

“Again.”

Greene County.

To get there you take I-87 south of Albany, a tricky highway in the wintertime and an unfortunate place for infrastructure. Roads crack from ice and neglect under the power of heavy weight engines going into the capitol region and repairs are scarce. Foreclosure signs dot the local estates and what is left of the downtown areas of Coxsackie and Athens seem like carcasses of old industry. The spirit of disrepair haunts Greene county in her abandoned houses, lots, office spaces, and like other former centers of development, the economic tailspin of the United States is not lost on the local inhabitants.

Similar to a lot of rural America, Greene county, within the boarder of a solid blue state and only miles away from the Albany democratic machine, voted for Donald J. Trump in the election of 2016. With the exception of Schenectady, every county surrounding Albany voted Trump. It should be no surprise the votes casted in these counties were overwhelmingly white, a reflection of the regional population, and mostly male. It should also be of no surprise that, not so long ago, Greene County and areas just like it, were once the backbone of the American consumerist and manufacturing state, now turned to ruin. The poor economic conditions created by capitalism over the last 50 years were appropriated by the right wing and led to the election of Donald Trump, who offered empty handed change to empty handed people.

“Make America great again.” To understand why the nostalgia President Trump evokes in his rhetoric is so successful, it is paramount to understand why white, working class America

is so attracted with “again.” In 1975 the real median personal income in the United States was 23,900 dollars, according to the federal reserve (FRED). Adjusted for inflation, that 23,900-dollar value is a 2018 equivalent of 111,000 dollars. Today the median is less than half that (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics). Wages decreased, jobs left, benefits were cut and all the while the cost of living rapidly increased. That is of course not to say all Americans were thriving before the 80s. Poverty was still rampant in large parts of America; African Americans still did not live with the same socio-economic privileges as white Americans and income inequality and unemployment was still higher in black neighborhoods. And those who lived as outsiders in America; those who opposed American wars overseas, people of color, feminists, political dissenters, domestic worker, immigrants ect did not receive the same status as the white, middle class.

Richard Wolff, professor of economics and founder of *Democracy at work*, a “non-profit advocating for worker cooperatives and democratic workplaces for a stronger, democratic economic system”, is an open critic of capitalism. In a lecture at the Levy Economics Institute, Dr. Wolff described to his audience of intellectuals and fellow professors, the reason for the downfall of American capitalism. “Before 1980 about 18% of U.S jobs were in manufacturing... now that number is 8%.” (Dr. Wolff, April 22, 2016). Capitalists and wealthy business owners are rewarded for finding cheaper labor abroad. Cheaper labor means more money, even if it is at the expense of factory workers in Detroit and Baltimore. What Dr. Wolff expounds on is the other side of the decline of manufacturing in the United States; automatization. Corporations will automatize human labor to be more efficient than a person and cost nothing in the long run. What automation means for industrial workers is mass layoffs. When Donald Trump says he will bring

back manufacturing jobs in the face of automation he is lying. Robots are much more efficient and if the United States refuses to embrace the age of automation it will fall drastically behind other nations that do. What automation should mean for American workers is more paid vacation, higher wages for increased productivity and increased benefits. The goal of manufacturing is for consumers to buy what is being made. It makes much more sense for a nation to have a population that can afford what is being produced rather than to automatize and layoff to find another county to sell in. The issue is these changes would take away from the pockets of the very wealthy who hoard their money on off shore accounts and instead will go to workers who spend it. For this reason, the president will not encourage any such policy correcting this immediate flaw of capitalism and will go after immigrants and bad trade deals to explain the open wound.

Eleven days before the primary election began in Iowa, Donald Trump outlined his political platform on Sean Hannity's fox show. The theme of his discussion was assigning the downfalls of American capitalism with foreign malevolency. "Mexico is killing us at the border, they are also killing us at trade... we have companies that are leaving the United States, I mean they are leaving, major wonderful companies, because of taxes," The president to be professed, "we will bring our jobs back into this country" and that "We are going to stop being the country that gets pushed around" (Fox, Mar 9, 2016). In an article for BillMoyers.com, Wolff wrote, "Donald Trump, like Obama, once again offered hope for change to those hurt over the last 40 years" (Dr. Wolff, Nov. 16, 2016). Trump seduced white America, while vilifying outsiders as colluding with anti-American values, by convincing people he could offer them the same socioeconomic privileges they had 50 years ago.

