a major concern and will have to be resisted at every turn during his presidency. The fallacy of the assumption that Clinton would have equaled stability because Trump equals instability stems from two primary requirements of the system of imperialist capitalism, regardless of who is the president of its leading country, the U.S.: endless war and an extending rate of exploitation. The correct conclusion, therefore, is that, as long as imperialist capitalism exists, the vast majority of humanity will be subjected to instability and violence. Trump must no doubt be resisted; however, the solution is not a more progressive imperialist figurehead, but the complete destruction of imperialism.

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Curry Malott is an Associate Professor of Educational Foundations in the College of Education at West Chester University of Pennsylvania. Dr. Malott earned a PhD in 2004 from New Mexico State University in Curriculum and Instruction with an emphasis in the Social Studies, under the guidance of Dr. Marc Pruy. Most recently, Dr. Malott is

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