

THE UNKNOWN TRUMP VOTER

Many of us have tended to think of the voting public that elected Donald Trump as a bunch of unwashed thugs and undereducated yokels. We visualize them as almost all like the people that the media shows at his rallies, wearing MAGA hats and cheering every word and inane phrase that emanates from the podium. If we think that these are the mass of voters that elected him, we're in for a rude awakening.

While these are the visible tip of the proverbial iceberg, the giant mass of discontent fueling that candidacy lies under the surface and elected our current president. That iceberg, if not identified and attended to, could sink the American Titanic governmental vessel.

So who are these unseen and unheard voters?

I think that it has its roots back in the 1950's and in the steel mills of the Rust Belt. This was at the forefront of modernization and new processes that involved electronics and mechanization. United States Steel and Bethlehem Steel wanted to institute changes in the smelting and rolling of steel which involved modern techniques and machines to expedite the production and lower the cost of steel product in the United States. The steelworker's union vehemently resisted these changes, because it would have significantly reduced the number of workers necessary to turn out the product. Since the steel companies then couldn't compete in price with overseas producers (including major shipping costs), they lost business and eventually the steel industry shrank to a shadow of its former glory. Many towns lost their major employer and became almost ghost towns. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and Johnstown, Ohio have preserved a fraction of their previous steel plants as a museum of rusting reminders to their not-so-ancient past.

This inability of the industry to change gave rise to the Korean and Chinese steel giants, as well as enervating their shipping industry to a massive scale. That also eventually dribbled down to the auto industry, where "cheap Japanese imports" became the rage with the American consumer. The consumer electronics industry equally fled overseas when American workers refused (and some would say rightly so) to work for the minuscule wages of foreign, third-world countries doing monotonous, boring work. In addition, the ignominy of having to train their foreign replacements to do their job before layoff created a large reservoir of resentment that lingers to this day.

To compound the problem, those companies that were doing the research and development here in the U.S. were hiring foreign nationals at a good clip to do high-end research after they graduated from U.S.

universities. They were just as qualified as an American scientist and worked for a fraction of the wages.

We can't blame the corporate structure for doing this. After all, they have to answer to their stockholders and produce profits for the owners. If they can produce the product cheaper somewhere else or use improvements in manufacturing processes that use fewer people to make them, it's understandable.

The problem is multi-fold. In the process of becoming a technological leader, we have also become so efficient in doing things that our job market has dwindled while our productivity has soared. This has led to the loss of (mostly) low and middle-class jobs on assembly lines and manufacturing plants.

In addition, those jobs that have survived or been created require more and more education and technical knowhow. The educational system is significantly behind in producing qualified workers for these skilled jobs. Not only that, many of the students for these skills just don't have the capabilities to complete the training because of either inept community schools or they are just personally lacking in basic abilities.

The easy political answer is to restrict or eliminate immigration or temporary foreign workers. The rationale is that if we kill the job market for foreigners here, that Americans will be hired to do the work and things will be hunky-dory. In the agricultural industry, this theory has been proven to be massively incorrect. The state of Alabama instituted intrusive identity checks, attempting to locate and deport illegal immigrants. Within months, local farmers were having to let crops rot in the fields because they could not attract American workers to do the backbreaking field work necessary. The low wages, coupled with the inability to pass drug tests limited the candidates. Those that did show up usually didn't last a week and just failed to show up for work at some point.

So we have the problem of a large number of people having been thrown out of work because of either foreign competition or advances in manufacturing processes that involved robots or improved techniques. They're not happy, being forced from a nice, middle-class assembly line job at Ford or Maytag, and winding up as a stock clerk at Walmart. Those that were lucky enough to find retraining available were competing with foreign green-card holders willing to work for less wages than an American worker was either able or willing to accept.

So here we are, with a large number of disaffected citizens who feel

that they have been left behind by their country, their former employers, and the political system that didn't save their jobs to foreign competition. They're not (for the most part) white nationalists, KKK members, or white supremacists. They're not undereducated rubes or the "basket of deplorables" that was referred to in the last presidential campaign.

They're the unemployed hard-rock coal miner in Appalachia who has been laid off because power companies switched to lower price natural gas or strip mines that produce coal more cheaply. They're the assembly line worker who stuffed washers into shock absorbers and was replaced by a robot. They're the office worker that produced financial reports and did secretarial work that has been replaced by a computer program. In recent months, they're the 'product picker' at a giant E-commerce warehouse that has been replaced with a robotic worker that runs twenty-four/seven and never has to take a lunch break or a sick day. They're the union construction trades worker that was replaced by an illegal immigrant that was willing to work for a third of what the prevailing wage is with no benefits. They're the hospitality worker (maids, cooks, janitors) that the same thing has happened to.

These are the 'basket of deplorables' that Donald Trump spoke to and appealed to. They responded to his promises of bringing their old jobs back and restoring their dignity. They are not the lunatic fringe of white nationalism or racist bigots. They are what used to be the heart of industrial America.

Unfortunately, the genie is out of the bottle and he's pissed. He ain't going to be going back into that bottle any time soon. The 'basket of deplorables' is only going to increase unless we do something to stem its growth in size. The manufacturing jobs aren't coming back and employers will always go to the lowest cost option.

We face an impending rise in our cost of living if we don't find a way to get the agricultural sector able to get the crops out of the fields and into our supermarkets. If we don't, then our ag sector will wither, and imports of produce and meat will skyrocket along with our cost of living.

So what do we do?

In the long term, we have to educate our workers to better serve the needs of the employment market, which is increasingly technology-driven. The number of those jobs, while increasing, will never replace the number of assembly line workers that have been displaced. In addition, not every worker is capable of understanding the technology that they will be required to maintain.

The same is true of science and technology research. Not every mind is capable of mastering the skills necessary to create a new software product or derive a new drug for curing cancer or Alzheimers.

This leaves us with a growing underclass of workers that are either ill-equipped (or unable) to deal with the job market of today, are under-educated, or are older workers that cannot be economically retrained to justify their remaining time in the workforce. What do we do with this group of citizens who, through no fault of their own, have seen their employability wither and die. It's a problem that is only going to get worse unless we find a way to resolve it.

People need work not only to make a living wage, but to validate their own self-worth. Without both of those, you have an angry, easily persuaded voter that will grasp at the first straw that a politician throws in their direction. This is the Trump voter that has stuck with him even through all the manure that has manifested through his actions and demeanor. In political terms, it's called populism, and it never ends well. Trump sang that siren song of jobs returning and America becoming great again. The manufacturing jobs that have been lost will never return. When the politicians fail to deliver, their base rises up and deposes them, usually in violent actions that destroy a society.

There are ways that governments use to allay the situation, at least temporarily.

We can increase the welfare state. This means paying that underclass enough to get by and not riot.

We can increase law enforcement to prevent the rioting. This usually migrates into authoritarian governments that take away law-abiding citizens rights in the name of keeping the peace. This, by the way, didn't work too well in the Watts riots or Ferguson, Missouri. It only goes so far.

We could recreate the CCC and the WPA of the great depression of the 30's. There will always be a need for workers to clear brush in the forests or create trails. We could de-technologize some functions of government such as street-sweeping and park maintenance. There are some places where technology has been employed just for technology's sake, and the human calculation has been ignored.

If we are to survive as a society, we have to solve this problem. If we don't, we will wind up as many other societies have, with revolution and anarchy when things get bad for the 'deplorables'. The French Revolution is a prime example, where the aristocracy ignored the needs of the citizenry and paid the price. Ancient Athens suffered the same fate, as did the later Roman Empire.

We gotta fix this.