The issue with Trump's political platform is that it does not identify the major contradictions of capitalism. Trump creates strawmen to convince his supporters the issue is not capitalism—the system that enriched him and the rest of the one percent—but rather a string of unrelated political scapegoats. In Trump's presidential campaign announcement, he asserted, “When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're not sending you. They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with them. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people” (Schwartz, Ian). In her book, *White Trash*, Nancy Isenberg details the complex history of class and racism and how these two principals have been at the heart of the American system of control, “Poor whites are still taught to hate—but not to hate those who are keeping them in line” (Isenberg, 315). This insight is certainly reflected in the president's fervent hatred of immigrants. President Trump supporter, Fox news commentator and employee of Donald Trump super PAC, “Great American Alliance”, Tomi Lahren, tweeted, “Bum-rushing the border is a CHOICE and has consequences. Watching the USA FINALLY defend our borders was the HIGHLIGHT of my Thanksgiving weekend” (Nov 26, 2018), after asylum seekers, trying to enter the U.S, were tear gassed at the border.

In April of 2017, 1,470 economists wrote an open letter to the President, explaining the immense value of immigration to re-ignite a damaged economy. They cited, “Immigration brings diverse skill sets that keep our workforce flexible, help companies grow, and increase the productivity of American workers” (3 Aug. 2017). Yet despite this, despite Trump himself being the son of an immigrant, despite most Americans being descended from immigrants and asylum seekers, despite the prophetic words of Steinbeck, Sinclair and Jacob Riis who recorded the

struggles of migrants traveling huge distances to seek better lives for their children in different parts of America. Despite all of these things, Trump and the conservative right still seek to scapegoat the issue of immigration and highlight it as the reason for the economic failures of capitalism.

Trump re enforces a capitalist agenda by not blaming capitalism for its pit falls.

Companies left so they could pay poor people in faraway lands much less to do the same work.

The economic policy institute finds a nearly 700,000 net job loss to Mexico as of 2010, a country with a minimum wage of only \$4.71 (Puzzanghera, Jim, Dec. 2016). The centers of capitalism are shifting away from North America because capitalism has little thought for sustainability, it only cares about profit. Companies like General motors, who just this last month announced their plans to lay off more than 14,000 jobs in the United States and Canada, are concerned with their decline in sales, which can be attributed to joblessness and fleeting wages in the U.S.

The American right-wing blames taxes and democrats and immigrants and conspiracies for capitalism's short comings. Ben Shapiro, Harvard grad, writer, lawyer and political commentator on several media platforms including his YouTube channel, *The Ben Shapiro Show*, calls on Americans to reject any type of progressive agenda to help mend the wounds of capitalism. On *conservative talk radio*, Ben argued for the abolition of a minimum wage. The pundit stated that minimum wage laws destroyed incentive to work and all Americans need to do to be economically successful is "Graduate high school, don't have kids before marriage, get a regular job. You will be able to rise in the work world if you do these things" (Simeona, Michael. 2014). On the campaign trail, Donald Trump changed his minimum wage position, but settled on leaving the decision to the states. By not enacting federal legislation and allowing the

issue to be settled regionally, large parts of the U.S will not see wage increases. More right leaning regional governments, like Greene county and areas like it, will favor big business over government intervention. But There is no evidence to suggest corporations, in general, will equate wage compensation with productivity, like Shapiro says. Just because you work hard does not mean you will be paid well. According the economic policy institute, the gap between productivity and a typical worker's compensation has increased dramatically since 1973. While productivity rose rapidly over the last 50 years, wages fell or stagnated (*U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Aug. 2018*). Companies making billions, even trillions of dollars in profit, while wages for the working and middle-class fall, is a defining characteristic of capitalism and a shift away from the labor friendly reforms enacted during the Great Depression.

