

Workers, Donald Trump, and U.S. Foreign Policy

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As a recent *Washington Post* article argued, the role of working-class voters in electing Donald Trump has likely been exaggerated. One of the problems with much election analysis, suggest the authors, is that it has used educational levels as the determinant of who belongs to which class. Yet if one uses household income levels under the median of \$50,000 a year as the primary criterion, then only about thirty-five percent of those who voted for Trump were working-class. In other words, a majority of Trump supporters were relatively undereducated (lacking college degrees) but were either middle-class or affluent in terms of income.¹

Yet even if working-class support for Trump has been exaggerated, workers—as defined by income—still played an important role in helping him win the electoral-college vote in Rust-Belt states. Pundits have yet to adequately explain why even a significant minority of working-class voters would be attracted to a billionaire who promised to eliminate or cut funding for programs that served the needs of poorer Americans. Some have stressed Trump’s cultural appeal to working-class white Americans who feel their needs have been ignored in recent years. Others emphasize that Trump’s economic nationalism and “America First” foreign-policy program have resonated with working-class voters.

To date, diplomatic historians and political scientists who have addressed the latter issue have been more successful at explaining why old models do not work than at offering new ones. Leo Ribuffo, for example, has recently demonstrated that Richard Hofstadter’s ideas about a paranoid style in American politics fail to adequately explain the Trump phenomenon.² Scholars such as Tom Nichols have echoed the laments of

¹ Nicholas Carnes, Noam Lupu, “It’s Time to Bust the Myth: Most Trump Voters were not Working Class,” *Washington Post*, 5 June 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/06/05/its-time-to-bust-the-myth-most-trump-voters-were-not-working-class/>.

² Leo Ribuffo, “Policy Series: Donald Trump and the ‘Paranoid Style’ in American (Intellectual) Politics,” *H-Diplo/ISSF*, 13 June 2017, <http://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/1-5AN-Paranoid>.

Cold-War establishment figures such as George Kennan in emphasizing that democracies necessarily rely on largely uneducated voters to make decisions about foreign-policy issues that actually require high levels of expertise. Social media, he suggests, has made the problem worse by encouraging everyone to think of themselves as experts and by collapsing the division between “professionals and lay people[.]” Trump, he argues, capitalized on this distrust and disrespect for experts and expert knowledge in his campaign.³ Yet, given the role of experts in creating the worst foreign policy disasters of the Cold War, at least some skepticism about experts would seem to be in order.

Although many diplomatic historians have recently been attracted to the new “cultural turn,” this approach, with its penchant for overgeneralizing about the success of hegemonic elites in winning “spontaneous consent” among a majority of Americans for their foreign policy by appealing to shared national cultural values, is also unlikely to offer much new insight about class divisions on international issues.⁴ Instead, diplomatic historians would do well to integrate the collective knowledge of two schools into their thinking about workers and Trump: that of the William Appleman Williams school and that of the “new” labor history that came to the fore in the late twentieth century.

The Williams school pioneered in documenting the decision of American Federation of Labor Leaders (AFL) to support Woodrow Wilson’s foreign policy during World War I in order to gain access to corporatist networks of power-sharing and also by highlighting the subsequent loyalty of AFL leaders to a Wilsonian vision in the twentieth century. Williams’s followers, however, devoted little attention to those within the labor movement who dissented from this vision.⁵ More recent labor studies by both historians and labor activists have in fact highlighted high levels of rank-and-file opposition to the foreign policies of the AFL and AFL-CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations) leadership. They have also illuminated a persistent and

³ Tom Nichols, “Policy Series: The Election of Donald Trump and the Decline of the Expert,” *H-Diplo/ISSF*, 6 June 2017, <https://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/1-5a1-experts>. See also, Arthur Eckstein, “Policy Series: Aristocracy, Oligarchy, and Donald Trump,” *H-Diplo/ISSF*, 31 January 2017, <https://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/1-5j-trump-aristocracy>.

On Kennan, see particularly, his quotes comparing American public opinion to a dinosaur, parts of which are reprinted in John Cassidy, “ISIS and George Kennan’s Americanasaurus,” *New Yorker* (25 September 2014) <http://www.newyorker.com/news/john-cassidy/isis-george-kennan-americanasaurus>. For intellectual currents during the Cold War emphasizing the conflict between expert and public opinion, see Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Vintage, 1963) and Thomas Bailey, *The Man in the Street: The Impact of American Public Opinion on Foreign Policy* (New York: Macmillan, 1948).

⁴ Walter L. Hixson, *The Myth of American Diplomacy: National Identity and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 2. Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Vintage, 1963).

