

From Solidarity to Trump: White Working-Class Culture in the Rust Belt



Before embarking on my current career, I worked as a labor organizer, mostly in West Virginia and Ohio. In the course of doing that work, I probably did two thousand “housevisits” with people I was attempting to organize. The purpose of these meetings was to understand people’s motivations and interests in order to assess how they would vote in a union recognition election (as the union president once said to the organizers: “I don’t care if you lose, I care if you can’t count”) and assess their leadership potential for either the union’s organizing committee or for management’s anti-union efforts.

The work entailed a never-ending confrontation with the slow social death of a region. Proud people—who once possessed the social honor that came with hard work, supporting a family, and meeting one’s civic responsibilities—were confronting the fact that their skills, their values, and their mores were not only no longer valued, but had become an object of ridicule. This is on my mind these days as I look at my RSS feed, awash as it is in horror that populist revolt, which has already claimed Brexit, Poland, and Austria, will soon claim the American presidency.

I sympathized, and I understood the people I visited. Not all of it, of course; not the racism, misogyny, or jingoism—all

often coded in the language of merit and worthiness. What was refreshing about it was that it amounted to a rejection of the material calculus that dominates in so much of our political culture and in academic theories of action. In school I learned that politics was about delivering material incentives to people in order to win their support. Democrats win because they deliver the welfare state. When they vote for Republicans, people are being fundamentally stupid in a way that warrants intrepid journalistic explorations of how it is that people can have motivations they do (what's the matter with Kansas?). But of course, Republicans have much to offer too: assertive nationalism, moral righteousness, and validations of white privilege and heteronormativity, to name a few.

The working class of the Rust Belt has been in its death throes for decades. Deindustrialization first began to take hold with the "Southern Strategy" of American manufacturers who moved to the southern United States where "right to work" laws ensure an environment that is hostile to unions. But Japanese competition accelerated the problem. Then there was Bill Clinton, a Democrat, who abandoned the working-class base of the party in his pursuit of free trade agreements. Companies received tax breaks for moving jobs overseas. Then there were the tax preferences for financial investment over manufacturing investment, practically guaranteeing that money would flow out of the industrial economy. In a valiant defense of their social order, workers in Youngstown and Wheeling tried to stem the tide by purchasing their plants and hoping that they would remain viable if only profit could be subordinated as a motive. The plants closed anyway.

Wages stagnated and even shrank for many. It was open season on unions not just because of deindustrialization, but aggressive union-busting. Today, the United Mine Workers, which once had 800,000 members and the fortitude to strike in the middle of World War Two, now has 60,000 members. My

partner, also a former union organizer, recalls the elderly retired miner she met on a housevisit who bragged about happily paying union assessments to cover John L. Lewis's legal fees when Roosevelt had him thrown in jail. Lewis, unlike many labor leaders today, was happy to fight a losing battle in the name of a principled defense of working-class autonomy and dignity. His combativeness earned loyalty. But West Virginia workers don't have unions anymore to help them fight the decline of their communities.

With income stagnation the norm in the 1990s and 2000s, Democratic policy often focused on helping people maintain their standard of living through the possession of assets. Policy encouraged homeownership and investment in securities. Predictably, people lost their pensions or retirement savings in the tech bubble, and then lost their homes in the foreclosure crisis. The Democratic President, Barack Obama, chose to bail out bondholders while leaving homeowners to rot. He then pursued more free trade policies, expanding the number of countries that American workers would have to compete with. Cities like Cleveland had a windfall in their stock of postindustrial porn. In addition to rusting plants they now had naked and rotting houses. Suburban houses lost as much as 75% of their value in postindustrial Ohio. They were never worth anything to start with in West Virginia. Since that time, the problems of disinvestment and unemployment have been compounded by drug addiction. These are problems that, thanks to scholars like William Julius Wilson, we once associated with the urban black working class. They are now the problems of white, small-town America too. It turns out race isn't the relevant variable for explaining the crisis of the family.

Young people are rare in many of these communities. Nursing homes have replaced mines and mills. Working as a nurse's aide is a young person's work, but not in this part of the country, especially in rural areas. The nursing homes I encountered were staffed by women who went back to work when their partner

lost his job as a miner or a steelworker. Back then it wasn't surprising to encounter a forty year-old nurses' aide working two jobs, "one for the bills and one for health insurance." Not only is the structural decay of towns a constant reminder of the demise of a way of life, but the decay of the people themselves is as well. It is hard to sustain optimism when the young people most imbued with the characteristic are gone.

