

# From Neoliberalism to Neofascism

**Charles Levenstein<sup>1</sup>,  
Carlos Eduardo Siqueira<sup>2</sup>,  
and Craig Slatin<sup>1</sup>**

NEW SOLUTIONS: A Journal of  
Environmental and Occupational  
Health Policy  
0(0) 1–6

© The Author(s) 2017

Reprints and permissions:

[sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav](http://sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav)

DOI: 10.1177/1048291117713503

[journals.sagepub.com/home/new](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/new)



The path from neoliberalism to neofascism is littered with the lives of working people and their families. We knew when Barack Obama was elected president that we should keep our expectations low—he was, after all, a centrist candidate inheriting more than a decade of Clinton and Bush neoliberal policies. The antiregulatory stance of the federal government, the profound desire to find compromises with the Republicans, all of that was on top of the pro-market ideology that had prevailed since Ronald Reagan’s administration.

We were pleased when President Obama selected progressives to run the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) but were very cautious in our expectations. We remember with some bitterness the revocation of the ergonomic standard by Congress—and our modest hope was that some way would be found to reinstate the standard, at least symbolically. We were pleased when David Michaels took on the directorship of OSHA—but we really could not expect much. We had a similar reaction to the appointments of liberals to head the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

We were pleasantly surprised by OSHA’s efforts to step up enforcement and to increase penalties. The attack on popcorn lung was noteworthy. The attempt to finally get some revision to the old silica standard was a serious one. The more recent effort to require more effective reporting of occupational accidents and injuries was also important. Perhaps most significant for labor and public health activists was the sense that we had friends at OSHA. Still, the over-riding policy of the Obama administration was to refrain from interfering too much in the market. It became clear over time that Obama’s administration was in the spirit of the neoliberal Washington Consensus.<sup>1</sup> Both OSHA and EPA had to play by

---

<sup>1</sup>Department of Public Health, University of Massachusetts Lowell, MA, USA

<sup>2</sup>University of Massachusetts Boston, MA, USA

**Corresponding Author:**

Charles Levenstein, Department of Public Health, University of Massachusetts Lowell, 1 University Avenue, Southwick Hall, Room 328, Lowell, MA 01854, USA.

Email: [craig\\_slatin@uml.edu](mailto:craig_slatin@uml.edu)

the rules of this consensus, though the latter has always faced a stronger opposition from business interests.

Although many environmental advocates were critical of the Obama administration, it is important to remember key moments of progress—especially now that they are under attack. The Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) has listed 10 noteworthy Obama administration efforts:

His Clean Power Plan was the first ever national limit on carbon pollution from its largest source. It sent a signal to states and utilities, which is now transforming the way we produce energy. The president also used his office to educate Americans about the dangers of climate change with major speeches and TV appearances.

Some progress was also made in pursuit of an international effort to control climate pollution. The Obama administration put into place limits on pollution from power plants and introduced safeguards against pollution from oil and gas operations. EDF notes that “The Obama EPA enhanced fuel efficiency and sensible pollution standards for vehicles,” and invested in clean energy. “The president signed the first major environmental law in two decades, passed with bipartisan support, fixing our broken chemical safety system.” The administration introduced efforts supporting sustainable agriculture, as well as protecting western water and endangered species. Fisheries regained their capabilities—and efforts to protect national lands were advanced.<sup>2</sup> For all our criticism of the Obama administration, Gina McCarthy, the head of EPA, was quite remarkable.

Of course, the EDF omitted the early emphasis of Obama’s EPA on environmental justice (EJ). Under Lisa Jackson, the EPA’s first black administrator, the agency brought back an EJ focus that disappeared over the G.W. Bush years. “Prior to her tenure, the agency did about two EJ analyses of its rule-making per year; since 2010, EPA has conducted about 20 annually.”<sup>3</sup> But as Joshua Frank wrote in *Counterpunch*, Jackson’s efforts to use EPA’s fangs were too often thwarted by Obama. He notes that Jackson had demanded that British Petroleum (BP) halt its use of the dispersant Corexit 9500. “She took a tough line against a company that had gotten away with far too much for too long.” After BP complained to the White House, Rahm Emmanuel created a response team that did not include Jackson.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, keeping the EPA off of an oil response team for a major environmental disaster pales in comparison to appointing the head of Exxon Mobile to be Secretary of State, proposing to cut the EPA budget by 31%, and eliminating 25% of the agency’s personnel and more than 50 program areas. On May 7, the *New York Times* reported that EPA administrator Scott Pruitt had dismissed at least five members of the EPA’s Board of Science Counselors. The EPA spokesperson was quoted saying that Pruitt is considering replacing academic scientists on the board with industry scientists, “. . . people . . . who understand the impact of regulations on the regulated community.”<sup>5</sup>