In 2016 I spent time behind the picket lines of the Momentive plant in Waterford, NY after workers went on strike. Workers at the plant walked out after Momentive industries proposed large cuts in health care, 401Ks and other benefits. The strikers were unionized and to my surprise at the time, mostly Trump supporters. In 2008 they voted for Obama, but after 8 years in office, their jobs are still being threatened and fear of outsourcing is constant. Donald Trump offered them a trip back before the 80s, when workers like them would be making enough to support a wife and kids, own a house, have no debt and live comfortably. Coincidentally, before Reagan and the political shift to the right side of the aisle, union membership in manufacturing states like Michigan, Wisconsin, New York, Pennsylvania, and Washington state was much higher. 1972 saw all of those states boast membership above 30%. That number has since dropped to less than 20% and falling as the rest of the country saw even steeper drops in union participation in places like North Carolina where less then 3% of workers

belong to a union (Bui, Quoc Trung). “Unions represent all of the workers together... they have been, for at least two centuries, a mechanism to get higher wage and better working conditions” (Wolff, Richard). Unions challenge the structural imbalance of capitalism by heightening the status of the working class. In the last 50 years, union membership drastically declined and the working class suffered driving them to more and more fringe political solutions.

“America two dollars and twenty-seven cents January 17, 1956.”- Allen Ginsberg's poem, *America*, from which this line is drawn, replicates a frustrating feeling of forgottenness a lot of Americans held during the cold war. War after war, diplomatic crisis after crisis, every potential move the Soviets could make was covered by some paranoid news anchor or paper in the States. The poverty at home, the prejudice, the racism, the despair of poor, desperate Americans, was however left out of the nightly news. In 2018 it is a little different. Instead of Soviets it is “radical Islamists” and a perpetual war on drugs that covers up the neglect for the poverty in areas like Greene county or the economic depression in coal country or the desperate state of American inner cities or crumbling American infrastructure or the far-right shift of American politics.

Trump's heavy-handed manipulation of what has caused the decline of the “American success story” has taken the anger and rage of America's working class and pointed it away from unionizing, protesting and organizing social institution for the betterment of people's wellbeing. After the end of the American Civil War, the United States embarked on a revolutionary journey as freed slaves took over legislative offices in the post war south and for a short while transformed the power structure of the former slave states. The increased cost of living married to the rise of powerful corporations in the post war economy offering pitiful wages and awful

working conditions led American workers to form the first national labor union and working people began to organize rapidly. Howard Zinn has championed revising the epic of American history in his books to highlight the point of view of the working class, disenfranchised, people of color, women, immigrants and social and political dissenters. In his "People history of the United States", the post-civil war America is described as a time of massive social upheaval. From textile workers in Troy, New York, to share croppers around Mobile Alabama, all the way to the miners outside of Salt Lake City, people protested and organized for an eight-hour work day, a five-day work week, higher wages, workers compensation, safer working conditions and an end to corporate greed occupying the Government. Within a first few years after the Civil war ended, 3,200 workers walked out of textile mills in Massachusetts (Zinn, 241). In Chicago, 20,000 would march through the streets demanding "bread for the needy, clothing for the naked, and houses of rate homeless" (243). in 1877 alone 100,000 workers had gone on strike" (251), cities like St. Louis and Pittsburg saw city wide shutdowns orchestrated by working people's movements. It was a time when droves of Americans, trapped in cycles of poverty by a system designed to keep wages low, cost of living high and dissent under control began to rebel. All the while profits for the Carnegies and Rockefellers of the world skyrocketed. But the powers that be were patiently waiting on their heels for an opportunity to strike back and after federal troops pulled out of the south in the 1870s, their moment came. Jim Crow laws were enacted, forcing freed slaves out of positions of power and pitting Black against White. Anti-union laws were signed and as the nation readied itself for war with Spain, vocal dissenters of the government, including union organizers and progressive reformers, were locked up and silenced.

