

Don't Blame the Workers

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I don't think my political analysis can be understood apart from my class experiences. And those experiences probably explain a lot about why I'm writing this essay on how workers have been betrayed, devalued, stigmatized, and misunderstood. I'm the kid who joined the women's movement in 1968 and still felt sorry for the construction workers who hooted at us. Today, as I sit in my loft-like study, at tree-level, watching the birds happily chirping away, it's clear I've made it to the middle class. Yet I still have that strange unsettling knot in my stomach of working-class shame, rage, and unease. I'm what the working-class studies folks call a "class migrant," and, like any foreigner without proper papers, I can feel insecure and subject to sudden deportation.

It's not easy being working-class in a culture that, as Owen Jones recently put it in *Chavs*, demonizes workers. Some simply praise the Lord that they escaped and just try to pass, hoping no one will notice. Others, left behind, "dis-identify"—to use a term coined by sociologist Beverly Skeggs—with the working class. They reject any connection with a group so denigrated and seek self-esteem in other identities. Religion helps—at least it did for me as a teenager in early 1960s Atlanta. At age twelve, I heeded the revivalist's call one Sunday night at the local Baptist church, and for the next five years I found enormous solace in the sonorous cadences of the preacher as he promised that Jesus loved "even me," repeating the refrain from a much-sung hymn. Being a soldier or a mother and embracing those lost virtues of self-sacrifice and service used to work, too, to boost working-class self-respect. And of course, for working-class men, there are always the "privileges" of masculinity. But without much money,

authority, or status, working-class masculinity is more often an embarrassing display of power rather than power itself—which is why I felt sorry for the construction workers.

It wasn't always this bad. My dad took considerable pride in his work—he drove trains, passenger and freight, for the Southern Railway, as did his father and grandfather—and in how, through organization, he and his union buddies could exert power, defend their needs, and secure a surprising amount of freedom and dignity. He laughed when I reported one day that he and his buddies didn't deserve their cushy jobs. They were "featherbedding," I had learned at junior high, forcing the railroad to hire more workers than they needed, and as a result they hardly did a lick of work. Well, he countered, what's wrong with a feather bed? Should we be sleeping on straw mattresses? Then he sat me down and, poking a huge gnarled finger in my face, proceeded to explain how power worked and how one class kept down another by making up stories portraying those who worked the hardest as shirkers and ne'er do wells.

But that was more than a half century ago, and much has changed. The trade union movement has been flat on its back for some time and shows little sign of resuscitation. Working-class wages have declined precipitously, and U.S. workers clock in longer hours than in any other industrialized nation.

What really gets under my skin, though, is that workers are blamed for this mess. The ideological class warfare my father taught me about in the 1960s not only persists, it has gotten worse. As economic inequality has reached unprecedented, even obscene, levels, particularly in the United States and Britain, an elaborate ideological justification has grown up alongside it, what we could call a

new Social Darwinism. Just as slavery needed racism to prop it up, the new plutocracy requires classism. Workers who were once mocked for overreaching and assuming too much power are now ridiculed for their weaknesses and failures. The new Social Darwinism is clear about who does and doesn't deserve respect. Those at the bottom, white and nonwhite, waged and wageless, are there because of their own personal failings. And those at the top deserve their disproportionate share because of their supposed talent, intelligence, or some other innate quality marking their superior "fitness" for the competitive battle. It's a post hoc world governed by so-called natural laws and biological drives. Wherever you end up is where you should be. The meritocratic myth is sustained by a culture rife with unrepresentative rags-to-riches tales but largely silent on the diminishing prospects for such mobility.

This poisonous ideological beast digging its tentacles deep into our souls is a real problem. It can make workers feel as if they deserve the scraps they are getting. But no social movement was ever built by folks who thought they deserved what they were getting. And, as it turns out, there's no credible way to challenge the power of the new ruling rich and make society fairer and less cruel without the working classes as part of the movement.

Most *Dissent* readers, I assume, reject much of the new Social Darwinism and would point to broad societal forces rather than individual character to explain economic inequality. What might be more controversial among *Dissent* readers, however, is whether there is a progressive analog to the new Social Darwinism, a progressive form of worker-bashing, that, like its right-wing sibling, also holds workers to blame for their own increasing misery. Yet if all of us see the world in part through a class lens, why shouldn't elite progressives have their own class biases and blinders? Indeed, we on the democratic Left need to have a long and long-delayed conversation about class and class bias, starting with why money and the cultural capital accompanying it are so rarely acknowledged as profound influences on every aspect of our lives, from the vacation homes we do or do not visit to our ease of elocution to our

sense of entitlement and security. We are still very far from admitting freely, as E.M. Forster's heroine Margaret Schlegel does in *Howard's End* that some, like herself, stand with their feet firmly planted on land, secure in their income, while others, the Leonard Bast of the world, teeter on the edge, peering into the abyss of joblessness and poverty. "The boy, Leonard, was not in the abyss," Forster reminded his readers, "but he could see it, and at times people whom he knew had dropped in, and counted no more."

