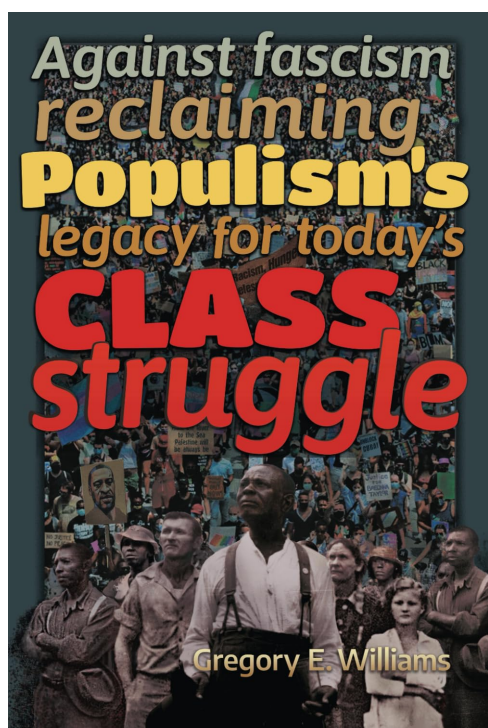


Against fascism: New book challenges Trump's 'populist' label

written by Gary Wilson
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You might clench your teeth just like I do when someone calls Donald Trump a populist.

As the new book — “Against fascism: Reclaiming populism’s legacy for today’s class struggle” — points out, that’s using populism to mean making phony patriotic appeals to “the everyday person,” in the style of Mussolini and Hitler ... or Donald Trump.

Trump’s “populism” bears no resemblance to the populist movements organized by workers and farmers over a century ago.

Populism was progressive

In the book’s introduction, author Gregory E. Williams writes:

“Populism was a progressive – that is, left-wing – movement of the late 19th Century, having farmers as its base, both Black and white. The movement fought big business and the big banks, and generally insisted that workers of different races share common interests, and ought to work together.

“This doesn’t sound like any of the politicians called populists except for Bernie Sanders. However, unlike Sanders, the populists in their heyday were an independent mass movement. They were a big coalition of labor and farm organizations, and founded a political party to challenge both the Republicans and Democrats. They were a real threat to the ruling class.

“This radical tradition influenced subsequent politics in the Progressive era and the New Deal, but was largely forgotten by the 1950s. ...

“In his 2020 book ‘The People, No: A Brief History of Anti-Populism,’ Thomas Frank presents evidence that the consensus historians used the language of the horrified ruling class during the 1890s and the 1930s to characterize populism. This is how populism came to mean any mass movement, right or left, as well as demagogic appeals to ‘the common man.’ ...

“So, in an era when we are told that there is no alternative to capitalism, or even the possibility of a liveable future for humanity, they are trying to take away our history. But our movements need to know. Learning from history makes our movements stronger and more capable of going on the offensive ...

“This book is about strategizing for the current fight against the billionaire oligarchs like Elon Musk and the fascist movement they’re backing in order to save the decaying capitalist system. This book is a call for a revolutionary socialist response – a communist response – to the situation.”

Resistance amid Jim Crow

Williams’ book covers the history of populism as a people’s movement. This includes Black populism, which is rarely found in U.S. history books.

From the “Reclaiming Populism” book:

“The [historical populist] movement was based especially among farmers in the South and West, but included alliances with industrial workers and even small shopkeepers.

“Although populism was overwhelmingly anti-racist, a fundamental weakness of the movement was that it remained mostly white. The populist movement was not able to create the big, multiracial alliance that was needed to take on the rich successfully.

“But to leave the story at that would be misleading. In fact, there was a significant Black populist movement that had its own dynamics. What they achieved was impressive, especially considering the extreme racist violence that characterized this period.

“When the populist movement was in full swing in the 1890s, the Southern ruling

class's shock troops were carrying out over 100 lynchings annually, rolling back the many political, economic, and social gains made by Black people after the Civil War.

"The Black populists organized and fought back during the height of this post-Reconstruction Klan terror, leaving a legacy that influenced movements going forward."

Also included in this book is Vincent Copeland's "Southern Populism & Black Labor," which was written in 1972.

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