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I Ain't Afraid of No Trump

by Vincent Kelley on July 6, 2016

MIT linguist Noam Chomsky and Bard College music professor John Halle have recently written a crisp professorial defense of Lesser Evil Voting, or LEV, for the 2016 United States presidential election. The LEV strategy advocates voting for Hillary Clinton in swing states, or states in which a vote could potentially break a tie between Clinton and Donald Trump, while permitting voters to vote for a third party candidate or not vote in other states.

The LEV argument is far from a new one, but Chomsky and Halle's piece provides perhaps one of its pithiest and clearest justifications. Their method and reasoning therefore deserve a somewhat detailed response. I do not want to rehearse or defend, as others have done, any of the particular arguments against LEV that Chomsky and Halle anticipate in their article. Rather, I want to unveil the unstated premises and class perspective of their argument in order to reject the LEV strategy and suggest a way forward outside the confines of liberal democracy.

In short, Chomsky and Halle base their argument on the utilitarian principle of harm reduction. For them, to not vote for Clinton in a swing state will increase Trump's chances of winning the presidential election *and*, they assert, will drastically increase human suffering as a result of Trump's reactionary policies. Halle and Chomsky thus assert that those on the left who refuse to vote for Clinton in a swing state are complicit in the deleterious consequences that will emerge from a Trump presidency, just as they anecdotally blame the "ultra-left faction of the peace movement" for the "senseless death" caused by the Nixon administration.

This logic rests on a number of unstated assumptions about this election in particular and the American political climate in general. For one, Chomsky and Halle place great emphasis on the “consequences” of a Trump presidency in comparison to a Clinton one, which assumes that they have insight into what both of these administrations would look like and how they would stack up against one another. In particular, they implicitly claim to have a clear picture of life under a Trump presidency. Indeed, in order to demonstrate just how terrible a Trump presidency would be, Chomsky and Halle provide a long list of reactionary positions that Trump has articulated during his campaign with regard to the environment, immigrants, social services, and minorities.

By way of this method, Chomsky and Halle make two severe errors that are fatal to their argument in defense of LEV. First, they base their knowledge on Trump’s fickle rhetoric and completely ignore Clinton’s empirical policy history. This idealist turn to discourse over factual policies is especially peculiar coming from Chomsky, who has effectively built his popular social critique on a privileging of the latter over the former. Second, they obscure the fact that their fundamental moral adherence to *lesser* evil voting is premised on a *comparison* between two evils. But instead of comparing the prospects of a Trump presidency to a Clinton one, Chomsky and Halle choose to exclusively focus on Trump, leaving the more certain outcomes of a Clinton presidency hidden behind the menace of Trump’s language. Indeed, they very well could have mentioned Clinton’s actual record of supporting and implementing objectively imperialist, racist, anti-working class, anti-immigrant, and environmentally destructive policies, but instead choose the path of intellectual opportunism by obfuscating the comparative character of their argument.

It is in response to the pro-capitalist policy program epitomized by Clinton that Trump has gained a popular base. In particular, Trump has come out strongly against the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), calling it “a rape of our country.” NAFTA was signed into law by none other than Bill Clinton in 1993 and was, according to the Economic Policy Institute, “the door through which

American workers were shoved into the neoliberal global labor market,” resulting in the loss of 700,000 U.S. jobs coupled with decreased wages and benefits for American workers. Despite these facts, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has been one of the “leading drivers” of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which has been called “NAFTA on steroids,” speaking in favor of the trade agreement at least 45 times. Trump’s combative rhetoric against both NAFTA and the TPP has won him a working class base that is rightfully fed up with the Clintons’ central role in orchestrating these destructive trade agreements. It is these kinds of facts that Chomsky and Halle do not want to confront in their comparisons between Trump and Clinton.

Another central claim in Chomsky and Halle’s defense of the LEV strategy is the negative impact a Trump victory would have on the ostensibly Sanders-inspired left “movement,” which they hesitantly say “seems to be materializing.” If leftists refuse to support the LEV strategy, they contend, the left will be rightly criticized for betraying the populations certain to be most harmed by a Trump presidency. Besides once again skipping the necessary step of demonstrating that Clinton will harm these populations less than Trump would and opportunistically using undefined “victimized” people to bolster their claim, this argument suffers from a gross misreading of the current political context in the United States. Most fundamentally, it assumes that *the left* actually has the potential for political power that would lead it, if Trump were elected, to lose masses of prospective allies due to its refusal to vote for Clinton. The much soberer reality is that the American left is far too weak to bring these ever elusive converts into its fold no matter how it votes or doesn’t vote in November. While this *left* has been busy calling out Trump’s bigoted rhetoric and attacking his seemingly hate-filled supporters, Trump has bolstered his racism and xenophobia with a call to turn the GOP into a “worker’s party” for justifiably angry white working class audiences who have been hit hard by NAFTA and fear another Clintonite assault in the form of the TPP.

It is hard to remember if or when anyone in the left intelligentsia, which has

almost completely abandoned class politics, has called for anything resembling a worker's party, let alone felt the need to talk to and learn from workers in order to build a working class led movement. One would think that Chomsky and Halle would be aware of the left's role in creating the conditions for Trump's popularity by failing to provide a progressive alternative for the white working class, but it seems that this kind of self-reflection is too much to ask. Halle, who has been a trenchant critic of race-first identity politics, reverts to identitarian banalities about "white skin privilege" within the "radical left" to defend himself against critics who might actually be interested in combating white racism within the working class as opposed to ferociously defending a lesser evil vote for what is, in reality, the more "effective evil" of Clinton and the Democratic Party.

