**WORKSHOP**

**DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA & ABROAD**

The growth of authoritarian regimes – even in countries that call themselves democracies - is an alarming development for those of us that believe that democracy, though imperfect, gives us the best chance of creating a good society. The liberal values of tolerance for different opinions, religions, and ways of life are threatened in these societies. China, Russia, Hungary, the Philippines, Brazil, the United Kingdom and many other countries have – either lately or longstanding - experienced authoritarian “strong” leaders.” These men have asserted their total personal control over their societies. They become the law, as the rules of democratic societies - a free press, freedom of expression, the decision to make war, and many more - are challenged or simply set aside.

How this has occurred is complicated, but the decline of democratic values has spread well beyond those countries that have traditionally experienced authoritarian regimes. The growth of globalization and communication worldwide through the internet and other technological innovations has contributed. So hare the strong feelings of deprivation and anger among people in poverty everywhere in the world, who now can easily compare their lives to those who are well-off.

Below is a discussion of the rise of authoritarianism, xenophobia, and threats to democracy in the United States, culminating in the 2016 election of Donald Trump and his domination of the Republican party. Many of the factors existing in the United States have also been the case in other countries that have slid away from their democratic pasts.

 \*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

From the depth of the Great Recession in 2009 until 2019, the American economy grew by almost 25 percent. But economic inequality also grew. Over those years, wages and salaries for most workers decreased: those with a high school diploma by 0.3 percent; employees with some college education by 3.8 percent; college graduates by 0.8 percent; and those with advanced degree by 0.6. Only employees with less than a high school degree experienced an increase. But that increase did little to reduce the poverty they experienced. The increase from $213 per week to $229, translates into an annual poverty-level wage of less than $12,000 for those workers..

In short, the economy was growing but wages were not. The benefits of the economy’s growth were concentrated among the small economic elite who grew increasingly wealthy.

During most of those years, Barack Obama was the President. Obviously, his Administration was not alone responsible for the frustrations experienced by American workers, and any attempts on his part to remedy the situation with legislation would have been blocked by the Republican-dominated Senate. But the fact is that no such progressive agenda emerged. The Administration did not champion a strategy to more equally share the income that the growing economy was generating.

It was against this background that Donald Trump made his political entrance. He stoked existing frustrations, by scapegoating immigration, environmentalism, and globalization. Hillary Clinton’s campaign did little to reverse the impression that the Democratic Party was indifferent to the economic well-being of American workers. Even so, Clinton’s popular vote exceeded Trump’s by almost three million votes, but not enough to deny Trump a narrow Electoral College majority.

The fact is that all three of Trump’s targets mentioned above actually have the potential to contribute to broadly shared economic well-being. Immigration increases the size of the productive labor force; environmentalism represents the path to a more sustainable economy; and globalization creates new markets for American producers.

They are not the problem. In fact, the opposite is true. They each could contribute to overcoming the very real deprivation the American working class has experienced in recent years. But while the growth of inequality continues, the Trump years have seen increasing authoritarianism, challenges to the rule of law, vindictive attacks on his perceived “enemies,” on the free press, and on the norms of acceptable behavior. These challenges to democracy in the United States have been reflected in other countries abroad. Where this leads is not clear, but what is certain is that policies that could create a more equally shared prosperity have been ignored and rejected.