
Can We Bring Back Many Factory Jobs? Let's Do the Math

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Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton promise to bring back jobs lost to foreign producers. There are many questions about these promises but the most important are whether they can do it, and how many jobs can be brought back. This piece focuses on the second issue.

How many factory jobs can be brought back? We've lost a lot of them. Manufacturing employees were 30% of the non-farm work force in 1955. Now they're just 8.5%. To get the factory work force back to the relative weight it had in 1955, we'd have to add 31,000,000 factory jobs. That's not going to happen.

Thanks to automation we don't need as many factory workers as we used to. But we could have more than we do now. Imagine that through selective tariffs and less currency manipulation by China and other nations, government policy could cut the \$600 billion manufacturing trade deficit in half. In that ideal situation, we might add two million jobs in the manufacturing sector.

Two million new factory jobs would be a plus for American workers. If these jobs offered better-than-average pay and benefits and union protections too, think what they could do if they went to the south side of Chicago, high-poverty areas of Milwaukee, to coal areas of West Virginia, to Fresno, Cleveland, Baltimore, Detroit, Philadelphia, St. Louis, Indianapolis, and the state of Mississippi.

These areas are among the poorest in the nation. We hear about them when a police officer shoots a young person of color or when residents go on a shooting spree. But politicians and the media don't pay much attention otherwise. The major party conventions were held in two of these cities. Did one mainstream politician or journalist tour high-poverty neighborhoods and offer a credible analysis of causes and cures? I must have missed it.

More good jobs for poor areas would be a plus. But two million factory jobs won't bring back the golden age of the factory worker, and they won't make much of a dent in our good-jobs deficit. Fighting China and Mexico is not a jobs policy. To draw into the labor force millions of workers who have dropped out because of lousy job markets

and to push the official unemployment rate closer to full employment—let's say 2%—we need 10 million more jobs than we are currently getting.

That many extra jobs won't come in factories and they won't come by making the 1% richer with tax cuts. They will have to be created directly by the federal government in the public and private sector. We can start with the physical infrastructure, which is in D+ condition, and the social infrastructure, where we can expand affordable child care, cut class size in public schools, and much more. Neither candidate has made a major commitment in these areas.