On taking office, the Trump administration quickly took actions confirming his campaign commitments concerning regulations. On March 22, the Department of Labor announced a delay in the new beryllium rule. Five days later, the administration announced a resolution to block the Fair Pay and Safe Workplaces Rule. On the same day, the Labor Department announced that it would delay implementation of the rule for examination of workplaces in metal and nonmetal mines. A few days later, there was an announcement that the administration would block a Department of Labor rule on improving worker health and safety record-keeping. Last but not least, on April 7, the Department of Labor announced that there would be a delay in the crystalline silica standard for the construction industry.<sup>6</sup>

According to the *New York Times*, the attack on environmental protection and on EPA was embodied in budget cuts. At stake, the *Times* reported, were programs involving tap water (Flint), criminal and civil enforcement, geographic programs, Superfund and Brown Fields, endocrine disruptors, climate protection, vehicle and fuels standards, nonpoint source grants, and radiation preparedness.<sup>7</sup>

In sum, the Trump administration had launched an attack on the role of the state as a relatively autonomous element of liberal capitalism. John Bellamy Foster has recently written in *Monthly Review* that:

Not only a new administration, but a new ideology has now taken up residence at the White House: neofascism. It resembles in certain ways the classical fascism of Italy and Germany in the 1920s and '30s, but with historically distinct features specific to the political economy and culture of the United States in the opening decades of the twenty-first century. This neofascism characterizes, in my assessment, the president and his closest advisers, and some of the key figures in his cabinet. . . . Neofascist discourse and political practice are now evident every day in virulent attacks on the racially oppressed, immigrants, women, LBGTQ people, environmentalists, and workers. These have been accompanied by a sustained campaign to bring the judiciary, governmental employees, the military and intelligence agencies, and the press into line with this new ideology and political reality.<sup>8</sup>

What does this mean for occupational and environmental health policy?

It means that we will have to deal with a demagogue, authoritarian president who talks the talk about doing what he wants when he wants, but has so far had to deal with a divided Republican base regarding health care and foreign policy issues. However, the Republicans are so far very unified in their efforts to reduce protections for workers and the environment. In addition, federal employees are under severe restrictions to not even mention climate change and freely express their views on environmental and occupational health policies. The nomination of Neil Gorsuch for the Supreme Court will likely add another level of attacks to worker and environmental statutes that may move us backwards.

Foster addresses the strong attack on science when he argues that:

Distinguishing the neofascism of our present moment is the advent of the climate change crisis—the very reality of which the White House denies. Rather than address the problem, the new administration, backed by the fossil-capital wing of the Republican Party, has declared flatly that anthropogenic climate change does not exist. It has chosen to defy the entire world in this respect, repudiating the global scientific consensus.<sup>8</sup>

In the 1990s, as neoliberal structural adjustments were becoming entrenched and expanded from national and regional economies to local economies and most industrial sectors, front groups challenged environmental and occupational health scientists as purveyors of “junk science.” Three U.S. Supreme Court decisions, *Daubert*, *Joiner*, and *Kumho*, established a basis for ignoring scientific evidence in challenges against polluting industries.<sup>9</sup> The junk science charges were often made against researchers of human illness links to toxic chemical exposures. Agriculture disparagement laws were passed in states whose economies were dependent upon agricultural production. The widespread use of pesticides in industrial agriculture was to be protected and the free speech rights of those concerned about exposures to toxic substances used in agriculture were squashed for the broader good of economic stability and prosperity.

Trump and Steve Bannon have declared the mainstream media as the “enemy.” Trump’s campaign rhetoric to “Drain the Swamp” presumed to assert the need to clear Washington, DC, of corrupting lobbyists and has been clarified as a call to rid our politics of journalists who report “fake news.” Trump circumvents news journalism by tweeting his own version of the news and challenges fact-checks as propaganda. Scientific research, diligent journalism, and public health surveillance data are daily castigated as a form of political interference from “losers,” while federal funding will be slashed for scientific research that aims to protect public health, ecosystem sustainability, and human rights. The White House daily email announcements (Your 1600 Daily) guide readers to selected news stories, mostly from conservative sources such as Fox News and the *Washington Times* and uses a Pinocchio scale (a liar index) to jeer *Washington Post* and *New York Times* reports.

