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Twenty-First Century “Populism:” Not for the Unions and a Good Thing Too

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Abstract: On both the left and the right the phrase “populism” has lost any tangible meaning; or rather it is the default word used to describe otherwise unorganized and atomized anti-elite sentiment of almost any sort. The labor movement is a genuinely anti-corporate and anti-elite effort to empower workers both white and of color, but few commentators describe it as “populist,” and correctly so. This is because trade unions have an organized leadership, a concrete program, and the capacity to exist once the fever of the election season has passed. In his campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination, Bernie Sanders largely missed the much needed opportunity to defend and legitimize these working-class institutions for millions of potential members.

Earlier this decade, hundreds of blue-collar workers, mainly white, mainly male, mostly small-town, and all very angry, had a dramatic standoff with two of the biggest and most aggressive foreign-owned corporations on the planet. The workers were defending a multigenerational way of life that was threatened by a pair of global corporations intent on slashing wages, cutting pensions, and turning a set of skilled occupations into something far more tenuous and contingent.

In Longview, Washington hundreds of workers blocked train tracks and stormed portside loading docks to keep EGT, an East Asian logistics consortium, from outsourcing their jobs to a cheaper set of workers made desperate by a Pacific Northwest economy that had bled logging, manufacturing, and transport jobs for a generation. Until the police stopped their rampage, they used baseball bats to smash windows, damage rail cars, and dump tons of grain onto the ground. More than a dozen were arrested.¹ Meanwhile in Boron, California, deep in the heart of conservative Kern County, scores of beefy miners confronted Rio

¹ Steven Greenhouse, “Union Dispute, Turning Violent, Spreads and Idles Ports,” *New York Times*, 9 Sep. 2011, B2.

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Tinto, a giant British-Australian combine that was determined to slash labor costs in a small, isolated Mojave Desert town where open pit mining of “Twenty Mule Team Borax” fame was the only game in town. “We’re standing up for our community and for every working family in America,” was the way most these heavy equipment operators saw their fight.²

Angry white male workers fearful for their jobs; small towns turned upside down by global economic forces. Surely all this proved a breeding ground for populist resentment, xenophobic outrage, and blue collar support for the kind of political tribune who could promise to “Make America Great Again.”

But no. These blue collar men, and a few women, were all members of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, a West Coast labor organization that would endorse Bernie Sanders in the Democratic primary early in the Spring of 2016. No reporter or pundit thought to label these strikers “populist” even at the very height of their confrontation with multinational capital, which took place in 2010 and 2011 when “Tea Party” outrage was on the upswing. They were unionists and militants who had the moral and financial support of the rest of the labor movement. They confronted a set of corporate opponents in a highly programmatic fashion. They were not alienated, but found solidarity and friendship in their struggle. To call them populists, at least of the 21st century sort, is to saddle them with a label that does grave injustice.

If some observers might wish to do so, that is because the term “populist” has become nearly impossible to define: it has become a default phase for various forms of social or political insurgency, with an ideological content that too often lies in the eye of the beholder. In the 1890s when the Populist Party rose to prominence, these workers, farmers, and radical intellectuals put forward a coherent and far-reaching program that echoed down the 20th century decades. The Populists wanted electoral reforms to squeeze corruption out of politics, pushed for progressive taxation of income, demanded public control of banking, railroads, and utilities, favored silver over gold in order to expand and cheapen credit, and fought for more public schools and colleges. They were not hayseeds. Nor were they remembered as such. In 1962 for example, the *New York Times* headlined a liberal congressional effort to defeat A.T. & T. and keep satellite communications in public hands. “Space Age Populists: Senate Test Today on Satellite Bill Recalls Political Fires of the 1890s.”³ In this anti-monopoly effort, contemporary progressives saw the Populists as part of a long and respectable lineage stretching back to

² “Drawing the Line Against Corporate Greed in Boron,” *ILWU Dispatcher*, March 2011.

³ Cabell Phillips, “Space Age Populists: Senate Test Today on Satellite Bill Recalls Political Fires of the 1890s.” *New York Times*, 14 Aug. 1962.

the Jacksonians, the Mugwumps, the Progressives, the New Dealers, and the Paul Douglas/Wayne Morse/Estes Kefauver liberals of the 1950s.

