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TDS STRATEGY MEMO:

THE RECENTLY PUBLISHED BOOK, *RUST BELT UNION BLUES*, BY LAINEY NEWMAN AND THEDA SKOCPOL REPRESENTS A PROFOUNDLY IMPORTANT CONTRIBUTION TO THE DEBATE OVER DEMOCRATIC STRATEGY.

IT CHALLENGES THE DOMINANT THEORY FOR WHY DEMOCRATS HAVE A SUFFERED A MAJOR DECLINE IN WORKING CLASS SUPPORT AND HOW THEY CAN ATTEMPT TO REGAIN IT.

BY
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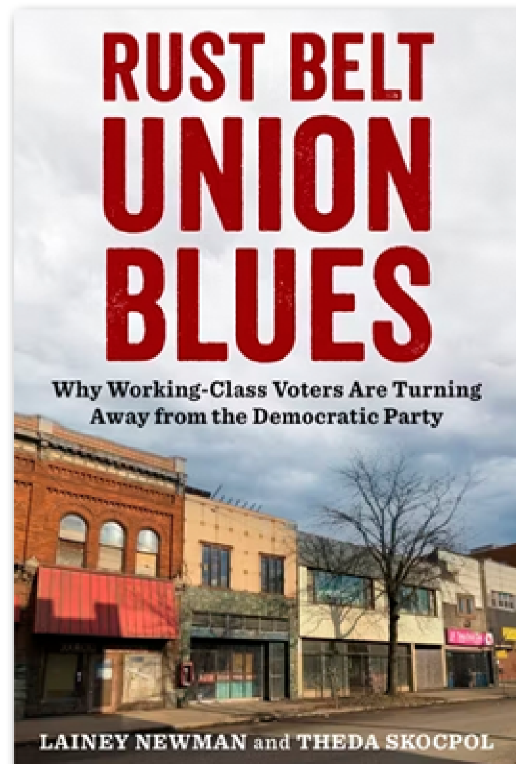

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The recently published book, Rust Belt Union Blues, by Lainey Newman and Theda Skocpol represents a profoundly important contribution to the debate over Democratic strategy.

It challenges the dominant theory for why Democrats have a suffered a major decline in working class support and how they can attempt to regain it.

Andrew Levison

Among Democrats this dominant explanation for the loss of working class support is essentially the following:

1. In the 1950s and 1960s American workers supported the Democrats because the Dems supported solidly progressive economic programs.
2. Beginning in the 1970s and then sharply accelerating in the 1990s during the Clinton Administration, American workers began abandoning the Democrats either because (a) the Democratic Party increasingly supported neo-liberal economic policies that encouraged deindustrialization or (b) because they gradually began adopting a variety of unpopular positions on cultural issues.
3. In 2016 working class voters supported Donald Trump because he offered hollow, demagogic promises of a populist, pro-worker agenda combined with thinly veiled racism.

The conclusion that follows logically from this analysis is obvious: Since the basic problems Democrats face today have occurred because they supported unpopular policies and offered unpopular messages the problem should be able to be solved if Democrats propose better programs and better messages instead. For left-wing Democrats this means more robust and aggressive progressive economic programs while for centrists it implies offering pro-working class policies that appeal to the presumably “moderate” social and cultural views of working class voters.

The problem with this analysis of the Democrats’ problem can be stated simply: it is profoundly and painfully superficial.

It essentially visualizes working people as if they were isolated individuals sitting in their living rooms watching TV or reading a newspaper and thoughtfully evaluating the political messages and policy proposals that they see presented.

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What is entirely ignored in this way of conceptualizing how workers make political choices is the massive effect of social and community life and neighborhood and community institutions on an individual's political opinions – on how daily interaction with friends, neighbors, co-workers and others in a worker's neighborhood workplace or community shape that person's political attitudes.

This very limited "isolated individual" way of understanding working class opinion formation is a result of a major change that occurred in the 1980s in the way that working class opinion was studied.

