The Role of Workers and Unions in Trump's Rise to the U.S. Presidency

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During the 2016 U.S. presidential elections, the Industrial Heartland states, now the Rust Belt, played a significant role in Republican candidate Donald Trump's victory. Surprisingly, he took states like Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania, which ended up being decisive for his overall win. In addition, he received more votes of unionized workers than previous Republican presidential hopefuls. Trump's win was a surprise, as I mentioned, since all the polls predicted Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton would come out on top. This result represents a confused response by the U.S. working class to the negative effects of globalization and technological automation.

At least 270 votes out of a total of 538 in the Electoral College are required to win the election, and each state is assigned a specific number. It is a winner-take-all system with the leading candidate taking all the electoral votes in each state. Donald Trump totaled 306 electoral votes and Hillary Clinton, 232. However, in the popular vote, the Democrat beat the Republican with 48.2 percent versus 46.1 percent. Trump won 30 states, while Clinton took 21.

The majority of the most serious projections were right about the results in most states except Florida, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin. Balloting in traditionally Democratic states favored the Republican, above all in the Midwest, which had gone to the Democratic Party in previous elections.

In short, Trump won through a surprising victory in states considered Democratic Party bastions. For example, Clinton lost in Florida, Ohio, Iowa, Michigan, Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, which Barack Obama had taken in the 2008 and 2012 elections. In some of them, the margin was very narrow, while Hillary won by a comfortable margin in California and New York. That is, she got more votes than Trump, but his votes were distributed better.

Most of the states with unexpected results favoring Trump are part of the Industrial Heartland that has been affected by globalization and automation based on technological innovation. White workers have been faced with a discouraging panorama in recent decades, including the exodus of jobs to

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non-union areas of the country and other countries with lower labor costs. The number of manufacturing jobs dropped from 19.5 million in 1979 to 11.5 million in 2010, although there has been a slight recovery with an increase to 12.3 million in 2016.

Most of the job losses in manufacturing are due more to technological innovation than to free trade. Ball State University attributed approximately 13 percent of the job losses in this sector in the 2000-2010 period to the latter, and the rest to increased productivity due to automation.[1]

Trump took full advantage of workers' malaise during his presidential campaign, promising actions to bring back the jobs that have disappeared in industry and manufacturing. Among his most outstanding proposals are building a wall on the border with Mexico to prevent not only the entry of immigrants but also illicit drugs and criminals; restricting immigration levels and deporting the millions of undocumented immigrants who were already in the country; and using a border tax to prevent U.S. companies, particularly auto manufacturers, from relocating abroad in countries with lower labor costs like Mexico and China. Nevertheless, even if Trump fulfills these promises, he will not be able to do anything against the automation stemming from technological innovation.

In the 1990s, Jeremy Rifkin warned about job losses in some industries that at the same time were becoming more productive due to technological innovation. In his book *The End of Work*,[2] Rifkin mentions that that recent decades have produced a big change in the employment structure, citing the fact that in the early 1970s, one-third of U.S. Americans worked in factories; but by the end of the 1990s, this figure had dropped to only 17 percent. Despite this, the United States continues to be the world's number one manufacturer. What is happening now is that the United States produces with fewer workers and more intelligent machines. Rifkin mentions the example of the case of US Steel, one of the country's most important employers. He says that in 1980, it had 120 000 U.S. workers producing steel; by 1998, that number had dropped to 20 000, but they produced more steel than the 120 000 had. That is, over the last three decades

of the twentieth century, technology did away with three-quarters of the labor force in the steel industry without affecting output. If we look at other industries, we can get a clear reading of how technological innovation has lowered the number of workers in the productive process.

The rapid technological advances of our time generate big hikes in production without needing to increase proportionately the number of jobs; this makes for job losses, in addition to precarious wages and labor costs. This trend may advance in other industries and jobs; for example, video cameras replace police and surveillance personnel; computer programs make a certain kind of office worker expendable; and robots replace workers in the auto industry, and, in the near future, truck and taxi drivers.