Men lose their breadwinning jobs, making the justification for their authority in the household precarious. Women return to work. I was organizing at a moment when women carried with them an attitude towards bosses and unions that their husbands had learned in decades of struggle in their workplaces. This wasn't all good, workers had plenty of fights with their union representatives too. But it did sustain a culture of combativeness and solidarity that was possible to transfer into healthcare, with modifications, of course. Patients had a different significance for healthcare workers than rivets did for autoworkers. Healthcare workers wanted to use unions to defend their patients against the depredations of the profit motive, though they probably didn't mind the health insurance and wages they won in the name of patient care. As for the men, pride and combativeness can easily become authoritarianism and misogyny when they're dependent on a female breadwinner. A shibboleth in the local I worked for recounts ex-UMW members opposing the unionization of their wives and girlfriends: "We know that if you teach them to fight the boss at work, they'll know how to fight the boss at home," they said.

In order to stave off the indignity of dependence on their wives and girlfriends, some men would go to extreme lengths that illustrate the value of white working-class identity for people who haven't known anything else. I'll never forget the autoworker I encountered on a housevisit to his wife, a nurse at a local hospital. He liked unions and what they stood for. He told me about the notorious Lordstown Strike against GM in

1971. He participated in the torching of a motel that was housing strikebreakers. He didn't seem to regret it. When I met him he was still working as an autoworker. His UAW contract meant he could bid on jobs in other plants with seniority rights. Laid off at Lordstown, three times per week he would carpool with friends for the five-hour drive to another plant in order to maintain his income and, one had the sense, his working-class identity. Other men figured out that staying at home and maintaining their income meant a switch to healthcare and nursing, but that work didn't confer status in the same way as manufacturing work did, it was "women's work." A Youngstown-area hospital I was organizing had a huge number of male nurses (nationally, about 12% of nurses are men, in Youngstown back then it was more like 25%). Obviously for them, the money was worth more than working-class pride.

The serial destruction that has faced the Rust Belt has not occurred without a struggle. "Fighting the good fight" was extremely important to many Rust Belt workers, as if it were a matter of social honor and recognition. And fight they did, often enough anyway. Why did they fight? Was it for material gains as so many assume? Sometimes. There is always the nurse that will throw some Randian entrepreneurial freedom stuff at you (workers read too), but that particular ideology wasn't that common, despite the assumptions of economists, pundits, and union busters.

Union busters use a kit, a sort of paint-by-numbers sequence of things to talk about and do in the run-up to a recognition election. One standard item is the checks. This is a mock-up of a check with the worker's name and current weekly pay. Next to it will be a comparison check with the costs of a strike deducted. How do workers react? Certainly some were influenced. People have different economic circumstances and different reactions to them. But often enough the response was something like: "that's a small price to pay to tell the boss to fuck off." And there it is. The value that many workers

place on being able to express their opinion or fight just for a chance to speak is an awful lot higher than many expect. Workers stage sit-down strikes, even though they are completely illegal and could result in the bankruptcy of the union. Transit workers did this in New York in 2006, but nursing home workers were doing it in Ohio too.

Perhaps such a fight is worth a few dollars, but surely there is an underlying material instrumentality, isn't there? Union staff often told the story of a contract fight for county mental health workers in Mentor, Ohio. The county had told the workers that if they refused to accept the contract the county would simply stop funding mental health altogether, costing all of the workers their jobs. As the votes were counted, it became clear that the workers had placed more value on their right to protest the behavior of their employer than they did on their own job. They ratified the contract, told the boss what they thought of his threats, and, presumably, headed for the unemployment line.

In 1998, I found myself on a picket line in front of a prison in Lima, Ohio. We represented the social service professionals who worked for the state: doctors, psychiatrists, nurses, social workers. That year the union representing the non-professionals negotiated a concessionary contract with the state. We could either also accept the concessionary contract or fight it despite having very little workplace power. But our members and our president wanted to fight, not least to show everyone what cowards the other union was. Our picket had signs like: "Grandmas shouldn't have to strike." Prisoners were jokingly shouting "we want a contract too!" out their cell windows. We won. The threat wasn't because our workers were off the job, and it certainly wasn't because the guards respected the picket (though a few did). But the prisoners rioted. State troopers had to be called in to quell riots, including one at the notorious Lucasville Prison. It turns out representing nurses isn't such a weak hand after all, at least

when you're striking a prison. The culture of solidarity reaches far in the Rust Belt, especially when people choose to fight the boss.

I have long thought that the workers of the Rust Belt and their communities were an underutilized political resource. Unions once did important work holding white workers in the Democratic coalition, despite the fact that Democrats have been ignoring them for three decades. But unions have mostly been destroyed in the Rust Belt. Michigan, the birthplace of the UAW and Industrial Unionism, became a Right to Work state two years ago, joining Wisconsin and soon to be followed by West Virginia. States which once had 40% of their workforces represented by unions now have 10-11%. As a result, the populist outrage of the white working class is available to both the Right and the Left. Over the years various Democratic candidates, Tom Harkin, John Edwards, and Bernie Sanders among them, have attempted to recapture white workers for the Democratic Party and, in the process, reorient the Party away from its deference to finance capital. These efforts have failed. The Democratic coalition is a party of free trade, finance, and tech with a diverse base recruited on the basis of social liberalism and fluency with identity politics. This is not a party of the working class and is especially not a party of the white working class.