Populism got a sour, illiberal rewrite when postwar intellectuals like Richard Hofstadter, Seymour Martin Lipset, and Daniel Bell entered the historical and sociological fray. As part of the generation who had witnessed the rise of Stalin and Hitler, these ex-radicals thought they saw in the mass following of Joe McCarthy the kind of authoritarian mobilization that had led to catastrophe in Europe and elsewhere. Since McCarthy came from Wisconsin, and made a regular habit of denouncing Washington civil servants, liberal academics, and moderate Republicans, Hofstadter et al. explained McCarthyism as a kind of revolt against modernity, a pseudo-conservatism that traced its roots back to a Populist movement seeking to recapture an agrarian and small town past forever lost in the 20th century. In this reading of their history, Populist mythology celebrated virtuous farmers at the expense of urban sophisticates, found financial conspiracies responsible for the business cycle, and traded in anti-Semitic stereotypes and innuendo.⁴

But Hofstadter and the rest of the New York intellectuals were wrong about the original Populists. As early as 1963 historian Walter Nugent published a refutation, *The Tolerant Populists: Kansas Populism and Nativism*; an assessment sustained by scores of other historians, including Charles Postel, whose *The Populist Vision* won the Bancroft Prize in 2008. Meanwhile, in 1967 political scientist Michael Rogin demolished the idea of a generational or demographic linkage between the Populists, illiberal or otherwise, and the followers of Joe McCarthy. In his *The Intellectuals and McCarthy: The Radical Specter*, Rogin found that the McCarthyites in the 1950s Midwest were far more closely associated with traditional Republican conservatism than with any authoritarianism arising out of plebian angst.⁵

But none of this scholarship could dent the evocative framing that took hold in the 1960s and after. From that decade on the term populist referenced an unstable, often irrational hostility toward an ill-defined elite. George Wallace seemed an early embodiment of the kind of demagogic candidates for high office who took advantage of this strain in American politics.⁶ Over the next half

4 Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (1955); and also *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (1963).

5 Walter T. K. Nugent, *The Tolerant Populists: Kansas Populism and Nativism* (1963); Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Michael Rogin, *The Intellectuals and McCarthy: the Radical Specter* (1967).

6 Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 221–44.

century the populist moniker became a shape shifting category, often an explanatory phrase deployed to describe the appeal and the following of almost any rightwing politician defaming liberal elites, but also applied at various times to those on the left who supported Jimmy Carter, Jim Hightower, Jerry Brown, and Howard Dean. And the Texas billionaire Ross Perot had the populist label applied to him as well.⁷

To the extent that there is a cultural or educational elite, populists resent them; indeed, all those of a cosmopolitan, bi-coastal outlook, notwithstanding the many conservatives who also fill this sociocultural niche. But even more important than the cultural posture or economic program held by those labeled contemporary populists, is another feature of their politics: the atomization and anti-institutionalism of their struggle, a condition that sometimes applies as much to those on the left as on the right. Almost by definition, populists are unorganized in any meaningful sense. They do not function through and with an institution, except perhaps via intense engagement in partisan politics at the height of the campaign season. Mass rallies offer an emotive substitute for substantive political organization and engagement. Populism is therefore the label attached to protest sentiment unmoored by institutional loyalties.⁸ And such populism is by common if unstated agreement, exclusively white. Thus on the left, neither Black Lives Matter nor the Latino protests of a few years ago, “A Day Without Immigrants” are thought to be populist, while Occupy Wall Street and the Bernie Sanders campaign, both predominately white, are offered this label. On the Right, virtually all political activity is white. But significantly, neither the hyper-organized National Rifle Association, nor Focus on the Family, nor the more politically active evangelical churches are normally-or rightfully-thought to be “populist.”