⁵ See especially, Ronald Radosh, *American Labor and United States Foreign Policy: The Cold War in the Unions from Gompers to Lovestone* (New York: Random House, 1969), Thomas McCormick, “Drift or Mastery? A Corporatist Synthesis for American Diplomatic History,” *Reviews in American History* 10 (December 1982), 318-330; Michael Hogan, “Corporatism,” in *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*, 2nd.ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 137-148; Gregg Andrews, *Shoulder to Shoulder? The American Federation of Labor, the United States and the Mexican Revolution: 1910-1924* (Berkeley: University of California, Press, 1991). See also, Simeon Larson, *Labor and Foreign Policy: Gompers, the AFL and the First World War* (London: Associated University Presses, 1975).

articulate working-class critique of the Wilsonian principles that have regularly guided the Democratic Party since World War I and that have often also been influential in Republican circles.⁶

A brief examination of internal labor debates over U.S. foreign policy—from World War I to the present—highlights a persistent dilemma for American workers and labor activists. In contrast to the leadership of dominant labor organizations, many rejected the capitalist-driven international agendas of both the Democrats and Republicans, but structural impediments to a third-party alternative dedicated to a more worker-centered foreign policy proved impossible to overcome. With no party devoted primarily to working-class international needs, workers often chose to demonstrate their dissatisfaction by voting for the party not in power at the time of the election.

When President Wilson declared U.S. neutrality following the outbreak of hostilities in Europe in 1914, both the AFL leadership and a diverse range of labor activists widely praised his decision and participated in antiwar campaigns designed to discredit those who sought U.S. intervention in the Great War. Yet when President Wilson increasingly denounced German submarine warfare as a threat to U.S. national security and demanded that the Germans abandon the practice, the labor response was more divided. AFL President Samuel Gompers expressed his agreement with the President and announced that he would support the president's military preparedness plans. In return for his loyalty, Gompers was awarded with a position on the Council of National Defense in 1916.

By contrast, many within the labor movement argued that Wilson's evolving definition of national security revealed not only a pro-British but also a pro-capitalist bias. German attacks on American ships, they argued, were not an imminent threat to working people but to the profits of businessmen. Even more troubling, they insisted, was Wilson's insistence on defending the right of wealthy passengers to travel on the commercial vessels of belligerent powers such as the *Lusitania* for business or leisure purposes during wartime. National security boundaries, they argued, should be restricted to the American shoreline. Working men should not be asked to die to protect either business profits or the frivolous travel pursuits of the wealthy. As one Seattle trade unionist explained, if there were an invasion of the United States, he would encourage his three sons to "shoulder a gun to protect Seattle, but to hunt up men to kill—I didn't raise my boys to that end."⁷

To thwart the efforts of business leaders and preparedness groups intent on driving the United States into war, labor activists recommended a variety of strategies, ranging from an embargo of American goods to Europe in order to prevent further attacks on U.S. shipping, to the nationalization of the munitions industry, to a national referendum on the question of war or peace, to a general strike in the event that war seemed imminent, to the establishment of a labor party. Although labor activists acknowledged that some of their

⁶ See notes below.

⁷ Elizabeth McKillen, *Making the World Safe for Workers: Labor, the Left and Wilsonian Internationalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 53 and in general; idem, *Chicago Labor and the Quest for a Democratic Diplomacy: 1914-1924* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); Jeanette Keith, *Rich Man's War, Poor Man's Fight: Race, Class, and Power in the Rural South during the First World War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Carl Weinberg, *Labor, Loyalty and Rebellion in the Southern Illinois Coalmines during World War I* (Carbondale: University of Southern Illinois Press, 2005); Frank Grubbs, *The Struggle for Labor Loyalty: Gompers, the A.F. of L and the Pacifists, 1917-1920* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1968); Francis Shor, "The IWW and Oppositional Politics in World War I: Pushing the System beyond the Limits," *Radical History Review* 64 (Winter 1996), 74-94.

proposed measures—such as an embargo—might harm the economic well-being of workers as well as business interests, they insisted that lives were more important than prosperity.⁸

When Germany declared that it would resume unrestricted submarine warfare in late January of 1917, the Wilson administration chose to sever diplomatic relations with Berlin. On April 2, Wilson asked Congress to declare war against Germany. Wilson's war address is often remembered primarily for its seemingly altruistic pledge to make the world "safe for democracy." Many labor and socialist dissidents expressed skepticism about this goal, noting Wilson's paternalistic record of intervening in Latin American affairs and also expressing doubts that democracy could ever be imposed on one nation by another.

