

Nancy Pelosi: the Lost Leader

In his article "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte", written in 1852, Karl Marx paraphrases Hegel's aphorism that all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice. Hegel forgot to add, the first time as tragedy, the second as farce. Marx was comparing the emergence and political role of Louis Bonaparte, the future Napoleon III, with that of his uncle Napoleon I of whom he was a caricature.

It is illuminating to consider the actions of Nancy Pelosi, Minority Leader of the U.S. House of Representatives, in Washington D.C. in June 2015 on the trade bill in the context of Marx's essay. Her actions are similar to, and almost a caricature of those of the French politician Alexandre Auguste Ledru-Rollin in Paris in May and June 1848.

Ledru-Rollin, one of the leaders of the French revolutionary movement of February 1848, was chosen minister of the interior in the provisional government and a member of the executive committee. He became involved in a dispute over the desirability of further uprisings in Paris and as leader of the democratic republican group at first was opposed to them. However, he was forced to change his mind. In Paris his name is now immortalized as a metro stop on line 8. In the world he is better remembered for the aphorism attributed to him, perhaps incorrectly: "There go the people. I must follow them for I am their leader."

Pelosi followed in his footsteps as a follower by the change of position made evident in her vote on June 12, 2015 against the bill that would assist workers who have lost their jobs as a result of global trade. Some members in the Obama administration have argued that her vote shows that Pelosi is cynical or devious. That assessment is debatable, but she did violate her principles and those of the mainstream Democratic

Party.

For more than 40 years Democrats have voted in favor of previous bills of this kind. But, rather than supporting President Barack Obama in this case, Pelosi bowed to pressure from labor unions, environmental groups, human rights advocates, and leftist activists, all for different reasons opposing the president's trade policy.

Party political behavior in the House of Representatives in June 2015 signaled the shift that has taken place in American political parties. It would be a fair generalization to say that for a century the Democratic Party, in the main, was the party of free trade while the Republicans were mostly protectionist.

Changes began in the 1970s as labor unions, a leading faction in the Democratic Party, called for protection. Union leaders declared that workers were losing jobs as a result of foreign competition. Today more than ever, they are firmly opposed to internationalism and seem united in the belief that free trade deals send American jobs abroad. That belief has affected ideological principles of the political parties. The political change became clear in 2003 when the House approved the Trade Promotion Authority (TPA) Bill with only 25 Democrats voting for it and only 27 Republicans voting against it.

On June 12, 2015 the House of Representatives voted first on the extension of the Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA) program, the bill to provide aid to workers who have lost their jobs because of the impact of global trade. Previously, Democrats have favored legislation of this kind. This time, the extension of the program was rejected by 302 to 126. It was supported by 86 Republicans and 40 Democrats, and rejected by 144 of the Democrats, including Nancy Pelosi, and 158 Republicans.

At the center of the problem are the political differences on

the desirability of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (T.P.P.), the multilateral trade zone, including Japan, Australia, Canada, and eight other Pacific rim countries, a pact that the Obama administration claims will lower tariffs and open markets to U.S. goods. Opposing this claim are those who like Senator Elizabeth Warren argue that the Partnership would favor multinational corporations and be harmful to U.S. workers, and Richard Trumka, president of the AFL-CIO, who also suggests that he has concerns about the potential harmful effects of T.P.P.

The problem was that the TAA bill was tied to the broader "fast track" bill, the Trade Promotion Authority, that would give the president the ability to negotiate for the Trans-Pacific Partnership and allow Congress to accept or reject but not amend the proposal. The legislative process had been structured so that the fast track bill could not advance unless the TAA program was also passed. Many Democrats, and many leaders of trade unions, blame the past trade pacts for reducing the American manufacturing sector and for lower or stagnant wages. Certainly the North American Free Trade Agreement of 1993 resulted in a loss of U.S. jobs. They therefore opposed the TAA bill.

Sensing the mood of many in her Democratic caucus, Pelosi, once a keen supporter of TAA, decided not to challenge fellow members opposed to fast track, and acquiesced in their opposition. Her latter explanation in a press interview was that fast track must be slowed down to get a better deal for the American people. In rather opaque language, she thought the process for making international trade agreements must be more transparent and must be more consultative with Congress.

In the parliamentary maneuvering in the House, the vote on TAA was immediately followed by another vote on Trade Promotion Authority (TPA). This was approved by 219 to 211, supported by 191 Republicans and only 28 Democrats, a voting pattern very similar to that in 2003. Opposing it were 157 Democrats and 54

Republicans. Trade Promotion Authority would give the president the "fast track" authority for the next six years to expedite trade negotiations. Supporters argue the Pacific trade deal is necessary to counter a more economically aggressive China which is preparing later this year to launch the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and to building a new "Silk Road to Europe."

Because of the defeat of TAA the entire package could not be approved. Presidential fast track authority, at least temporarily was not authorized. Presidents in the past have had responsibility for trade negotiations with Congress being able to approve or not, and having no control over changes of details. The Democratic Party vote in June had the procedural effect of denying Obama's desire to possess quick decision making over trade. Perhaps he did not help his cause by what some Democrats thought was somewhat imperious behavior. Few in Congress were likely to be persuaded by what seemed an ultimatum: "a vote against trade is a vote against me."

However, the problem goes beyond the personal behavior of Obama, or the relationship between the president and Congress. It concerns the fundamental and difficult reality that the trend in the contemporary international economy is from a labor-intensive economy to a capital-intensive one. Some jobs of U.S. workers are likely to be lost as a result of this change. The opposition to trade pacts is therefore a mixture of genuine concern and reactionary populism. The unions have refused to come to terms with the reality of technological change. Pelosi and the majority of the Democratic Party are delinquent in not focusing on this crucial issue.

Whether Nancy Pelosi genuinely stood up against "corporate interests" or showed bravery and leadership in helping the cause of labor is dubious. Her motivation appears more due to political considerations of her position in the Democratic Party rather than acting out of conviction based on analysis of economic reality. She may not be the political version of

Rachel Dolezal, the white woman who professed to be black, molding a new identity. But she is, repeating the history of Ledru-Rollin, at the moment a lost leader. As a follower, not a leader, is Pelosi's behavior just for a handful of political ribbon to stick in her coat?