So let’s return to those labor protests for a moment. At Longview and Boron, the striking workers were organized, not merely in a legal or economic sense, but on a trajectory that extended from the social and ideological to the profoundly emotive and personal. Although in each case a powerful corporation was the aggressor, the workers were not mere victims, but combatants, empowered by their friendships, their local union, the larger ILWU, and supporters across the

⁷ Dave Denison, “Perot: New Style Populist?” *Baltimore Sun*, June 28, 1992.

⁸ Jonah Goldberg, “Trump and Sanders Break the Mold for Populist Politicians,” *National Review*, December 30, 2015; Bert Bonikowski and Noam Gidron, “Trump and Sanders aren’t Blazing New Trails. Populist has Run Through U.S. Politics for a Very Long Time,” *Washington Post*, April 25, 2016.

country and even abroad. Rio Tinto locked out hundreds of these unionists and replaced them with others, often less skilled, who were glad to find almost any job. But unlike so many others, then and now, who found their jobs stolen or abolished by global production shifts, these Boron workers were not alone. They had prepared for the lockout in a collective fashion, with meetings, strategy sessions, and on-the-job slowdowns and stoppages. The ILWU sent in food caravans, organized demonstrations, and enlisted friendly politicians to put pressure on Rio Tinto. They attended rallies in which prominent labor leaders attacked the global elite, but these workers could also speak for themselves. Their fight was in the news on almost a daily basis and they had their own trusted spokesmen and women who put forth an ideologically and political coherent defense of their cause.⁹

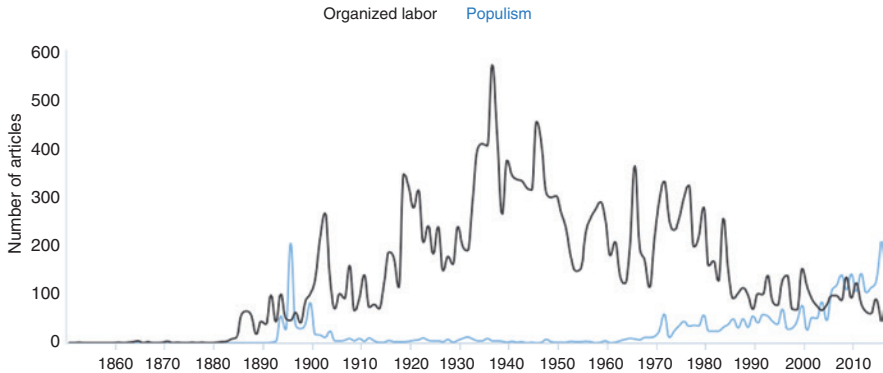
At Boron the ILWU won, maintaining key seniority rights, wage standards, and union strength; at Longview the union reached a far less satisfactory agreement. But regardless of the outcome, we can see why "populist" would indeed serve as such a poor label if applied to their struggle. Many of the workers, especially in heavily Mormon Boron, were probably Republicans, perhaps later Trump Republicans,¹⁰ but their anti-corporate fight was of a far more concrete, programmatic, and efficacious sort than that rhetorically offered by the politicians labeled populist during the 2016 campaign season. This same dichotomy would appear during the strike of nearly 40,000 workers against Verizon during the late spring of 2016. Bernie Sanders appeared on the picket line; indeed, Larry Cohen, a former president of the Communications Workers of America was one of Sanders' most ardent backers. But no one thought to call these blue collar workers populists.¹¹

Although causality is impossible to prove, the graph below illustrates how "organized labor" and "populism" have been inversely linked during the last 150 years. *New York Times* reporters rarely used the work populist or populism during the era when trade unions were strong. But as they declined and ceased to poise even much of a verbal challenge to the existing corporate or governmental elites, populism rose to prominence as a descriptive label for working class and plebian insurgent sentiment.

⁹ Peter Olney, "Battle in the Mojave: Lessons from the Rio Tinto Lockout," *New Labor Forum*, March 4, 2011.

¹⁰ Peter Olney e-mail to author, September 5, 2016. Olney was a former staffer with the ILWU.

¹¹ Dave Jamieson, "Bernie Sanders Joins Verizon Workers on Picket Line," *Huffington Post*, April 14, 2016. Hillary Clinton also showed up at a strike support event.