Socialist and labor activists noted another troubling theme in Wilson's speech that received little public attention. The President also argued that the United States had a special responsibility to defend those tenets of international law which guaranteed that the "free highways of the world" remained open to neutral powers seeking to maintain their commerce during wartime. This open-ended pledge seemed to suggest that Wilson was more interested in making the world safe for capitalism than democracy. Such a pledge, argued labor dissidents, might immerse the United States in endless wars to guarantee the profits of American businessmen.⁹

Although strong antiwar currents coursed through every layer of the labor movement during the weeks leading up to and following Wilson's declaration of war, AFL President Samuel Gompers and other AFL leaders staged a meeting at which they pledged their loyalty to the government for the duration of the war. A British immigrant, Gompers—like Wilson—sympathized with Britain in the conflict. Equally significant, Gompers had watched with interest the partnerships that developed between governments and labor movements in belligerent countries during the war and believed that U.S. labor would benefit from similar arrangements in the event the U.S. entered the war on the side of Britain.

Wilson rewarded Gompers for his loyalty by appointing him and other labor leaders loyal to the government to serve on a network of war boards created to guide the country's mobilization for war. In contrast, labor and socialist activists who continued to oppose the war and the administration's conscription policies were increasingly persecuted under the Espionage and Sedition Acts. The war nonetheless remained unpopular among Americans. Historians suggest that about 12% of eligible men in the United States dodged the draft by failing to register or not reporting for military training after induction. Recent studies of the draft in Illinois, Georgia, and New Jersey have demonstrated that large majorities of the men in these states who registered for the draft nonetheless sought legal exemptions in order to avoid military service.¹⁰

⁸ McKillen, *Making the World Safe for Workers*, chs. 2-3; Philip Foner, *History of the Labor Movement of the United States*, vol. 7 (New York: International Publishers, 1987).

⁹ For Wilson's "War Message to Congress," see https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Wilson's_War_Message_to_Congress; McKillen, *Making the World Safe for Workers*, 124-125.

¹⁰ Christopher Capozzola, *Uncle Sam Wants You: World War I and the Making of the Modern American Citizen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 10; Gerald Shenk, *"Work or Fight!" Race, Gender, and the Draft in World War I* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2005).

After the war, the Wilson administration further rewarded Gompers by appointing him to serve on a special Commission on International Labor Legislation at the Versailles Peace Conference. This body developed an unprecedented labor bill of rights that was incorporated directly into the peace treaty and also created the International Labor Organization (ILO). Wilson and Gompers assumed it would be a selling point among U.S. workers in winning their support for the Versailles Peace Treaty.

They badly miscalculated. Labor dissidents, now distrustful of both the U.S. and AFL presidents, assumed that the new international organizations created at Versailles would only further facilitate collaboration among government leaders intent on serving the interests of their capitalist classes. This held true even for the International Labor Organization, because it was to be comprised of business and state as well as labor representatives. Labor dissidents instead chose to direct their political efforts at war's end toward either the Socialist Party, the newly created Farmer-Labor Party, or the one two new Communist parties. Many and rank-and-file workers, convinced that a vote for one of the many emergent parties on the Left would be a wasted vote, instead registered their disillusionment with Wilson by voting for the Republican candidate Warren G. Harding, who won a land-slide victory and ushered in a decade of Republican ascendancy.¹¹

The legacies of the war thus proved problematic for both labor collaborators and labor dissenters. The AFL leadership, although loyal to the administration, failed to achieve lasting improvements in labor's bargaining power either domestically or internationally. Nonetheless, the pattern of collaboration that developed between labor leaders and government policy makers would be repeated in other twentieth century wars, including World War II and the Cold War, with even more mixed results. Particularly troubling during the Cold War was AFL-CIO support for the Vietnam War and for Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) efforts to destabilize democratically elected socialist governments such as that of Chilean leader Salvador Allende.¹²

Labor dissenters, unsuccessful in their bid to establish an independent workers' political party at the end of World War I, remained a minority voice throughout the 1920s. Some found a new role for themselves in the Popular Front and championed innovative labor approaches to international affairs within the newly created CIO (Committee for Industrial Organization, subsequently the Congress of Industrial Organizations) in the 1930s. They suffered another devastating wave of repression during the Cold War as McCarthyism and the

¹¹ McKillen, *Making the World Safe for Workers*, chapters 6-7.

