

Fascism in Reverse and the US Working Class

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On Saturday, November 19, roughly 200 people attended the annual conference of the National Policy Institute at the Ronald Reagan Building in Washington D.C. The Institute seeks to create an exclusively white American nation through a process of what it calls, “peaceful ethnic cleansing.” The keynote speaker at the conference was the Institute’s director, Richard B. Spencer, who claims to have invented the term, “Alt Right” when he created his internet domain, AlternativeRight.com. In his speech, which has now drawn outraged reactions from around the world, Spencer celebrated the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States with the chant, “Hail Trump, hail our people, hail victory!,” to which some members of his audience responded with the open-hand fascist salute. Spencer also made thinly veiled anti-Semitic and racist references to the “mutually hostile tribes” who backed Hillary Clinton and used the Nazi term *Lügenpresse* (lying press) to refer to the mainstream media. While Trump was forced to disavow the conference and its speaker at a meeting with the owner and senior staff of the New York Times, the disavowal rang hollow considering his appointment of Stephen Bannon, first as CEO of his presidential campaign, and then as Chief Strategic Advisor to the President. Bannon, who has been accused of antisemitism by his ex-wife among others, has at least skirted on the edge of Spencer’s territory, once bragging that Breitbart, Bannon’s online media site, is “the platform of the Alt Right.”

Spencer’s conference and Bannon’s appointment are only two of the most recent signs of Trump’s connection with the fascist or quasi-fascist right. There are many others, such as his pretended ignorance of the identity of David Duke when the former Klan leader endorsed him; the appearance of the Star of David superimposed on a pile of cash in a Trump anti-Clinton poster; Trump’s call to supporters to watch for “fraud” at the polls (i.e., to harass Black and Latino voters) that drew an eager response from white supremacist militias; online harassment by Trump supporters of Jewish journalists and political candidates with anti-Semitic slurs, threats, and images; the public celebration of Trump’s victory by the KKK, neo-Nazis, and other white nationalist and supremacist groups; and post-election hate crimes against Muslims, Blacks, and Latino immigrants, all of whom were targeted by the fundamentally racist, nationalist, and nativist message of Trump’s presidential campaign.

The fascist response to and participation in Trump’s campaign and now his presidency are sure to have a significant impact on national politics for the next four years. For those in danger of being hurt by the Trump Administration as well as those who intend actively to oppose it, it is vital to understand the significance of the fascist dimension of Trump’s politics. This, in turn, requires an understanding of the similarity and differences in the historical situations that gave birth to Trump’s campaign and presidency on the one hand and to classical European fascism on the other.

Fascism first arose in Italy and Germany in the 1920s and ‘30s following a global catastrophe. Ten million people died in World War I, undoubtedly the most destructive war in history, until the Second World War beat its record by a factor of ten. With the Versailles Treaty, the victorious Allies subjected Germany to insufferable conditions, forcing it to pay far more in

reparations than it could afford. Although Italy was on the winning side of the war, Italian nationalists believed that the Allies had denied their country its fair share of the spoils. An example is when Italy's claim to the island of Fiume was thwarted when Yugoslavia acquired it instead. In a famous incident that thrilled Mussolini just as he was planting the seeds of the fascist movement, the warrior-poet, Gabriele D'Annunzio invaded Fiume in September, 1919 with a ragtag expeditionary force. He held it for a year-and-a-half, until, under international pressure, the Italian government ordered its navy to shell the island, which caused D'Annunzio to make a hasty retreat to civilian life. But Italy and Germany were not just dissatisfied with the outcome of the war. Both countries were also crawling with demobilized junior officers who had nowhere to go except back to the ranks of the impoverished lower middle-class (Mussolini and Hitler were among them). These men nurtured an intense hatred for the socialists and pacifists who had tried to prevent a war that was the officers' only chance at glory and the power of command. The paramilitary squads of the Italian fascists (*fasci di combattimento*) and Nazis (*Sturmabteilung* – SA) were recruited from these demobilized junior officers looking to recapture their battlefield glory and power, and murderously angry at a Left that, opposing the war, wanted to deprive them of both. In their lethal, disciplined hostility, they followed the example of the notorious paramilitary *Freikorps* that murdered the famous Marxist theorist and leader, Rosa Luxemburg in 1919.