<http://chronicle.nytlabs.com/?keyword=trade%20unions.populist&format=count>

Although a world of political, cultural, and moral difference divided Donald Trump and his supporters from the movement engendered by Bernie Sanders, the two did have this in common: both appealed to an alienated mass of white men and women who had little direct contact with organized politics or self-conscious interest groups. In both instances the enemy was a distant elite, in one instance the “billionaire class,” in another craven Washington politicians or foreign trading powers. Trump’s dystopian and conspiratorial world has more appeal than we might have though just a year ago, but in this essay there is not much point to a deconstruction of the manifest irrationalities it embodies. Many others have worked over that ground.

As a populist Bernie Sanders and his movement offer much more to fruitfully consider. The achievement here is remarkable, perhaps even unprecedented in US presidential politics. Starting as a mere protest candidate, the Sanders candidacy quickly transcended the marginality into which it had been cast by all credentialed observers. Not only did he best the Clinton establishmentarian machine in 22 states and win just over 45% of all Democratic Party primary votes cast in the Winter and Spring of 2016, but Sanders won more support than Clinton from down scale Democrats, an especially amazing development when one considers that most African-Americans, who broke decisively for Clinton, have incomes lower than the norm among Democratic Primary voters. His voters were also of a lower income than those of Trump.¹² Unlike “wine track” insurgents like John Dean in 2004, Bill Bradley in 2000,

¹² Nate Silver, “The Mythology of Trump’s ‘Working Class’ Support,” *New York Times*, 3 May 2016.

Edward Kennedy in 1980 and even Barack Obama in 2008, Sanders captured, on a decidedly leftwing program, more white working-class votes than the woman who had long been anointed by virtually ever Democratic Party leader and institution as their presumptive presidential candidate. His campaign built a mass constituency, pushed Hillary Clinton to the left, and energized a new generation of young voters.

But what was the content of his program and did it have a populist appeal? Sanders called himself a socialist and argued for a "political revolution." The fact that millions of people were willing to vote for a self-described socialist generations after Eugene V. Debs and Norman Thomas campaigned for the presidency is a remarkable testimony to the fading away of an older, Cold War inspired, taboo. And the deployment of the phrase "political revolution," offers a bracing contrast to Barrack Obama's flaccid invocation of the word "change" in the 2008 campaign. But regardless of such linguistic labeling, what in fact was the political content of this Sanders' populism?

The easiest answer, and perhaps the most accurate, is just to say that Sanders is an American social democrat. He is not a revolutionist and not much of a socialist either. The meaning of the latter has morphed and evolved in countless ways during the last century, so it would be churlish to measure Sanders against an abstract and ahistorical standard and thereby declare his program timid and misplaced. But compared to the old 1890s Populists, Sanders is not all that much of a radical. He favored a more progressive income tax, a \$15 minimum wage, and a restoration of the Glass Segal Act which proscribed putting under the same roof investment and commercial banking. Nor did he favor nationalization of the banks or utilities, which was central to the Populist Omaha Platform of 1892.

Most problematic was Sanders' analysis of the problem. Of course, the fault was not his alone: virtually the entire American liberal/left has latched on to economic inequality as the root cause of our problems, a sentiment ratified in the most rigorous fashion by Thomas Piketty's multi-century study, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Moreover this attack on wealth and income inequality has a specific phrasing: it is the 1% versus the rest of us, the 99%, a dichotomy first made potent by the Occupy Wall Street protests of 2011 and 2012. Sanders supported those occupations of urban parks, university campuses, and other public spaces; and many Occupiers were among the first volunteers joining the Sanders campaign for the Democratic Party nomination. Indeed, it is a tribute to the programmatic coherence of his campaign, in stark and salutary contrast to the studied refusal of the Occupiers to prioritize or even enunciate their politico-economic demands, that explains some of the great success enjoyed by Sanders in the first half of 2016.