Different measures can be taken to facilitate workers' reinsertion into the labor market when they have been replaced by robots; for example, training programs, stronger unions, more public sector jobs, a higher minimum wage, a tax on high incomes, and more university degrees for the next generation of workers. However, Trump has not mentioned that he will implement any of these measures.[3]

Millions of U.S. blue-collar workers have become more frustrated and angry due to the impact of years of unfavorable conditions and the refusal of political parties in Washington to do anything about them. They did not believe it when President Barack Obama, supported by Clinton, said that the U.S. economy is not only better off than it was eight years ago, but that it is the strongest in the world, when most workers were facing a very different scenario: high unemployment and under-employment, unsafe working conditions, an increase in opiate addiction, and other social disasters derived from the moral and political crisis of capitalism.[4]

In this context, Trump's victory can be seen as a confused revolt of the working class that demonstrates the disgruntlement of workers from the industrial belt and the Great Lakes over the consequences of economic globalization and automation, which have sparked job losses in manufacturing and the creation of precarious jobs in the service sector. In addition, it represents the failure of the world's center-left parties, like the Democratic Party, which have adapted to neoliberal globalization with a social slant but could not reverse its negative effects like inequality, unemployment, and the expansion of contingent jobs.

As I already mentioned, unionized workers were key in this win, particularly in the Rust Belt states of the Midwest. Union leaders were unable to convince their members to vote

for the Democratic Party, as they did for Obama. This was the case of Ohio, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, all of which have been hard-hit by globalization and free trade. Exit polls showed that Hillary Clinton had more backing in union families nationwide: 51 percent (versus 43 percent for Donald Trump). However in 2008 and 2012, in these same sectors, Obama received almost 60 percent of the vote, with the rest going to his opponents. Therefore, in this sector, Trump surpassed his Republican predecessors' performance with 43 percent, a higher number than George W. Bush, John McCain, and Mitt Romney had received in the past (see Graph 1).[5]
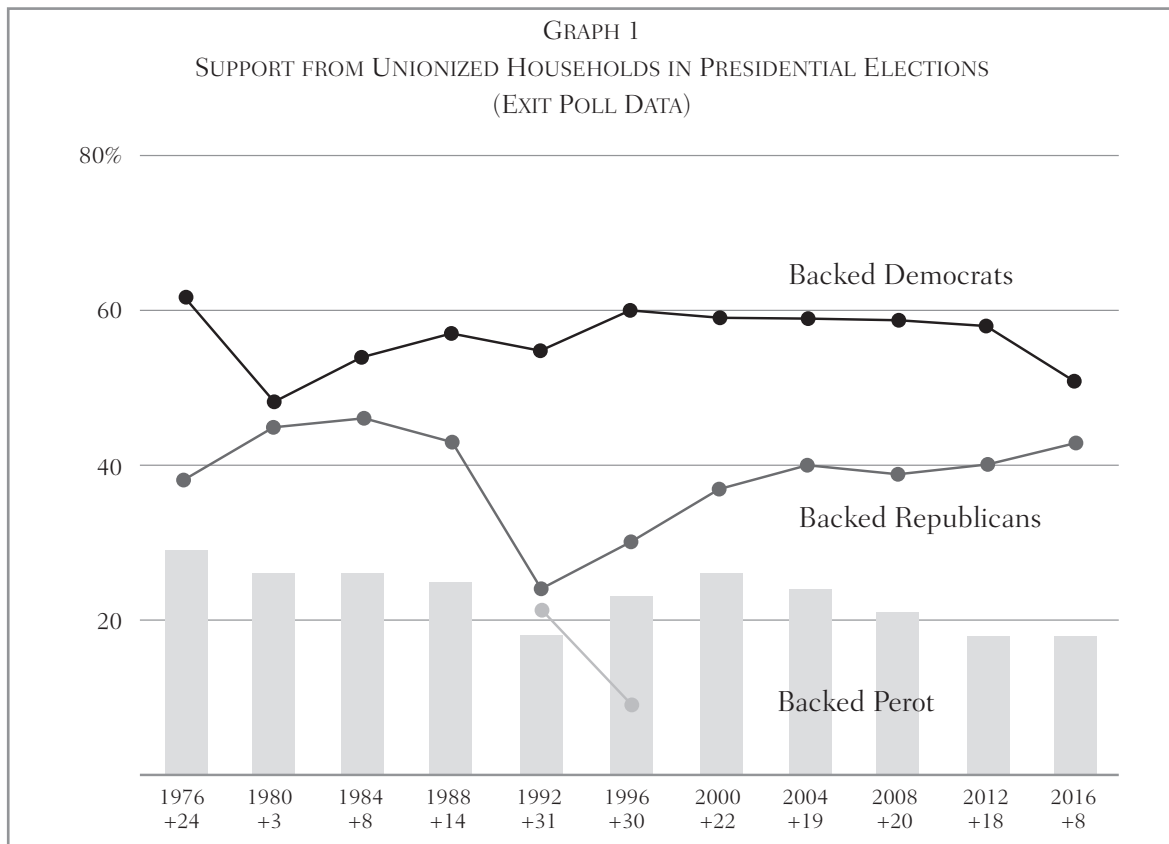
Thus, unionized workers contributed significantly to Donald Trump's win in the industrial region that had voted for Barack Obama in the previous two elections. For example, in Ohio, Trump won the majority (54 percent versus 42 percent), according to exit polls, which also reveal the support he received in states with a strong presence of the auto industry.[6]