We should not underestimate the significance of these paramilitary squads for the culture, politics, and ideology of fascism. There would have been no fascist movements or states without them. In a way, the squads recreated the World War I battlefield on home territory, with the domestic Left cast in the role of the enemy. These commandos were responsible for the aggressive masculinity of fascism, its related hostility to feminism and women in general, and its cult of the supreme leader. The *squadristi* and SA men affirmed a nearly religious faith in the transcendent power of violence and death (hence the images of daggers and skulls on their flags and uniforms), and cultivated an “anti-bourgeois” disdain for the comforts and pleasures of domestic life. In addition, they saw themselves as instruments of the triumph of the will over spiritless material conditions that was such a central aspect of the worldview Mussolini and Hitler propounded.

The Fascist Party in Italy and the Nazi Party in Germany began their ascendance to power after abortive attempts at revolution by workers in the two countries; the armed proletarian uprisings in Berlin, Hamburg, Munich, and many other German cities as well as the declaration of a soviet republic in Bavaria, all in 1919; and the occupation of the metal-working factories in the Italian “northern triangle” of Genoa, Turin, and Milan the following year. However, in both cases, the fascists were not the ones who defeated the militant workers. That task was accomplished by the Social Democratic government in Germany, and the liberal Giolitti government in Italy. It is true that the German government enlisted the aid of the proto-fascist *Freikorps* in putting down the revolutionary uprisings, but that was a half-decade before the rise of the National Socialist German Workers' Party. In both Italy and Germany, it was only after democratic governments defeated the workers that *squadristi* and SA men launched their commando raids, disrupting and eventually destroying the unions, co-operatives, and workers' parties that had remained significant though weakened forces in their respective countries.

Antonio Gramsci, leader of the Italian Communist Party, who spent the final 16 years of his life in one of Mussolini's prisons, put it this way:

What service has fascism performed for the bourgeois class and for "democracy?" It set out to destroy even that minimum to which the democratic system was reduced in Italy—i.e. the concrete possibility to create an organizational link at the base between the workers, and to extend this link gradually until it embraced the great masses in movement.

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Its most effective activity has, therefore, been that carried on in the localities; at the base of the organizational edifice of the working class; in the provinces, rural centers, workshops and factories. The sacking of subversive workers; the exiling or assassination of workers' and peasants "leaders;" the ban on meetings; the prohibition on staying outdoors after working hours; the obstacle thus placed in the way of any "social" activity on the part of the workers; and then the destruction of the Chambers of Labour and all other centers of organic unity of the working class and peasantry, and the terror disseminated among the masses... After three years of this kind of action, the working class has lost all form and all organicity; it has been reduced to a disconnected, fragmented, scattered mass.

"A disconnected, fragmented, scattered mass" is not a bad description of the US working class in 2016. Donald Trump does not need paramilitary squads to achieve this result. It is the outcome of four decades of attacks on organized labor by the representative-democratic state. The attacks began under the presidential administration of the *avant la lettre* "New Democrat," Jimmy Carter; grew to Dunkirk-size proportions during the eight Reagan and four Bush Senior years; continued in the self-styled New Democrat administration of Bill Clinton; was ramped up during the eight years when Bush Junior ruled; and continued, with a few minor concessions, during Obama's reign. The weapons the state used varied from government strike-breaking in the air traffic controllers strike and sponsorship of private sector de-unionization under Reagan, to neoliberal trade deals facilitating capital flight under Clinton, Bush Junior, and Obama, to fiscal policy designed to keep wages down in all administrations from Carter through Obama, to massive reductions in corporate and personal tax rates that shifted trillions of dollars from the bottom and middle to the top of the income ladder under Reagan, Bush Senior, Clinton, and Bush Junior. Call it the neoliberal consensus if you like, with marginal differences in direction and severity. The end results are incontestable; one of the lowest rates of unionization in the industrialized world (11.1% of the workforce), wage stagnation, reductions in pensions and medical benefits, the slow death of Rust Belt cities and towns, and disparities in income and wealth that have not been seen since the Gilded 1920s.