White workers can certainly be bigoted, but it is opposition to policies like NAFTA and the TPP, not simply an identification with Trump's xenophobia and racism, that provide the material basis for support of his campaign. I know one white working class family in my hometown of Eugene, Oregon that does not have enough money to buy drawing paper for their 11-year-old daughter, whose interest in artwork is one of the only things keeping her afloat while she is out of school for behavior problems. Every workday, her father drives the family's car to a small town outside of Eugene to work his low-paying job as a manual laborer on the railroads and her mother's physical disability and insufficient money to pay regular bus fares keeps the rest of the family homebound. It is these kinds of material conditions among the white working class that Donald Trump is speaking to with his call for a "worker's party."

For example, during a May rally in Eugene, Trump told the crowd that "We have people that are great people ... that haven't had a wage increase in 18 years. They're making effectively less money today than they made 18 and 20 years ago," and went on to call for a return of jobs to the U.S. and a minimum wage above \$15 an hour. At the rally, a 56-year-old maintenance worker at a fruit processing plant said he was drawn to Trump's call to "bring back jobs" and a middle-aged woman who came with two friends said that she wanted someone who would "stand up for

the working class.” For years, the left has failed to talk to people like this and is now facing the consequences.

These material roots do not, of course, only impact the white working class in the U.S., whose predicament I touched on above, but are international in scope. A friend from an indigenous community in Mexico recently told me how NAFTA directly impacted her largely agricultural community in Oaxaca. Flooded with cheap foodstuffs from the U.S. in the wake of NAFTA, the farmers in her community were unable to compete and many have now moved to the U.S. where they work as migrant farm laborers. These workers, who make up one of the most vulnerable sections of the U.S. working class, were forced off their land as a direct result of NAFTA. As Halle laments what Trump will do to the “most vulnerable members of society,” the “Hispanic Americans” whom he tokenizes to justify a lesser evil vote for Clinton know very well that it was policies like NAFTA, signed into law by Bill Clinton, that make them vulnerable to Trump’s anti-immigrant fervor in the first place. Rather than address the Clintonite material roots of Trump’s right-wing ideology, Chomsky and Halle choose to obscure this alliance of evils and make Trump into the greater evil who must be opposed at all costs.

To oppose the LEV strategy advocated by Chomsky and Halle is not to be an ultra-leftist. In fact, at this political moment in the U.S., the immediate task is not revolution but, rather, the slow, tedious, and demanding process of building an autonomous working class movement. It is only through the construction of such a movement that we can win reforms that do not devolve into reformism and lay the foundation for revolution against the capitalist system as a whole. Organizations like Workers Struggle, Speak Out Now, and the Laundry Workers Center are constructing a kind of movement that can win reforms for workers that build class power toward revolution rather than validate incremental reformism. What we need is a combative movement that is capable of fighting, challenging, and ultimately defeating capitalism.

The question that confronts us today is as daunting as it is simple: is capitalism worth keeping alive? For Chomsky and Halle, the answer will always be an implicit

“yes” because the moment will never be *quite* right for revolution. While we are, indeed, far from a revolutionary moment today, this should not be used as an excuse to postpone building an autonomous movement led by the working class that is capable of bringing about that moment as soon as possible. To borrow one of Chomsky and Halle’s favorite words, the *consequences* of failing to defeat capitalism are too great for the people and the planet to bear.

4 responses to “I Ain’t Afraid of No Trump”



Lee says:

July 6, 2016 at 6:20 pm

Great piece. I enjoyed the commentary and am glad that folks are offering a critical analysis of the LEV. There never seems to be a “right time” to challenge capitalism. But you lay out an argument explaining just why it’s so important to be principled and convicted in our goals.



Anonymous says:

July 7, 2016 at 11:02 am

I view The Donald as a completely unknown quantity – no telling what he might do if he were to attain the office. (Clearly, this is a fear harbored by the repug “elites”, who are so afraid of the potentially-liberal positions that The Donald might adopt that they want him nowhere near the Oval Office.)

OTOH, The \$hill’s well-documented history, statements, and policy positions leave no doubt whatever regarding the range of outcomes should she attain the Presidency. We know exactly what we are going to get from her, and it ain’t gonna be pretty — (“bend over” –)



Robert Allen says:

July 7, 2016 at 11:56 am

Agree with this article entirely, but would add that Trump's use of "working class" rhetoric is straight out of Neo Nazism, giving the lie to the idea floated by ultraleftists that "things that have failed in the past (such as trade unionism, Marxism, socialist rhetoric) can't be revived and so new efforts must be made from scratch". We can't reinvent the unions let alone socialism, but they can reinvent Nazism? There is "nothing new under the bourgeois sun", to paraphrase another blast from the past, Ecclesiastes 1:9, An autonomous worker's party, yes, -but we must build on, not discard, what organization we do have, however corrupt and deformed it has become. Only in struggle will our true allies begin to emerge, and labor "misleaders" be swept aside. Also we must call things by their right names- it is true that both Clinton and Trump are bourgeois capitalist supporting candidates, but we cannot let the rightists float their best lie, that both parties are "corrupt" and only a strongman can save us, etc., obscuring real social relations from the masses, herding them toward neofascism.



AlphaLop says:

July 10, 2016 at 8:35 pm

Excellent and well thought out piece.

You should cross post this over at caucus99percent.com (I was led to this blog from a link there.)

I am quite sure it would be warmly received and commented on.

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