It is important to remember that the unions had opposed free trade accords like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), and it

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was Donald Trump whose campaign promised to renegotiate the former and cancel the U.S. signature of the latter. Thus, his campaign proposals reverberated more in unions and among workers from those states than Hillary Clinton's.

It should also be underlined that union membership has been on the decline since the 1980s. This has made for a deterioration of workers living conditions: their wages and social benefits, such as healthcare, education, unemployment insurance, and pensions, have all suffered as a result. Despite this, workers voted for Bill Clinton in 1992 and 1996 and for Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012, but neither of these Democratic presidents managed to reverse the negative trend. In addition, concentration of income has accentuated since the 1980s, contributing to increasing inequality.

GRAPH 1
SUPPORT FROM UNIONIZED HOUSEHOLDS IN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS
(EXIT POLL DATA)

Backed Democrats

Backed Republicans

Backed Perot

1976	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016
+24	+3	+8	+14	+31	+30	+22	+19	+20	+18	+8

Source: Philip Bump, "Donald Trump Got Reagan-like Support from Union Households," *The Washington Post*, November 10, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/11/10/donald-trump-got-reagan-like-support-from-union-households/?utm_term=.a29fd36a31a2.

In this regard, Bernie Sanders has underlined that the 400 richest U.S. individuals own more wealth than the country's 150 million poorest people.

U.S. workers are facing a discouraging panorama and are angry about everything that is pushing them out of some industries and sectors. As a result, Industrial Heartland residents changed their vote in the hopes that it would improve their working conditions and bring back jobs. This reflects a crisis of representation of the unions and a breakdown of the alliance with the Democratic Party. Some Rust Belt states, like Indiana, Wisconsin, and Michigan, passed Right to Work Laws between 2012 and 2016, which are barriers to union affiliation and allow employers to fight unions. This encouraged the erosion of local union membership, which has negatively affected unions' financial circumstances and therefore their ability to attract voters to the Democratic Party, traditionally more supported by union members than by other workers.

However, instead of solving an unfavorable situation for U.S. workers, the Trump administration could make it worse. It has promised to reduce taxes on big corporations, which also heralds a cutback in social spending or even increased taxes on workers, or what in the United States is called the "middle class." It is unlikely that his cabinet, mostly entrepreneurs and millionaires, will be worried about dealing with workers being upset.

The election of the most reactionary president in the history of the United States is a threat for workers, for unions, for minorities, for women, and for young people. Trump has announced that he will deport between two to three million undocumented immigrant workers and that he will privatize public services. This will affect union members in the public sector, which has the highest unionization rate in the United States: almost four out of every ten workers in this sector belong to a union, while only one out of every eleven in the private sector does.

Trump's victory is not only dangerous for the workers of that country, but for those of others like Mexicans. One of Trump's campaign promises was to return the jobs lost in the Rust Belt states and repatriate the automobile manufacturers with plants in Mexico, among them Ford and General Motors. The latter have already announced they will stop investing in new plants in Mexico and will move to states in the U.S. Industrial Heartland. As a result, Mexico could lose hundreds of thousands of jobs, at least in the auto industry, one of the most dynamic in the country. **VM**

NOTES

[1] Claire Cain Miller, "The Long-Term Jobs Killer Is Not China. It's Automation," *The New York Times*, December 21, 2016.

[2] Jeremy Rifkin, *The End of Work. The Decline of the Global Labor Force and the Dawn of the Post-market Era* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1994).

[3] Cain Miller, op. cit.

[4] Maggie Trowe, "Election Reflects Effects on Workers of Capitalist Crisis," *The Militant*, November 21, 2016.

[5] Mitchell Hartman, "Election Shows Weakened Labor Support for the Democratic Party," November 14, 2016, https://www.marketplace.org/2016/11/11/world/can-labor-deliver-democrats.

[6] Larry P. Vellequette, "Labor Union Anger Fueled Trump in Midwest," *Automotive News*, November 9, 2016, http://www.autonews.com/article/20161109/OEM02/161109818/labor-union-anger-fueled-trump-in-midwest.