Trump has stepped into this political vacuum and it has served him well, enabling him to trounce establishment and Tea Party Republicans in the primaries. Trump seems to be furious at the establishment politicians that long ago wrote off the Rust Belt. He is combative, he doesn't defer to the political correctness that is sensitive to the feelings of everyone other than the white poor and working class. Trump's performance emphasizes action as much as words and ideas, which exasperates the educated, but appeals to Rust Belt workers. Ideas and rational consistency are not, academic dispositions aside, particularly important to people without

Ph.Ds. Trump performs the combativeness of Rust Belt culture, the lack of deference to odds or the focus-grouped lowest common denominator. He seems as lost playing the politically-coded game of pandering and recognition that people in Portsmouth, Ohio, are. He is a manifestation of the “fuck you” id of the Rust Belt that leads workers to fight their bosses even when they will probably lose. And sure, it isn’t exactly about the working class, but if Trump has been consistent on any issue, it has been trade. He promises to rip up the trade agreements that forced workers to make a choice between their dignity and their jobs, and that forced them onto an unfair playing field against workers with government health insurance or lower housing and food costs. He promises to protect them from immigrants that are somehow simultaneously competing for their jobs and sucking state coffers dry.

Hillary Clinton had a word for the Rust Belt in her convention speech, just like she did for every other constituency in the Democratic coalition. She pointed out that Donald Trump’s merchandise is made overseas. My first thought was that it was a good opener, but that was it. No policy, no recognition, just “That guy is a liar”. Now, granted, Rust Belt workers do get pissed off about stuff like that. For years the draw for the Central Labor Council annual picnic in Dayton, Ohio, was the destruction of a Japanese car with a wrecking ball. Watching a crane destroy a perfectly good automobile is exciting, but it’s downright cathartic when that car represents an existential threat to your existence and an offense to your patriotism. But I fully expect that Rust Belt voters, many of whom are pretty familiar with the dynamics of these issues (thanks unions!) would hear that and think: “ok, she’s taking us for suckers... again”. Just because that stuff worked with patrician Romney (and it did) in no way means that it will work with combative, disrespectful, trade-deal trashing, and immigrant-deporting Trump. Clinton’s move was calculated and condescending. She volunteered for an authenticity fight with Donald Trump, a fight she will lose.

Trump has nailed down populism for the Right. Sanders made a bid to win it back for the Left, but no one named Obama or Clinton is going to win it back for Democrats. Now pundits and Trump's campaign are plotting a path to the presidency through the Rust Belt. Trump's (former) campaign manager has said that victory depends upon winning Ohio, Florida, and Pennsylvania. Trump has talked about extending the map to Michigan and Wisconsin which, after all, are enthusiastic enough about Republicans to vote them into power in every branch of government and watch them pass Right to Work laws and create punitive social welfare regimes. The electoral map might be realigning to situate Democrats as the representatives of the New Economy and Republicans as the champions of Smokestack industries and their workers. Trump has made it clear that this potential political opposition is real.

But the anxiety and the worry is misplaced. There is no Brexit majority here. The path through the Rust Belt is actually a *cul-de-sac*, not because Trump lacks appeal with white workers, but because there are so few of them left. Cities aren't filled with factories and working-class neighborhoods anymore; they're filled with artist studios, tech startups, coffee bars, and criminalized hyper-ghettos. Latinos have been moving to Chicago, Cleveland, and Milwaukee, but they sure aren't voting for Trump. White people have been leaving many of these states which has increased the minority share of potential voters. Trump polled at 0% among African-Americans in Ohio during the Republican Convention. The Rust Belt economy has been diversifying. Unemployment in Ohio and Pennsylvania has mostly been below the national average since the financial crisis. Ann Arbor, Madison, Grand Rapids, Toledo, Columbus, Cincinnati, Lansing and others have been increasing in importance. These towns are hubs for tech and pharmaceutical startups, advanced manufacturing, and software engineering. They have concentrations of educated people who are less likely to vote for Trump.

The work of economic transformation has already been done in the Rust Belt and the demographic results are real. Trump missed the window for exploiting the alienation of the Rust Belt as a path to national office. White workers were angrier, more numerous, more combative, and more motivated twenty years ago when they were smashing Japanese cars at picnics. But back then unions had more capacity to hold white workers in the Democratic coalition. Unmoored from unions, racism and terrorism can be exploited to harvest white votes. Trump's combativeness is the ideal vehicle for effective exploitation, but the harvest is getting smaller every year. Trump can tap into the dispositions of the white working class, and speak to the issues of Rust Belt workers, but it is doubtful that he can overcome the demographically- and economically-determined fact of their declining relevance.