I have often been surprised by how much criticism is heaped upon workers, particularly white working-class men—working-class women are still pretty much ignored—in the academy. Perhaps it springs in part from the collapse of the revolutionary romance with the proletariat and the need for revenge on the loved one who turned away. But whatever the psychological roots, the anti-worker trope runs deep and wide.

Consider the resurgence (and the staying power) of the idea that workers are more conservative than other classes in society. Could there be a more insidious, unhelpful, and myopic blame-the-victim theory? Think about the heated objections that would be raised if the same were suggested of other marginalized groups. It would be judged a "culture of poverty" theory obscuring the real culprit, race discrimination, or a "she wants it" narrative justifying rape, and there would be proper outrage. But instead, we shake our heads in dismay and, like George Bernard Shaw's Henry Higgins, fret about why the working classes are so resistant to our teachings. Why can't they simply be more like us and know the political truth?

Granted, Seymour Martin Lipset's 1963 account in *Political Man* of how the authoritarian predisposition of the lower classes explained their disproportionate support of the Communist Party, in his view an unquestionably totalitarian movement, fell decidedly out of fashion as the 1960s generation came into its own. But that generation too had its version of the flawed working-class psyche. By the 1970s, the racist, sexist worker occupied a central villainous space in much of

the flourishing literature on race and gender. “Whiteness studies” shifted blame away from corporate and political elites and placed it squarely on the tired shoulders of the white male working class. David Roediger’s influential *The Wages of Whiteness* reserved its harshest criticism for the pervasive and deeply embedded racist identities of white male workers. It was white working-class men (and their unions), he argued, not the Southern ex-slave-holding elites or the Northern Gilded Age capitalists, who kept African Americans disenfranchised, landless, segregated, and poor after the Civil War. Gender studies judged male workers harshly too, holding them (and their unions), in Heidi Hartmann’s classic formulation, responsible for sex segregation, the principal mechanism perpetuating gender subordination.

The racist, sexist worker hasn’t disappeared. But he has been joined on center stage by a turned-on-its-head version of Lipset’s feared illiberal. This new politically misguided working man is still racist and sexist. But now his biggest failure is not that he’s a communist; it’s that he’s a Republican. The popularity on the left of Thomas Frank’s *What’s the Matter With Kansas?* is but one example of how well the stereotype of the reactionary, irrational worker still resonates. In 2004, surveying the scene in Kansas, Frank sadly concluded that the working classes just didn’t know their own best interests. Frank could see the Right’s real agenda was economic conservatism, but the workers didn’t get it. Deluded, outwitted, and just plain dumb, they kept voting against politicians who could actually help them. The conservative backlash, according to Frank, “is a working-class movement that has done incalculable historic harm to working-class people.” In other words, workers have mainly themselves to blame for being in such a fix. This narrative, like all false consciousness narratives, reeks of condescension and arrogance. It presumes, for example, the existence of an obvious correct political alternative—the New Democrats?—and it judges as blind and delusional those who don’t see the same mirage as the enlightened storyteller. Few left-

wing intellectuals would write such a diatribe against people of other cultures or countries. Yet the class “other” is fair game.

Another problem with the Frank narrative is that he isn’t the only one saying it. Bemoaning the conservative backlash of white workers after 1968 or the rise of the “Reagan Democrats”—those working-class Democratic voters who defected to the Republicans in the 1980s—is now standard practice among progressive intellectuals when they try to explain the decline of the Democratic Party. Take Joan Williams’s brilliant new book, *Reshaping the Work-Family Debate: Why Men and Class Matter*. I eagerly picked it up when it came out, and much of it doesn’t disappoint. I was thrilled to read that she believes we need more cross-class understanding and that one aim of the book is to explore the class dimensions of the work-family debate, starting with, for example, how working-class women have some of the most rigid, family-hostile jobs imaginable. When my daughter was young, I often thought how lucky I was not to work in one of those jobs. I’d shudder imagining what it would be like to have her standing on the street corner, waiting for me to pick her up after school, as I’m being told, five minutes before the shift changed, that we’d all be working (involuntary) overtime yet again and no, I must be crazy to think I could take a phone break right now. But as I read further, my heart sank as Williams fell into the predictable groove of how workers abandoned the Democratic Party beginning in the 1960s. “It’s no mystery how the New Deal Coalition died,” she asserts: “white working-class voters left.”