After the Civil war ended, the political revolution led by the working class and politically repressed, was thwarted by a counter revolution of the conservative leaning capitalist class. I urge you to consider we live in similar times. As the era of civil rights and Malcolm X and Dr. King and Unionization and antiwar/antigovernment protests came to a close, big cooperations, banks, the monied class, military and prison industrial complex saw their opportunity and began the counter revolution through anti-civil rights and labor legislation which gutted union membership and reversed the progress that had been made by the revolution of the 1960s. I urge you to consider the race bating of Donald Trump and the re-assurance to the working class of their economic safety under his administration is a façade. There is a dire need to control the anger of working-class America and point their frustration away from the tremendous flaws of capitalism.

The working class of America has been left to fester in the coming reality of their poverty. All around the world, far right “strongmen” figures have been growing in popularity. In Brazil it is Bolsonaro, the Philippine’s has its Duterte and we have our Trump. History gives us so many examples of progressive movements growing out of eras similar to ours, Radical republicans, muckrakers, International workers of the world, civil rights, SNCC; all were responses to hardship and oppression. Now it is crucial to organize the same institutions of resistance. The missing link Americans can’t seem to connect is that a lot of the same people who voted for Trump are under the same boot as those who support Black Lives Matter and Occupy Wall street, social justice, taxing the 1% and upholding social institutions like Medicare for all. What we are missing, from the anger and frustration in Greene county to the rancor and protests in East Harlem is, “the little screaming fact that sounds through all history: repression

works only to strengthen and knit the repressed”, John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*. That is only, of course, if we let it.

Works Cited:

Isenberg, Nancy. *White Trash*. Atlantic books, 2017.

Zinn, Howard. *A Peoples History of the United States: 1492-Present*. Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2005.

News, Fox. “Donald Trump Talks Bringing Jobs Back to America.” *YouTube*, YouTube, 9 Mar. 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=fpnnY5exStE.

Simeona, Michael. “AM 770 KTTH \$15 Minimum Wage Debate.” *YouTube*, YouTube, 15 Apr. 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=xfLx6XMdCiY.

NewsHour, PBS. “Trump's Fight against Federal Workers and the Health of Labor Unions.” *YouTube*, YouTube, 3 Sept. 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=W4HckXG9Oig

“CPI Inflation Calculator.” *U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics*, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm.

“Real Median Personal Income in the United States.” *FRED*, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, 13 Sept. 2017, fred.stlouisfed.org/series/MEPAINUSA672N#0.

Institute, Levy Economics. “Richard D. Wolff Lecture on Worker Coops: Theory and Practice of 21st Century Socialism.” *YouTube*, YouTube, 25 Apr. 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=a1WUKahMm1s&t=3s.

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, data.bls.gov/pdq/SurveyOutputServlet. “The Productivity–Pay Gap.” *Economic Policy Institute*, www.epi.org/productivity-pay-gap/.

Bui, Quoc Trung. “50 Years Of Shrinking Union Membership, In One Map.” *NPR*, NPR, 23 Feb. 2015, www.npr.org/sections/money/2015/02/23/385843576/50-years-of-shrinking-union-membership-in-one-map.

Schwartz, Ian. “Trump: Mexico Not Sending Us Their Best; Criminals, Drug Dealers And Rapists Are Crossing Border.” *Video | RealClearPolitics*, RealClearPolitics, [June 15th, 2016](http://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2015/06/16/trump_mexico_not_sending_us_their_best_criminals_drug_dealers_and_rapists_are_crossing_border.html), www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2015/06/16/trump_mexico_not_sending_us_their_best_criminals_drug_dealers_and_rapists_are_crossing_border.html.

“Open Letter from 1,470 Economists on Immigration.” *Equitable Growth*, 3 Aug. 2017, equitablegrowth.org/open-letter-from-1470-economists-including-me-on-immigration/.

“Capitalism Itself Is to Blame for Donald Trump – BillMoyers.com.” *BillMoyers.com*, 14 Nov. 2016, billmoyers.com/story/capitalism-blame-donald-trump/.

Puzzanghera, Jim. “These Three U.S. Companies Moved Jobs to Mexico. Here's Why.” *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, 19 Dec. 2016, www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-mexico-jobs-20161212-story.html.