What labor should learn from Trump's victory

written by Saulo Colón, Michael Hirsch, Murray Schneider, Lois Weiner | January 10, 2017

Michael Hirsch, Saulo Colon, Murray Schneider, and Lois Weiner *respond to an exchange between Larry Cohen and Randi Weingarten and Leo Casey in New Labor Forum about what organized labor could and should have done differently so as to avoid Donald Trump's victory. We hope to encourage wide-ranging debate among labor activists and supporters about these issues. You can reply on our blog, below, or in the comments section of the New Labor Forum reprint of our article.*

Bernie Sanders was the obvious choice for all of labor. He was a candidate custom-made for the movement, and he handed himself to labor's leaders ready to wear, running as a Democrat rather than an independent.

Unlike Hillary Clinton, a one-time member of the Walmart board of directors, Sanders has been a lifelong friend of labor with the record to prove it. It was Sanders who represented the leftwing of the possible, not Clinton. Moreover, a Sanders presidency was certainly possible, especially at the early stage at which the AFT leadership made its peremptory and undemocratic endorsement of Clinton.

Labor officials, such as Weingarten as well as many others, in refusing to endorse Bernie Sanders while grossly exaggerating Hillary's viability and worthiness for top office, share responsibility for the Trump victory.

While we agree with Cohen that Sanders was labor's natural candidate, Cohen's analysis misses an essential lesson for unions about backward social attitudes our society, workers, and union members harbor, and how unions must address these toxic prejudices.

First we need to clarify why Donald Trump won. Casey and Weingarten excuse a blundering campaign strategy and a candidate tarnished by her support for economic policies that harmed millions of working people, including union members. Their argument points to Clinton's expertise: her being an eminently qualified and experienced candidate for the presidency. They repeat the error of the Clinton campaign, ignoring considerable evidence that this "expertise" – read "insider position" – made her unpalatable to many voters.

Ironically, it is the workers who mistakenly voted for Trump who will be those most hurt by his administration. The union officials and political experts who were responsible for Clinton's failed campaign will be relatively unscathed.

The Roosevelt Institute, a liberal think tank that is wholly favorable to Clinton's economic policies (which we find, at best, limited), issued a report analyzing shifts in voter attitudes that completely undercuts Weingarten and Casey's assertions that voters failed to hear Clinton's real message:

> The Comey letter re-opened the vote decision for some people and critically impacted the race, but the Clinton campaign moved from running on change to running on continuity. She fully articulated an economic change message throughout the three debates and offered her plans for change, but after the Comey F.B.I. letter, the campaign no longer spoke of change, the economy and her bold plans for the future. In the final weeks, the Clinton campaign

> conceded the economy and change to Trump, while seeking to make him personally unacceptable.
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> Frustratingly, it closed the campaign appealing for unity, promising to promote opportunity and to "build on the progress" of the Obama presidency. That is why key groups of voters moved to Trump in the Rust Belt and why the turnout of many base groups was so disappointing in the end.

Moreover, according to USA Today, AFT's internal assessment shows 20 percent of AFT members voted for Trump. Close to one-third of NEA's members did likewise. Clinton's being the first female candidate of a major American political party was indeed historic. It was not, however, a persuasive enough factor by itself for White women workers to vote for her. Neither a politician's gender nor his or her race, as Barack Obama's administration demonstrates, is a guarantor he or she will pursue an agenda consistent with organized labor's professed ideals or workers' economic interests.

The authors are of course correct in faulting the archaic Electoral College for invalidating the popular voting majority Clinton received. And voter suppression, as they say, is rampant in GOP-dominated states, where Congressional and state district lines are gerrymandered to minimize urban and minority voting blocks. That was a given going into the election.

Weingarten and Casey are on sounder ground when they call for labor to push elected officials for "an economic program and [to] highlight class issues that convincingly take on what have been decades of economic losses to working people in the American heartland." But that can't happen without recognizing why the Clinton campaign didn't or couldn't do it, and why the bulk of the labor movement abetted what in retrospect was a betrayal of their members' interests. The irony, of course, is that Sanders ran just such a campaign. He said and did during his run – when Weingarten and Casey spurned him – what they now say Democrats must do.