As Sanders put it in an June 2016 *Boston Globe* OP-ED, “Today, 99 percent of all new income is going to the top 1 percent, while the top one-tenth of 1 percent own almost as much wealth as the bottom 90 percent.” “It is time to say loudly and clearly that corporate greed and the war against the American middle class must end. Enough is enough!” On his campaign website one can find the “suspension bridge” graph, made famous by Piketty, illustrating the rise, fall, and rise again of income inequality in the 20th and 21st centuries. To ameliorate such inequality, Sanders would tax the rich, curb Citizens United, which allowed the wealthy to make unlimited and anonymous campaign contributions, break up the big banks and double the minimum wage to \$15 an hour.

Unfortunately, the “We are the 99%!” rally cry obscures and confuses far more than it illuminates. It offers an ineffectual strategy for building the kind of movement that Sanders and his supporters hope to construct. The problem is two fold: first, who are the 99% and are they likely to have anything in common with each other? An individual making less than \$435,000 is part of the 99% and so too are those on food stamps.¹³ They do not have much in common; indeed their interests are likely to be in opposition. Nor does it help all that much to conflate the 99% with the “middle class” whose upper reaches would thereby extend way into the ranks of elite professionals and various managers. To champion the 99% is to seek agency where none can be found. This is not a social category that can be mobilized. It is a statistical construct. One does not have to be a Marxist to recognize that class is not defined by income, consumption, or even education, but by the power and autonomy – or the lack thereof – which people who sell their labor for their wages experience in daily life. Most members of what we, today, call the middle class do that as well.

Moreover, when we focus on this overbroad definition of a middle class as an object of concern, we are necessarily marginalizing, neglecting, and denigrating those who fall below it: those out of the workforce, those chronically unemployed, those on welfare, those whose aspirations are not middle class at all. As Michael Zweig has pointed out in *The Working Class Majority: America's Best Kept Secret*, when the working class disappears into an amorphous middle class, the working poor – a mere forty-six million strong – drops out of the picture. From Nixon to Trump, the American right has championed the middle class, often given a political twist by labeling it “the silent majority” or “the moral majority”

¹³ Tax Foundation, “The Top 1 Percent,” on-line.

precisely in order to denigrate low-income people of color and their liberal or radical partisans. Should the left be doing this as well?¹⁴

Conversely, it is important to understand what is wrong with a simple demonization of the 1%. That is a politically imprecise category as well. Most in that 1% may be politically conservative and economically self-serving, while a prominent minority are civic-minded liberals. But that is beside the point: the political significance of the 1% – or as Paul Krugman and others point out, the 0.01% – is that these people comprise an active group of capitalists whose overweening power over central economic and political institutions is both the cause of our difficulties and the proper target of all those who work for them, either directly in the corporations they control or in a public sector starved by virtue of the political and financial power wielded by that same elite stratum. Taxing away their income by half would certainly free up money for schools, infrastructure, health care and the like, but it would do little to limit their power.

During the Great Depression, income inequality reached record lows, if only because the value of the stocks and real estate held by the 1% of that era declined in precipitous fashion. But we do not remember the New Deal for that. Instead, the Roosevelt Administration and the social movements that sustained it remains a hallmark of progressive statecraft because it helped shift the structure of social and economic power. In the 1930s FDR gave many speeches that today we might easily label as populist. In his famous address to the 1936 Democratic convention, for example, Roosevelt denounced the "economic royalists" who had "carved new dynasties" based upon their command of the giant corporations and powerful banks that emerged in the 20th century. He denounced "the privileged princes of these new economic dynasties, thirsting for power, (who) reached out for control over Government itself. They created a new despotism and wrapped it in the robes of legal sanction."¹⁵

Roosevelt would moderate this rhetoric during the war, and his heirs, like Truman, Stevenson, Kennedy and Johnson, never offered such red meat to the Democratic Party base. But FDR's populism had a multigenerational longevity because it was backstopped, not only by new governmental laws and regulations, such as the Securities and Exchange Commission or the Fair Labor Standards Act, but by the creation of institutions, most notably the powerful industrial unions,

¹⁴ A longer discussion of the mistaken use of the term "middle class" can be found in Nelson Lichtenstein, "Class Unconsciousness: Stop Using 'Middle Class' to Depict the Labor Movement," *New Labor Forum*, 21 (2), Spring 2012, 10–3.

