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Mindy Thompson Fullilove and Rodrick Wallace Reflect on Industry Workers' Role in Election Results

In this Presidential Administration, we have already seen an unprecedented in the roll-back and dismantling of environmental protections and human rights. Tishman Center Affiliated Faculty reflect on the environmental and social justice impacts of the new Presidency from the perspectives of their research, practice, and passion.

Listening to the Message

Drs. Mindy Thompson Fullilove and Rodrick Wallace

Since the inauguration of Donald Trump as President of the United States of America, we have been besieged with executive orders tearing at banking regulations, immigration from some Muslim countries, and the Affordable Care Act. At the same time, we have been watching a series of Cabinet appointments of people hostile to every aspect of “public” life, from public schools to public housing to public assembly. The threat to democracy is very real and many have vowed to resist, to maintain the gains of the Obama administration. That stance of resistance overlooks

the fact that the Trump vote included an element of protest centered on very deep problems that President Obama's administration did not address, in particular the struggles of those who used to have good jobs in industry. The emerging analysis of the election results highlights the role of those without a college degree. Fifty-two percent of them voted for Donald Trump, and only 44% for Hillary Clinton. Why did they vote that way? It turns out that, while a high school education used to be enough to get a decent job in a factory and support a family, those jobs have vanished, leaving former factory workers in the limbo of retail and service jobs that pay too poorly to make ends meet, have few protections for workers, and carry few benefits. Even those jobs have been hard to come by since the recession, which has lingered longest for those at the bottom of the educational ladder. The loss of industrial jobs correlates with rates of hypertension, diabetes, obesity, opioid addiction and concentration of wealth. Though African Americans are suffering from these problems at higher rates than whites, whites are experiencing substantial trouble. Meanwhile, workers in the knowledge economy have higher levels of education, live in different parts of the country, have fared better through the recession, and are

grappling with substantially different problems from those that affect the post-industrial workers. Indeed, the knowledge workers and the post-industrial workers are socially isolated from one another, leading to serious alienation, which was expressed in the voting booth. This leaves us with two problems that must be addressed.

Problem 1: How are we to solve the problems of post-industrial workers?

The candidates agreed that rebuilding our infrastructure is a way to begin to emerge from crisis, and we have enough infrastructure decay to keep busy for a long time. But this needs to be accompanied by the rebuilding of the industrial sector of our economy. This requires shifting from military spending to a peace economy. To reboot the industrial sector, we will need highly educated people, unburdened by painful school loans. Free college tuition through the master's degree will give our economy the same kind of boost the GI Bill did in the aftermath of World War II. Every post-industrial worker should be offered free education and unemployment benefits to make attending college possible.

Problem 2: How do we bridge the gap between two sectors of workers – the knowledge workers and the post-industrial workers?

Social isolation and social instability have destroyed the bonds that should hold the parts of society together. Gentrification, for example, not only pushes poorer people out of their homes so that knowledge workers can move in, but also creates animosity between the two groups of workers. Investment in “third spaces” – community centers, parks, recreation, and social activity – can rebuild ties, helping people get to know one another. Based on this analysis we believe that we must push for a program of:

- Free education through the master’s degree, with unemployment benefits for post-industrial workers who are ready to go back to school;
- Investment in rebuilding the industrial sector of our economy; and
- Investment in “third spaces” that can rebuild ties among the splintered parts of our nation

Much is at stake in the coming years,
but we can't simply defend what we
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