Getting the job done

Forget identity politics. Jobs need to be at the heart of the Left's strategy to win back the working class

In December, the UK's Office of National Statistics concluded that support for leaving the EU was greatest in those areas that had experienced the least economic growth over the last two decades.

That such a conclusion should be news at all illustrates the problem facing progressives in the UK, EU and US: identity politics focused on immigration, culture and minority status has come to matter more to the Left than its historic emphasis on economics.

This is not to say that the Left's emphasis on LGBTQ rights, gender equality, ethnic minority rights and so on is off-putting to its traditional working-class voters (many of whom share progressive values with their middle-class compatriots). Rather the Left has of late paid insufficient attention to the most important concern of many blue-collar voters: their job and their livelihood.

Working-class voters have dropped their support for left-wing parties, because they correctly perceive the priorities of those parties shifting against their interests and values.

Those in the Left's traditional heartlands have reacted accordingly. Their electoral cry of 'you don't care about us!' has changed the landscape of Western politics dramatically.

The political Right is dominant. More worrying still, far-right and anti-establishment forces such as Donald Trump, Alternative for Germany and Marine Le Pen have come to the forefront, claiming to be a voice for ordinary folk let down by mainstream politics.

To my mind, working-class voters have by and large dropped their traditional support for parties on the Left, because they correctly perceive the priorities of those parties shifting against their interests and values.

The alliance between working-class voters and the Left sustained its first major blow in the 1990s, when the supposedly progressive administrations of Bill Clinton in the US, Tony Blair in the UK and Gerhard Schroeder in Germany started to embrace right-wing economic orthodoxy. The idea behind their 'Third Way' was to create higher growth, which in turn would increase tax revenues, providing more money for public services.

Simply put, these administrations prioritised deregulation, labour market flexibility and low taxes while actively promoting globalisation. (The idea was to create higher growth, which in turn would increase tax revenues, providing more money for public services.)

By so doing they diminished the power of trade unions, reduced work place democracy, undermined collective bargaining efforts and prioritised welfare over work. Reforms led to an increase in low-paid, low-skilled service sector jobs, coupled with a dramatic reduction in job security. Political parties that embraced the Third Way saw a steady erosion of their working-class support.

'A fundamental lack of ambition'

The politics of the Third Way was liberal in its social attitudes and its economics. It attempted to buy off low-pay, low-education voters with ever more complex and expensive welfare policies.

For example, the Clinton Administration boosted wages for low income workers using an 'Earned Income Tax Credit', rather than pursuing a political economy that would lead to actual higher wages for these workers.

This belied a fundamental lack of ambition. The Left had abandoned its belief that economics and political power could be rebalanced in the interests of those with little wealth or voice. Instead, it embraced a defeatist, 'There Is No Alternative' politics towards market-shaped globalisation.

The problem only worsened as 2007's Great Recession set in, with the Left tying itself in knots over the question of what caused the crash, and how best to respond

Whereas the Right reached for austerity, the Left remained trapped in the shadow of its Third Way predecessors. It preferred to tough talk on spending cuts, rather than agitate for a different form of political

economy in the wake of the crash.

Former US President Barack Obama's administration is an interesting example of both the Left's hesitancy to criticise modern capitalism and also its potential success in so doing.

In the wake of the 2008 crash, the Obama Administration balked at publicly arguing for a more balanced approach to the economy, rather than an all-out embrace of the free market. As a result, it failed to highlight signature policies such as the stimulus and the auto-industry bailout.

However by the 2012 re-election campaign it chose to embrace a more strident politics and promote these policies in a strategy that proved both effective and popular, and ultimately helped deliver the president's re-election.

Too much change, too quickly

Parallel to all this, left-wing governments in Europe and America began to embrace internationalism – increased political and economic cooperation between countries.

In the UK, the Blair government decided to grant full and immediate freedom of movement to new EU member states in 2004, without any transition period. (To my mind, this decision was the single most important factor in Brexit). In mainland Europe, internationalism came in the form of support for an open door refugee policy.

Too often, working-class voters' legitimate concerns about the scale or speed of change in their community are dismissed as inaccurate at best or racist at worst.

Both of these approaches increased economic and social anxiety among many working-class voters, who traditionally voted for parties on the Left.

Progressives' response to such fears has been both patronising and wholly inadequate. Too often, working-class voters' legitimate concerns about the scale or speed of change in their community are dismissed as inaccurate at best or racist at worst.

In Germany, the Left chose to focus almost exclusively on the economic fallout of migration, rather than confront the complex challenge of working-class voters' cultural concerns about the speed of change within their communities.

How the Left's staunchest supporters became a 'basket of deplorables'

For as repeated academic studies have shown, traditional working-class voters who now support anti-establishment politics such Brexit or Trump are as complicated in their political views as their middle-class brethren.

They may be Left-wing on the economy but worried about immigration, whilst still supporting gay marriage. But all too often, politicians on the Left dismiss their concerns, categorising such voters as 'deplorable' (as US presidential candidate Hillary Clinton memorably did in 2016).

Buttressing this casual classism has been rising support among the Left's intelligentsia for a 'progressive majority' theory of future electoral glory.

This supposes that the politically problematic working-class voters of the past can be replaced with a new coalition of university educated, middle-class voters as well as ethnic minority voters, LGBTQ voters and young voters all of whom are united by their social liberalism and internationalism.

But as the bold experiments of the Remain campaign in the UK or Hillary Clinton's campaign against Trump have proven, this is a risky strategy. Strategically, this is because in the last decade or so the Left has seen an inversion of its core support.

The 20th century model of a reliable working-class base supplemented by middle-class swing voters has now shifted to a situation in which middle-class voters are the base and the working-class voters make up the crucial swing vote.

The Clinton campaign coined the tagline 'Stronger Together', emphasising inclusivity and multiculturalism as the tenets of a healthy society. The Left now needs to apply this maxim to itself, by seeking to reunite its liberal, progressive middle-class electorate with its historic working-class base.

The means by which this should be achieved are many and varied, but at it forefront should be a return to economics.

Putting workers front and centre

The Left should cease to view itself as a manager of globalisation, a passive actor who merely observes the hyper-capitalism of multinationals like Amazon or Apple who prioritise profits over workers right to an astonishing degree.

Rather, it should champion the interests of workers over companies. Instead of seeking to tame the worst excesses of capitalism through welfare benefits or the much-hyped Universal Basic Income, progressives should aim to increase workers' agency.

This means including workers on boards, strengthening trade unions and collective bargaining arrangements, and moving from the minimum wage to the living wage as the new pay floor. We also need to promote regional banks and reverse the over-emphasis on financial services in the economy.

What's more, the Left should change its spending priorities, emphasising public spending for infrastructure and long term investment over ever-more funding for public services like healthcare and middle-class oriented university education. Vocational education, so often an afterthought by governments of all political persuasions, should be at the heart of higher education spending.

The advantages of such an approach include stronger contributions to GDP growth as well as public spending legacies that are harder to reverse by successor right-wing governments.

If left-wing governments and parties are serious about increasing equality of opportunity, they should focus less on welfare, and instead invest heavily in early years interventions such as universal childcare coverage.

All of this is necessary, but probably insufficient, for a new marriage between the Left and the working class. But it's a start. The economy is the centre of gravity of politics. The Left should seize it and by so doing prove it cares about workers again.



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