¹⁵ "Acceptance Speech for the Renomination for the Presidency," Philadelphia, June 27, 1936 at *The American Presidency Project*, on-line.

which organized millions of employees who worked for corporations that stood at the commanding heights of the national economy. These unions were mobilizing institutions whose very existence was predicated upon a constant battle to limit the prerogatives of capital and enhance the living standards of all those who exchanged labor for bread and shelter. Thus was populist rhetoric transformed into a social democratic political culture.

Some old ideas remain valid and potent. For two centuries the rise of an organized working class in the West has coincided with the advance of a democratic polity. Conversely, the demise of contemporary US unionism – it now stands at about six percent in the private sector – means that not only is it much more difficult to raise living standards, but that politics moves in an oligarchic and rightwing direction. The industrial Midwest is drifting toward the GOP, not because there is anything inherently rightwing about a population that is more white, blue collar, and high school educated than in other states, but because the humbling of the union movement in Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, Iowa, Wisconsin and West Virginia has gravely weakened a set of institutions that sustained Democratic Party strength and social democratic values. In their place the door opens wide to resentment, resignation, and atavistic and authoritarian political leadership. Thus we have witnessed the dramatic transformation of West Virginia from a bulwark of Rooseveltian liberalism and working-class militancy to a right-to-work state of ruby red coloration. This shift was closely linked not just to the demise of its historic industries, but to the pulverization of a unionized workforce schooled by home grown leaders seeking collective solutions to pressing social and economic problems. Union density in West Virginia declined from above 30 percent in the early 1980s to about 12 percent today, one of the sharpest drops of any state. Unemployment in the state remains at 7 percent, higher than the national average, but the real problem is the substitution of low-wage, non-union service sector jobs for those of a much better character. Mining and manufacturing employment dropped precipitously from the late 1980s until today, but retail and service sector jobs filled part of the vacuum. Wal-Mart, for example, is the state's largest private sector employer, with almost 12,500 workers, about the same as all the coal companies combined.¹⁶

It is not just a question of low wages. In his important book, *What Unions No Longer Do*, Jake Rosenfeld makes the case that the decline of unionism is responsible for about one third of the overall increase in US wage inequality

¹⁶ American Friends Service Committee, *The State of Working West Virginia: from Weirton Steel to Wal-Mart* (Charlestown: West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy, 2013); Wal-Mart, Inc. web site offers state by state employment statistics.

among men and about one fifth among women. But even more important, the near absence of unionism among workers who stand in the bottom half of the private sector workforce has proven disastrous for political participation within this strata.¹⁷ Union members are at least 20 percent more likely to vote in presidential elections than non members and they are 43 percent more likely to volunteer in such a campaign. Other studies have shown that if all other variables are held constant, a unionized worker is about 15 percent more likely to vote Democratic than one not in a union. And as Judith Stein has pointed out, there are just two places where working class people, regardless of race, can get leadership skills in America: the union and the church.¹⁸ Both privilege loyalty, self-education, and organic leadership over formal credentials earned elsewhere. The latter flourishes and tilts right, certainly in its evangelical, mega-church version. The unions are having a harder time, if only because their very existence is demonized and resisted by a huge majority of all employers, both public as well as private.

Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders championed the "Fight for \$15." Even Donald Trump sometimes favored raising the minimum wage. But this otherwise salutary movement for an improvement of US labor standards – sick leave, regular shifts, overtime pay, increases in the minimum wage – often implemented through referenda, executive orders, and new ordinances and legislation – is not a substitute for the revival of trade unionism. Consciousness is episodic, public sentiment and commitment come and go, so without an organization, with a paid staff, recognized leadership, and steady income, employers and their political allies know that they just have to wait a few years for the energy and commitment of a movement like "The Fight for \$15" to drain away, after which inflation, technological change, and shifting consumption patterns will all erode these social movement achievements. Conversely, the existence of a union, in virtually any form or coloration, constitutes an institutional expression of the elevated consciousness of those who in a moment of engagement actually mobilized their workmates and built an organization to permanently represent that new ideological and social understanding. Member dues pay for a staff whose task it is to continually mobilize the membership, recruit new ones, and confront employer and state opponents. If this appears to be an argument for bureaucracy and against spontaneity, populist or otherwise, the reader is correct.¹⁹

¹⁷ Jake Rosenfeld, *What Unions No Longer Do* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

¹⁸ Judith Stein, "Why Did White Workers Leave the Democratic Party," *Jacobin*, June 20, 2016.