¹² The literature on U.S. labor during the Cold War is now extensive, but see especially, Victor Silverman, *Imagining Internationalism in American and British Labor, 1939-1949* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000); Paul Buhle, *Taking Care of Business: Samuel Gompers, George Meany, Lane Kirkland, and the Tragedy of American Labor*, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1999); Robert Waters, Geert Van Goethem eds., *American Labor's Global Ambassadors: The International History of the AFL-CIO during the Cold War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Edmund Wehrle, *Between a River and a Mountain: The AFL-CIO and the Vietnam War* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005); Philip Foner, *U.S. Labor and the Vietnam War* (New York: International Publishers, 1989); Elizabeth McKillen ed., "Workers, Labor and War: New Directions in the History of American Foreign Relations," *Diplomatic History* 34:4 (September 2010): 641-699, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2010.00880.x>; Kim Scipes, *The AFL-CIO's Secret War Against Developing Country Workers* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010). 46-48; Beth Sims, *Workers of the World Undermined: American Labor's Role in U.S. Foreign Policy* (Boston: South End Press, 1992).

Taft-Hartley Act led to the expulsion of left-leaning unions from the CIO and paved the way for the formation of the AFL-CIO, which proved highly supportive of pro-business U.S. foreign policies.¹³

The Cold War's end, however, brought renewed debate within a weakened labor movement about American foreign policy. In the wake of the American occupation of Iraq in 2003, new groups such as U.S. Labor Against the War again inquired whether policymakers were using democratic rhetoric as a smoke-screen to promote U.S. business interests at the expense of workers in the United States and other countries. In a manner reminiscent of the World War I-era, labor critics also charged that the U.S. military forces fighting and dying in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were heavily working-class in composition.¹⁴

More recently, in the 2016 election, dissident labor groups such as Labor for Bernie (Sanders) took aim at the Democratic Party's commitment to Wilsonian ideals of free trade as they were embodied in treaties such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). In contrast to the stated policies of the Trump administration, their proposed solutions called not for economic nationalism, but for greater democratic input by labor and other groups in constructing trade policy.

Despite a strong insurgency within the AFL-CIO on behalf of Sanders during the primaries, the AFL-CIO leadership endorsed Hillary Clinton, who had long advocated for an expansion of free trade agreements and supported the invasion of Iraq and intervention in Libya. Two separate polls have estimated that about 12% of Bernie Sanders' supporters voted for Trump. This margin, in conjunction with other working-class voters already committed to Trump, was probably enough to cost Hillary Clinton the election.¹⁵

The lessons of the long-running debate over U.S. foreign policy within the labor movement since World War I seem clear. The Democratic Party needs to recognize that it has taken working-class support for its Wilsonian agenda for granted for too long and will continue to lose voters to the Republicans if it does not alter course. The AFL-CIO leadership, for its part, needs to distance itself from both the military interventionism and the free trade principles which lay at the heart of the Wilsonian vision and develop a more independent internationalist agenda truly grounded in serving working-class interests. Whether this

¹³ Silverman, *Imagining Internationalism in American and British Labor*; Nelson Lichtenstein, *Labor's War at Home: The CIO in World War II* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982); Ben Sears, *Generation of Resistance: The Electrical Unions and the Cold War* (Conshohocken: Infinity Publishing, 2009); Jerry Gordon, *Cleveland Labor and the Vietnam War* (Cleveland: Greater Cleveland Labor History Society, 1990); Daniel Garcia, "Class and Brass: Demobilization, Working Class Politics, and American Foreign Policy between World War and Cold War," *Diplomatic History* 34:4 (September 2010): 681-698, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2010.00882.x>.

¹⁴ See the website of U.S. Labor Against the War: <http://uslaboragainstawar.org/>.

¹⁵ See the website of Labor for Bernie: <http://www.laborforbernie.org/>. See also, Brian Mahoney, "AFL-CIO leader tries to quell pro-Sanders revolt," *Politico*, 3 July 2015, <http://www.politico.com/story/2015/07/afl-cio-endorsement-2016-democratic-primary-119701>; Ken Thomas (Associated Press), "Clinton wins endorsement of the AFL-CIO," *PBS Newshour* (website), 16 June 2016, <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/clinton-wins-endorsement-of-the-afl-cio/>; Danielle Kurtzleben, "Here's How Many Bernie Sanders Supporters Ultimately Voted For Trump," *NPR* (website), 24 August 2017, <http://www.npr.org/2017/08/24/545812242/1-in-10-sanders-primary-voters-ended-up-supporting-trump-survey-finds>; Jason Le Miere, "Bernie Sanders Voters Helped Trump Win and Here's Proof," *Newsweek*, 23 August 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/bernie-sanders-trump-2016-election-654320>.

includes supporting a left-of-center coalition within the Democratic Party like that of Bernie Sanders, or a third party movement like the Farmer-Labor Party movement that emerged during the World War I era, only time will tell.

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