There was no revolutionary uprising in the United States that inspired these attacks on organized labor. What motivated them was a change in the conditions of US capitalism. The unprecedented economic boom that occurred in the three decades following the end of the Second World War came to an end. Expanding markets for automobiles, road construction, consumer durables, and suburban housing reached saturation resulting in the recession of 1973. The huge profits made possible by the postwar boom had funded a three-decade compromise between the owners of big companies and organized labor, in which the owners agreed to accept unions as legitimate agents

of collective bargaining, while the unions gave up all challenges to the private ownership of industry and managerial control of the work-process. But when profits began their long decline in 1973, the owners no longer had an incentive to uphold the postwar compromise. Instead they sought to recuperate profits by driving down labor costs and increasing the length and intensity of work, and this involved weakening or destroying the unions.

The decline and fall of US labor was at least passively abetted by a predominantly bureaucratic, complacent, and craven union leadership, more willing to beg neoliberal Democrats for a place at their table than to fight for the future of their members. But this leadership was itself the result of state-sponsored purges of communists, Trotskyists, and other radicals from the unions during the McCarthy era. When the purges took place in the mid-1950s, unions represented 33% percent of the US workforce. They now represent a total of 11.1%, as we have already said, and just over 6% of the private sector.

Much of the difference between Trump's politics and that of interwar European fascism lies in the fact that working-class organizations were already decimated, and not just temporarily defeated, when Trump launched his presidential campaign. To be sure, his Administration will soon move forcefully against the sole remaining bastion of union strength; the public sector. It is likely to pass a national version of the right-to-work laws in the South and Midwest that exempt workers represented by unions from paying union dues. It will try to privatize public education by means of charter schools and voucher programs, thereby breaking the powerful teachers unions. It will undoubtedly appoint an enemy of organized labor as director of the National Labor Relations Board and nominate justices for the Supreme Court with a similar stance. And it will move to freeze hiring, eliminate pensions, and roll back job protections for federal employees. But in accomplishing these ends, the Trump Administration will not need to rely on paramilitary squads. It will simply proceed in the furrows already laid down by four decades of predecessors.

Just as there is no need for Trump to attack working-class organizations with commando squads, there are no legions of hate-filled, ultra-nationalist war veterans to form them. Instead of a catastrophic world war that produced hundreds of thousands of recruits for the fasci and SA, the US has been through four limited wars over the past 26 years – two in Iraq, one in Afghanistan, and one in Libya. With the exception of a fairly large homeless contingent, veterans have been more successfully reintegrated into civilian life than in Italy and Germany, largely as a result of VA medical benefits and the GI bill. Trump's dog-whistling to the Alt Right thus has a different significance than the creation of commando units charged with destroying substantial and extensive workers' organizations. The order of events in the history of classical fascism has been reversed; instead of the activation of the squadristi and SA followed by the destruction of workers' organizations, in Trump's case we have the destruction of workers organizations followed by the activation of the much, much smaller militias, KKK, and neo-Nazi groups. To what purpose?

Workers do not disappear when their organizations are destroyed, their communities degraded, and their other "centers of organic unity" dissolved. There is no capitalism without people who are forced to sell their labor for a wage, and none in which workers do not vastly outnumber the owners of big corporations, major banks, enormous areas of land, and the other means necessary

for making a living. Even a disconnected, fragmented, scattered working class must be integrated into the capitalist system; its members must give the economic and political order their consent, at least to the extent of showing up for work, paying taxes, sending their children off to war, and so on.

Once the SA and *squadristi* managed to destroy “the organizational link at the base between the workers,” the Nazi and Fascist parties had to incorporate these now atomized masses into their new regimes. They did so by means of ideology, symbolism, structural reorganization, and state-supported benefits. National Socialism and Italian Fascism portrayed themselves as workers’ parties while at the same time demanding an end to antagonistic relations between proletariat and bourgeoisie through the integration of both into new “corporate” bodies controlled by the state. Being a worker was no longer supposed to signify membership in a definite class, but rather performance of a patriotic service to the Fatherland and, in the case of Germany, to the Aryan race. An indication of this nationalist redefinition is that the tools of workers were often compared with the weapons of soldiers in Nazi posters. That the new corporate bodies affirmed absolute command of the owners of companies over their workers did not undermine corporatist ideology because of the material benefits the new regimes were able to provide. After the stock market crash of 1929 and the ensuing Great Depression, the acceleration of industrial production in the service of war put millions of unemployed people back to work. In Germany in particular, these new economic conditions made it possible for National Socialism to make good on its constitutional guarantee of the right to work as well its promise to extend pensions to previously excluded categories of workers.