Weingarten and Casey point to the key flaw in Cohen's analysis: his denial of the salience of bigotry in Trump's electoral success. They are correct to name "a significant backlash vote in which 'others' – most prominently, people of color, immigrants, women, LGBTQ people, Muslims and Jews – were scapegoated for the declining economic and social status of white male workers," contributing mightily to the Trump victory. While a majority of those earning $50,000 or less annually backed Clinton, voting members of union households were sharply divided. Although organized labor's apparatus was mobilized for Clinton, 43% of members of union households voted for Trump. Julius Jacobson explained this phenomenon decades ago:

> The racist attitudes of American workers are a social problem, with roots that are deep and complex. The unions are certainly not responsible for this state of affairs. The AFL-CIO does not preach discrimination. On the contrary, its formal educational material invariably advances the ideas of racial equality and nothing here is intended to detract from what the labor movement has contributed to civil rights legislation. The point is that the good that the union movement does is primarily on an elitist level, i.e., it is done from above. There has been no corresponding effort to bring the principles of racial equality home to the rank and file. For this reason, the union movement, bureaucratized and elitist, must assume its share of responsibility for the racial savagery and ignorance exhibited by so many rank-and-file workers. (*The Negro and the American Labor Movement*, Introduction, 1968).

So it's no surprise that Trump built a campaign around hate; "divide and conquer" by fanning prejudice is an old employer tactic. And while it is no surprise either that the unions didn't place opposition to Trump's appeals to bigotry at the core of their campaign work, Cohen's failure to namethis problem is a critical flaw in his analysis. Labor's unwillingness to endorse and work for

Sanders, a presidential candidate for whom its members would vote, cannot be separated from the conservative, elitist culture in unions, which in turn weakens unions in addressing social attitudes that undercut solidarity, at the workplace and in the voting booth.

Labor historian Judith Stein argues that "context, geography, religion, gender, skill, ethnicity, and — yes — race all make solidarity contingent, not something that inexorably flows from economic conditions or the social relations of production." At the same time, "egalitarian racial sentiment is often the consequence, not the cause, of unionization." For unions to develop a winning political strategy they need to empower members to "own" decisions about political endorsements and policies, while simultaneously addressing intolerance that workers share with the rest of the society.

What of the claim that the far left in effect elected Trump by siphoning off votes from Clinton? Even if this were factually accurate, which it is not, the argument sidesteps the scant gains the Democrats sustained in the House and Senate, where the Greens did not run. Glenn Greenwald said it best: "When a political party is demolished, the principal responsibility belongs to one entity: the party that got crushed. It's the job of the party and the candidate, and nobody else, to persuade the citizenry to support them."

Weingarten and Casey quote *Newsweek*'s Kurt Eichenwald and *Slate*'s William Saletan to validate their doomsday theory that had Sanders won the nomination he would have inevitably been sandbagged by the GOP in the general election. They claim "a Sanders defeat on the order of the 1972 McGovern campaign" was more likely than a Sanders victory. Their choice of historical analogy is revealing because it demonstrates that despite their rhetoric about Trump having ridden a tide of bigotry into office, they actually continue the AFT's and organized labor's failed political strategy of cutting off unions from social movements. McGovern forfeited the support of state Democratic Party organizations and the AFL-CIO because of his alignment with the movement against the war in Vietnam. Opposition to the war was McGovern's singular issue. In contrast, Sanders raised the "bread and butter" concerns of working people.

In fact, Sanders would have been better at attacking GOP policies than was Clinton. He was a credible opponent of the rich and corporate plutocrats; she was not. And as we know from his primary campaign, his candidacy would have stirred widespread support for economic issues that Casey and Weingarten argue should be at the heart of labor's politics. Clinton lost the campaign because she had nothing new to offer, and not because the left or misguided idealists voted their fantasies over their interests. A loss for Sanders would have invigorated the Democratic Party, unions, and the progressive movement. Clinton's loss has spawned demoralization. The effort to blame Clinton's and the Democratic Party's defeats on the left denies political realities that need to be faced. It obfuscates failed political strategies that need to be changed.

Weingarten and Casey's explanation for Clinton's failure illustrates both calamitous mistakes of labor leaders C. Wright Mills' identifies in *The New Men of Power*[1]. First, they "[look] to the government or to particular politicians rather than to the workers. The second is thinking of [their] movement essentially as a minority affair, which must balance its power against others, rather than as a potential majority movement with which to reorganize modern society."

The form of political action that Weingarten and Casey defend is a suffocating loser. It seeks accommodation when confrontation is required. It is more concerned with the longevity of the union as an institution – an important consideration for labor, but one that demands a more courageous vision – than with the overall strength of its members vis a vis their employers, which in fact is the only guarantor of institutional survival.

While they incorporate rhetoric about social justice that appears to reject "business unionism," their

political strategy continues the self-defeating thinking and practices of the old ways. They confuse the personal relations union heads curry with politicians for the real power of the union – a mobilized, informed membership – and continue to tail the Democrats, endorsing their tepid, even damaging economic programs, instead of challenging them. They ask for too little and settle for even less, and their members and many working people are no longer buying that scenario.

It’s time for friends of labor and working people to say our unions need to radically overhaul their strategies; it’s the beginning of wisdom and a necessity for survival.

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[1] C. Wright Mills, *The New Men of Power*, (1948, pp.237-238.)