### FEBRUARY 5, 2017

# [Resistance to Trump will separate progressives from neoliberals](http://stansburyforum.com/resistance-to-trump-will-separate-progressives-from-neoliberals/)

## BY [PETER OLNEY](http://stansburyforum.com/author/peter-olney/) AND [RAND WILSON](http://stansburyforum.com/author/randwilson/)

*… progressives must find their voice by systematically deconstructing the Trump program on issues like jobs, health care and retirement security.*

On a cold day in Washington, D.C., on January 20, Trump was sworn in as the 45th President of the United States. A ceremony that seemed very far-fetched as recently as three months ago confirmed what was considered unthinkable: the billionaire con artist and proto-fascist is President, and his hands are now on the levers of police and military power of the American empire.

While his inauguration was marked by cultural defections; only a handful of artists of any consequence were willing to perform at his ceremony, even as president-elect he has already wielded the power of his “tweets” prior to his swearing in.

In his inauguration speech Trump boldly denounced the elites and their politicians, many of whom were seated behind him on the stage, and said that his administration would be about the people and their prosperity. At his first press conference on January 11 he highlighted three issues: jobs, the price of pharma drugs and veterans’ health care. These issues resonate with his base and particularly in the key states that gave him his electoral margin of victory. Yet the response of the press was distracted, focusing on Russia and his ties with Putin. This demonstrates the challenge we face: Trump is a walking outrage, but a skillful communicator who grasps the issues that resonate with many working class people.

A righteous and raucous [Women’s March](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/21/us/womens-march.html) of over 500,000 took place in Washington, D.C. the day after his inauguration, which by far eclipsed the crowd that celebrated his swearing-in ceremony. Women and their supporters descended on Washington, D.C., bused in from 48 states and flown in from Hawaii and Alaska. [Hundreds of other rallies](https://www.womensmarch.com/sisters) were held in other US cities with simultaneous marches in solidarity held around the world including at the Pantheon in Rome.

The huge size of these protests bodes well for a vigorous movement. Many more marches and protests will surely follow against attacks on immigrants and people of color, and in defense of the Standing Rock pipeline protestors and the Black Lives Matter movement that has forcefully targeted racist police attacks on the black community.

While these battles must be joined and supported, in order to really sustain a much longer-term struggle, progressives must find their voice by systematically deconstructing the Trump program on issues like jobs, health care and retirement security.

A well-organized response to these and other important issues falls squarely on the chief organization of the working class: the trade unions. Yet instead of aligning with the popular resistance, many national union leaders have done nothing but cozy up to the new president. The task of union resistance will hopefully be taken up by the six national unions that supported Senator Bernie Sanders and his “socialist” campaign for the Democratic Party nomination. These unions (APWU, ATU, CWA, ILWU, NNU, and UE) have the resources and resolve to carry a message of popular and economic democracy to the heartland and explicitly challenge the neo-liberal orthodoxy that permeates the AFL-CIO and so much of the labor movement. Most already support Sen. Sanders’ new formation, [Our Revolution](https://ourrevolution.com/), that will engage in electoral politics at the city, county, state and national level by running anti-corporate candidates against neo-liberal Democrats in primaries or non-partisan races.

A proposed “beyond Bernie” labor formation can also reach out to more than 100 local unions that supported Bernie and the nearly 50,000 union members who publicly endorsed him. It has the potential to attract many more national and local unions and will hopefully result in a working class-led political coalition that can offer a real alternative to the Trump agenda and the tepid pro-corporate response of many Democratic elected officials.

The challenge is immense. One only needs to look at Senator Corey Booker as an illustration of the bankruptcy of the corporate Democrats. Senator Booker, the first African American Senator from New Jersey eloquently broke protocol with his Senate colleagues and testified against the racist nominee for Attorney General, Senator Jeff Sessions. Booker detailed the racist offenses of Sessions as an Alabama prosecutor and a US Senator. But in the same week that he rose valiantly in a Senate committee hearing against Sessions, he also rose to defend the pharmaceutical industry from the importation of low cost, generic drugs from Canada! He [voted against legislation](https://theintercept.com/2017/01/12/cory-booker-joins-senate-republicans-to-kill-measure-to-import-cheaper-medicine-from-canada/) sponsored by Senator Sanders that was a concrete step to fight price gouging by big pharma and a brilliant political move to expose the hypocrisy of Trump’s rhetoric.