¹⁹ The Service Employees International Union funded the \$15 minimum wage struggle in many cities.

When evaluating the impact of a political figure, campaign rhetoric normally takes second place to program and accomplishment. President Obama may well have been the nation's most skillful and moving presidential writer and speaker since Theodore Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln. But his political impress on the polity will be judged by the long term success of the Affordable Care Act, the efficacy of Dodd-Frank, and the composition of the Supreme Court. When it comes to Bernie Sanders, I think it appropriate to reverse the standard. He will not be president nor even a particularly powerful Senator. His impact has and will arise almost exclusively from those ideas he put on the national political agenda. All have been progressive, but for an ostensible socialist, one has been notably lacking.

That would be a bold and morally compelling defense of the idea of trade unionism. Such an affirmative justification and advocacy is actually more important today than any new law or labor board ruling, important as those can be. Yet the Sanders campaign was, if not silent than muffled and muted, on this important ideological task. Without a revival of this bedrock working class institution, redistributive tax policy and progressive welfare programs will always remain on shaky ground. In his stump speeches Sanders normally gave a shout out to the union movement, especially during the Verizon strike in April and May 2016. But such advocacy took a back seat, way back, to his more populist denunciation of Citizens United and the 1%. Notwithstanding the enthusiastic support Sanders won from the most progressive unions and many rank and file volunteers, his advocacy of a "political revolution" always had an abstract quality about it, divorced from the actual social revolution and radical political awakening that in the 1930s and a few other decades have accompanied the unionization of heretofore unorganized workers.

There is a good reason for this silence, but one which makes the Sanders failure on this front even more tragic. American liberals are divided, and often bitterly, over the role of unions in American life. In almost every cash-starved big city, otherwise progressive mayors, often backed by a sizable slice of the electorate, resist and sometimes demagogue the bargaining demands pushed forward by unionized teachers and other municipal workers. In private industry, non-union workers often resent, as much as they envy, the wages and pensions their unionized counterparts sometimes enjoy. And among the many millennials who flocked to the Bernie banner, trade unionism is often an alien concept. And of course, even among those who are union members, or who know a friend or relative in organized labor, the reputation of these institutions is often decidedly mixed. If hard bargaining, minimal wage advances, failed organizing efforts, and a declining membership are what young people mainly know about these institutions, then it is no wonder that unions are today marginal to the imagination of the American left.

That is why I was so disappointed that Bernie Sanders did not use the giant soapbox at his command to make the ideological and visionary case for a revival of trade unionism in America. He offered no sustained defense of organizations which for three generations have mainly prodded America to the left and served as the backbone of the Democratic Party. As a populist or otherwise, Sanders missed an opportunity to educate a new generation to the importance of a set of institutions that have anchored the aspirations of the American left for generations.

In the absence of such a union revival – or really of any kind of progressive organization or party that gives coherence to working-class fears and aspirations – we are condemned to watch populist history repeat itself. On the left, tribunes like Sanders, and before him John Edwards, Howard Dean, Ralph Nader, and Jesse Jackson will come and go. Meanwhile, on the right, populism of a far more retrograde sort makes steady headway within an unorganized and increasingly alienated white working-class that in better days gave its allegiance to a New Deal liberalism that stretched well into the postwar era. These populisms, both on the left and the right, flourish in an episodic fashion today because they are neither true protest movements, like that of civil rights and feminism in their heyday, nor based upon political and social institutions that can exist independent of the feverish campaign season. Not surprisingly, when unions and union-oriented Democrats were stronger in America, such populist impulses found little purchase within the body politic. Should the labor movement stir again, inspiring and channeling the social energy and anti-elite grievance so prevalent in our time, such populisms will rapidly fade, and a good thing too.

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