OK. It’s true. Workers, like the rest of us, now identify less with the Democratic Party. But unlike the rest of us, they actually vote Democratic and have since the New Deal. I admit it. I’ve become a bit obsessed with voting data and countering the myth of working-class conservatism. It all started innocently enough one Sunday morning as I looked over the *New York Times* compilations of how Americans voted in the 2004 election. Presidential voting behavior, I was shocked to see, closely correlated with income, with lower-income voters solidly Democratic, middle-income voters more mixed, and

higher-income voters solidly Republican. And that basic relationship, what we could call a “class voting gap,” had not changed after the 1970s. The class gap was wide in 1976, with almost twenty points between the percentage of the lowest and highest income-earners voting Democratic; it remained virtually the same in 2004. Indeed, if the bottom 45 percent of earners (those with annual family incomes under \$49,000 in 2004) had been the only

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ones voting, we would have had a solid string of Democratic presidential victories since the 1930s, with the possible exception of Eisenhower, who now seems like a New Dealer anyway. As Paul Krugman hammered home in a neglected September 24, 2007, *New York Times* column: “[T]he old-fashioned notion that the rich vote Republican and the poor vote Democratic is as true as ever—in fact more true than it was a generation ago.”

Or, to shift the frame, it is the middle and upper classes, that 55 percent of the electorate with family incomes of \$50,000 or more, who consistently voted Republican over the last three decades. Yes, elite liberals do exist. It is often pointed out that those with “post-graduate degrees” (16 percent of the population in 2004) voted Democratic in most—but not all—of the presidential elections since 1980. Yet not everyone with a “post-graduate degree” earns more than \$50,000, and of those who do, there just aren’t enough of them to change the color of the conservative tide among the top half of earners.

In 2008, the strict correlation of voting behavior and income broke down among those making above \$50,000, according to the *New York Times* election results. Basically, there was some shuffling about in the middle classes, with those in the \$75,000 to \$99,000 bracket, for example, voting slightly *more* Democratic than those below them in the \$50,000 to \$75,000 bracket. There was also a

historic move of the over \$200,000 group into the Democratic column. But significantly, those in the bottom continued to vote more Democratic than *any* other group, middle or upper. Historic voting patterns quickly reasserted themselves as the Obama charm wore thin. In the 2010 elections, voting behavior followed income, with Democratic voting diminishing steadily as incomes rise. And for the record, the last time I checked the poll data, Tea Party backers were wealthier than the general population. In other words, it is inaccurate to describe the Tea Party as a working-class movement.

But what if we just looked at the voting patterns of the *white* working class? Isn’t it the disproportionate number of nonwhites among lower income voters that moves them into the Democratic column? Here, Vanderbilt University political scientist Larry Bartels, who has done yeoman number-crunching to determine the voting behavior of the white working class, is quite illuminating. He finds that yes, whites in the *South*—of all classes—moved out of the Democratic Party after 1968 as the Democratic Party lost its monopoly hold on that region and a two-party system emerged. But outside the South, the loss of *white working-class* voters was insignificant, a decline of 1 percent since the 1950s. He concludes, “Republican gains since the 1950s have come almost entirely among the middle and upper-income voters. . . and where losses have occurred, it is attributable to the shift of white voters of all classes in the once-solid South.” So all you Kansas waitresses and truck drivers, hold your heads high. You aren’t the ones we should be blaming.

Still, Bartels has not convinced everyone, in part because most social scientist number-crunchers, unlike Bartels, favor education over income as the proxy for class. And when you look at voting patterns by education, you can tell a somewhat different story. Yet as Bartels points out, education doesn’t tell you much about wealth or poverty because “the economic circumstances of whites without college degrees are not much different from those of America as a whole.” In 2004, for example, he found that 40 percent of white voters without college degrees had family incomes over \$60,000, making them virtually

indistinguishable from all voters. Or, to think about it from another angle, as Occupy Wall Street reminds us, a college degree is no guarantee of a job, let alone a well-paying one. It's odd then that social scientists continue to conflate class and education. But hey, I guess the people doing the studies, underpaid (at least compared to hedge fund managers) and highly educated, are on to something. By their measures, they have all made it into the upper class.

The question we need to ask ourselves, though, is why the continuing liberalism of working people has been so underestimated. Why, despite the persistently progressive voting record of the bottom 45 percent of earners, are workers still portrayed as the new reactionaries, the ones who lost their way in the Republican wilderness? Is it just easier that way? Then we don't have to face our own inaction or confusion or fear? Could it be that there's something the matter with us, that the intellectual class has a problem? I don't know about you but I'm a bit hesitant to risk my job and my retirement right now to stick it to the

boss. And workers are right to be hesitant, too. I am willing, however, as are they, to vote for a party that makes the economic concerns of the majority a priority. We should not be surprised, though, that if the Democratic Party continues to abandon the working class, they eventually will abandon it.

The stories we tell about workers matter, to them and to us. As long as we blame workers for the problems besetting society and the progressive movement, we will not be able to figure out what did go wrong. And without some consciousness of the difference class inequality makes not just to those "out there," but also to those of us "inside" writing about it, the fragile threads of alliance between progressives and workers can only become more frayed. A little cross-class solidarity could go a long way.

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