Passage of the amendment would have been a huge benefit to the multiracial working class. Even a handful of Republican Senators voted for it. Yet the bill was defeated because twelve Democrats — including Sen. Booker — voted against it. Its defeat exposes and discredits Booker and his neo-liberal colleagues and further boosts the demagogic, phony populism of Trump. The election showed that America’s working class can be easily seduced. They are fed up with neo-liberal rhetoric and the main stream Democrat’s empty promises. Going forward it remains to be seen if labor and the left can meet the Trump challenge with a convincing program to truly advance working class interests.

•••

**First published in Italian in** [Sinistra Sindicale](http://www.sinistrasindacale.it/)

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

#### Peter Olney

Peter Olney is retired Organizing Director of the ILWU. He has been a labor organizer for 40 years in Massachusetts and California. He has worked for multiple unions before landing at the ILWU in 1997. For three years he was the Associate Director of the Institute for Labor and Employment at the University of California.

#### Rand Wilson

Rand Wilson has worked as a union organizer and labor communicator for more than twenty five years and is  currently an organizer with SEIU Local 888 in Boston. Wilson was the founding director of Massachusetts Jobs with Justice.  Active in electoral politics, he ran for state Auditor in a campaign to win cross-endorsement (or fusion) voting reform and establish a Massachusetts Working Families Party.  He is President of the Center for Labor Education and Research, and is on the board of directors of the ICA Group, the Local Enterprise Assistance Fund and the Center for the Study of Public Policy. [View all posts by Rand Wilson →](http://stansburyforum.com/author/randwilson/)

1. [Mike Miller](http://www.organizetrainingcenter.org/) said on [February 5, 2017 at 2:47 pm](http://stansburyforum.com/resistance-to-trump-will-separate-progressives-from-neoliberals/#comment-160278):

Questions for/Problems in Olney and Wilson:

“Trump is a walking outrage, but a skillful communicator who grasps the issues that resonate with many working class people… progressives must find their voice by systematically deconstructing the Trump program on issues like jobs, health care and retirement security.”

Is there more to Trump support than his grasp of “issues that resonate with many working class people”? Isn’t there anger, indeed rage, that goes beyond the rational calculation of self-interest, and is born of frustration and marginalization? “Progressives” haven’t been listening to alienated white working class, lower middle-class and other people for some time now. Isn’t that where they need to start? As Carey McWilliams, Jr once said, “politics is with whom and for what, and in precisely that order.”

“The huge size of these protests bodes well for a vigorous movement.” It might. And, don’t we need to pay attention to the fact that a majority of white women voted for Trump? Does it say something to the question ‘Whom do the demonstrators represent?’ that a Baltimore #BLM leader ran for city council there and received only 2% of the vote, coming in last in his race?

The black vote demonstrates several things that should tell us more than issues is involved in whether, and how, people vote: African-American turnout was low, including in states where there was voter suppression. Among those who voted, only the most youthful section of that vote was for Sanders. Endorsement of Sanders by a variety of new black movement figures and celebrities didn’t seem to make much difference. What is to be learned from these facts?

Is “aligning with the popular resistance” the principal alternative to “cozying up to the new president”? Perhaps that alignment leads to stances on issues that isolate progressives from elements of the constituency they need to be in relationship with. If you style and/or content alienate them, can you develop that relationship?

I know that “carry a message of popular and economic democracy to the heartland and explicitly challenge…neo-liberal orthodoxy” is dear to your hearts, but is that really the language that speaks to people with whom we need to be in a conversation? Does “carrying a message to them” make them consumers, continuing their status as objects of politics (only in this case, objects of the good guys) rather than participants in, and co-creators of, it?

There’s now a frenzy of “exposing Trump hypocrisy.” He relishes a lot of it: red meat for his constituency. The problem we are now in is deeper than Trump, though he is its most alarming feature. The problem includes his successful appeal to resentment by people who feel ignored because they have been ignored; who are told one thing by candidates before elections only to experience something else after they get elected; who are the object of polling, focus groups, direct mail and door-to-door solicitation—none of which engages them directly to act in their own interests and on their own values by doing anything more than voting, clicking a computer key or occasionally being part of a “demo”.

“[E]xposing and discrediting” Democrat “neoliberals” is necessary but not sufficient. “Going forward” requires far more than “labor and the left [adopting] a convincing program to truly advance working class interests”. It begins with listening and developing relationships, an orientation that has been missing now for some time. The roots of progressive isolation from constituencies crucial to its success are deep. The seeds that led to them were planted in the 1960s. It will take a while to dig them up.

Mike Miller, February 5, 2017.