In his presidential campaign, Trump invoked fascist themes in part to win the support of white workers, especially in the Rustbelt battleground states of Michigan, Ohio, and Pennsylvania, by promising them reintegration into a new social and economic order. He did so by appealing to their national and racial identity and directing their hostility to national and racial outsiders, while giving lip service to a critique of big corporations and banks. Like the National Socialists and Italian fascists, he also proposed public measures to end unemployment and improve wages and benefits. He advocated the creation of a trillion-dollar program of infrastructure repair to put people back to work, the imposition of tax penalties on companies that off-shore jobs in an effort to bring them back to the United States, the expulsion of illegal immigrants who compete for American jobs, and a shift in public attention and resources from urban Blacks to white workers. It is true that Trump voters in both the primaries and general election had incomes significantly higher than average, and that much of his base consisted in the usual affluent Republican voters. But what gave him his margin of victory in the November election was precisely the white working-class vote in the Rustbelt states.

The nativist and racist rhetoric Trump employed in attempting to win over white workers (and the lower middle class), his threats of violence against liberal opponents, including Clinton, and his overt misogyny resonated with essentially marginal groups of Klansmen, white supremacist militias, neo-Nazis, and sundry white nationalists and separatists. His opposition to Latino immigration was especially appealing to ideologues obsessed with the decreasing percentage of whites in the US population. And his close association with Breitbart and political elevation of Stephen Bannon secured the allegiance of even those elements on the Alt Right who were initially suspicious of Trump. But so far, these groups have no functional role in Trump’s

political project, and now that he is in power, it seems unlikely that they will get one. However, if the unions manage to overcome their inertia and respond with militant strikes to Trump's attempts to finish them off, we may yet see Alt Right groups mobilizing as shock troops.

The more immediate issue for labor activists and the Left is how to win back the workers lost to Trump. This is particularly urgent considering the fact that not only non-unionized workers voted for him, but also 40% of workers in unions. Trump will provide much-needed assistance in this regard as it becomes clear that he either will not or cannot deliver on his economic promises. First of all, his appointment of major Wall Street investors to key posts in his administration as well as his plans to fund infrastructure repair by privatizing roads and bridges indicate that Trump is more interested in benefiting his own class than the people responsible for his electoral margin of victory. His failure so far to oppose Paul Ryan's plans to privatize Medicare and otherwise roll back the public sector suggest that Trump has either capitulated to the Republican neoliberalism he lambasted on the campaign trail or has been in clandestine agreement with it all along. Finally Trump faces the likelihood that his plans for a major tax cut, his threat to engage in a trade war with China, and the probable return to recession sometime over the course of the next four years will result in an economic disaster, and so undermine his legitimacy with working-class voters.

This brings us to the second historical reversal in the Trump saga, although as a possibility rather than a certainty. The first task of European fascism was to destroy, not only trade union organizations, but the socialist and communist parties, newspapers, schools, athletic clubs and so on that, in the case of the German SPD, constituted a "state within the state." There are no such socialist or communist institutions in the United States. But Sanders' presidential campaign demonstrated that the basis exists for a viable socialist project in the same white workers who voted for Trump as well as the population under thirty of all races, which, by the way, also identifies itself in polling as working-class. If such a project is to emerge at long last in the United States, it will come from the continued efforts of Sanders and others to win control of the Democratic Party (even if only to walk out of it ultimately) and a dynamic popular movement of resistance to Trump's fascist policies, including the expulsion of undocumented immigrants. The unions will have an important role to play in both efforts provided they can break with the conformism and inertia of the past. If that turns out to be possible, they may help rebuild that "organizational link at the base between workers" without which socialism must remain a pipe dream.