Branding immigrants, non-white communities, native peoples, women—especially working class women—and LBGQT communities as “the other” aims to build broad-based antipathy to isolate and delegitimize these communities’ human rights and demands for equality and justice. Efforts to establish protections and affirmative action measures can be challenged as unnecessary advantages that only burden the taxpayers and weaken the ability of industry to create jobs. Environmental and Work Environment Justice movements will be resisted and trampled, as was demonstrated at Standing Rock. And while corporations

boycotted North Carolina for its horrendous bathroom law, the state's Republican Party had a free hand in gerrymandering that blocked the voting rights and power of black communities. In the meantime, the state's hog and poultry industries maim and disable black and Hispanic workers, destroy the environment, and erode public health with the waste products of 10 million hogs. Throughout the nation, the public sector, weakened by decades of neoliberal privatization and tax rollbacks and evasion, is attacked as the "deep administrative state." Organized labor is further threatened with Right-to-Work measures. Though the effort to pass one such law was defeated in New Hampshire, other states are passing these bills. Next year, the U.S. Supreme Court is likely to rule agency fee as unconstitutional and a public sector Right-to-Work will become national law, beating back the ability of workers to negotiate wages, hours, and conditions of work.

The polite discourse of neoliberalism, rather than focusing on worker or community rights, has instead insisted on cost-benefit analysis, cost effectiveness, return on investment in safety measures, and so forth. Monetizing life and limbs allowed a biased discussion of regulation that emphasized feasibility, defined in different ways for different purposes, always prioritizing concern for business profitability and viability. Now, with the rise of neofascism, the mask has been torn off neoliberal capitalism and its cultural cohort. Racism, xenophobia, sexism, and all the cultural kinks in American capitalism are revealed. The health and safety of workers is of no concern compared with profit; the rights of communities to decent air and potable water are trivialized. There is no shame, no polite discourse about the destruction of the planet.

On the other hand, not all news is sad news. The Trump administration has called forth a remarkable response from liberal and left groups, including the relatively quiescent and self-proclaimed neutral scientific community. We were greatly impressed by the massive protest mounted by the women's organizations and their allies. The "welcome" offered by the phenomenal number of pink knit hats kicked off rallies and demonstrations one after another across the nation. Alliances of groups demanding a living wage, immigrant groups fighting racist and xenophobic executive orders, rallies of scientists supporting "facts" and marches of climate change activists accounted for countless local demonstrations against one aspect or another of the new neofascist policies. We are experiencing an emerging grassroots resistance to Trump authoritarianism that is slowly but surely gaining shape and political direction. This resistance goes well beyond the "occupy" movement of the early 2010s and builds on the recent Sanders' presidential campaign. We are encouraged as we observe a new generation of socially conscious, socially critical leadership develop. President Trump has unleashed a progressive storm in the U.S. which bodes well for worker and community health and safety active resistance.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### References

1. Siqueira CE. *Dependent convergence: The struggle to control petrochemical hazards in Brazil and the U.S.* Amytville, NY: Baywood Publishing Inc, 2003.
2. Gaby K. Ready to defend Obama's environmental legacy? Top 10 accomplishments to focus on. *EDF*, <https://www.edf.org/blog/2017/01/12/ready-defend-obamas-environmental-legacy-top-10-accomplishments-focus> (12 January 2017, accessed 11 May 2017).
3. Mock B. Will EPA's 'Environmental Justice' outlast Lisa Jackson? *Color Lines*, <http://www.colorlines.com/articles/will-epas-environmental-justice-outlast-lisa-jackson> (14 March 2013, accessed 11 May 2017).
4. Frank J. How Obama defanged the EPA. *Counterpunch*, <http://www.counterpunch.org/2013/04/12/how-obama-defanged-the-epa/> (12 April 2013, accessed 11 May 2017).
5. Davenport C. E.P.A. dismisses members of major scientific review board. *NYT*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/07/us/politics/epa-dismisses-members-of-major-scientific-review-board.html> (7 May 2017, accessed 11 May 2017).
6. Economic Policy Institute. Worker Rights and Wages Policy Watch, Department of Labor announcement of delay of the Crystalline Silica Standard for the construction industry. *EPI*, <http://www.epi.org/perkins/department-of-labor-announcement-of-delay-of-the-crystalline-silica-standard-for-the-construction-industry/> (7 April 2017, accessed 11 May 2017).
7. Tabuchi H. "What's at Stake in the Cuts Proposed for the EPA." *NYT*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/10/climate/trump-epa-budget-cuts.html> (11 April 2017, accessed 11 May 2017).
8. Foster JB. Neofascism in the White House. *Monthly Review* 2017; 68: 1–30.
9. Project on Scientific Knowledge and Public Policy (SKAPP). *Daubert: The most influential Supreme Court ruling you've never heard of*. Boston: Tellus Institute, 2003.

### Author Biographies

**Charles Levenstein** is professor emeritus of Work Environment at the University of Massachusetts Lowell.

**Carlos Eduardo Siqueira** is an associate professor of Community Development and Planning at the University of Massachusetts Boston.

**Craig Slatin** is professor emeritus of Public Health at the University of Massachusetts Lowell.