Before that time the primary way working class attitudes were explored was by ethnographic fieldwork – in depth sociological studies conducted in working class neighborhoods and workplaces and by extended one-on-one, in-depth interviews. Sociologists and other researchers would live in working class communities and work alongside workers in their jobs, often for years, in order to genuinely understand their social world. Sociological interviews would be long and probing.

Some of these in-depth analyses remain sociological classics today: Jonathan Reider's, *Canarse: Jews and Italians of Brooklyn Versus Liberalism* which examined the white backlash of the 1970s, David Halle's, *America's Working Man* about the "Reagan Democrats" of the 1980s and Ruth Milkman's, *Farewell to the Factory* about deindustrialization.

Opinion polling was also occasionally employed in the period before 1980 but was very distinctly secondary. A major reason was that the "working class" was defined by occupation, a trait that was extremely difficult to measure and track on opinion surveys.

During the 1980s, however, in-depth sociological field studies of working class Americans sharply declined and an increasingly abstract, quantitative and computer-assisted approach gradually emerged as an alternative. The "working class" was redefined as people who had less than a college education—which was more easily captured on opinion polls—and their opinions became increasingly studied by the elaborate statistical analysis of polling data, frequently combined with data on election results and the general socio-economic characteristics of different geographic and political areas.[1]

The result was to profoundly obscure the effect of social and community life on political opinions. As Jennifer Silver notes in *We're Still Here: Pain and Politics in the Heart of America* (Oxford University Press 2019).

> "**Public opinion polling tends to isolate people from their social environment**, explaining political world views in a quantitative language of prediction. [researchers] might ask, for example how a person's level of education predicts their likelihood of casting a ballot or supporting raising taxes."

[1]In fact, as academic publications have increasingly favored more and more elaborate mathematical modeling of political opinion the level of complexity in these analyses has increased to the point that now only other specialists in mathematical modeling are able to seriously evaluate the validity of the conclusions that many studies present. When political commentators then quote the conclusions of such studies in popular articles and commentaries, they are effectively asking readers to accept the results on faith as neither they nor their readers are actually able to judge if the conclusions are right or wrong.

This is what makes Newman and Skocpol's new book vitally important. It represents a return to the former tradition of social research.

The book is based on dozens of in-depth interviews conducted in the twenty county area of western Pennsylvania that stretches from Erie to Pittsburgh and which was once a major center for the steel industry and the United Steelworkers Union as well as on information the authors derived from archival materials located in university collections and union archives. These included local union newsletters, meeting records, pamphlets and memos. Both authors grew up in the region and supplemented their research with on-site fieldwork and observation.

The book explains the fundamental role that unions played in the community life of workers in the 1950s and 1960s and how the underlying changes in social life that occurred as unions shrank after deindustrialization began in the 1970s profoundly transformed workers' political attitudes.

The authors clearly state their basic thesis:

> Our claim is that workers in the past and those today do not make choices at the ballot box simply via cost benefit analysis of candidates or policy positions nor have they ever simply responded to top down union directives. We argue that workers [conservative] re-orientation happened at least as much through shifting understandings of ***who we are*** and upended perceptions of which US political party is ***on our side.***
>
> …the union man of the mid-20th century was not a disaggregated bunch of white male lone wolves but rather a dense social web of interconnected workers, family members and neighbors that included grounded union and political organizations along with other community groups.
>
> In this social web union members were committed to supporting one another and giving loyalty, votes and time to their union and other supportive community rooted groups often including the Democratic Party.
>
> …union members expressed loyalty and gave support because they expected these institutions to have their backs and act as partners to them and their families over the long term. Voting Democrat was not just about particular issues for unionized workers instead it was in large part about socially embedded identities and mutuality about *who they were.*
>
> Over the last half a century the phenomena of automatic union man loyalty to the Democratic Party has disappeared, especially in regions with high proportions of white blue collar workers. As we will show this is not just a matter of union organizations declining or disappearing altogether nor a matter of white workers suddenly changing their personal attitudes about race, religion and guns. …male workers have not recently or suddenly started owning or using guns nor have they recently and suddenly started harboring racist and sexist views….

The change occurred instead because of the loss of the social solidarity that made a worker in the 1950s and 1960s define himself as *"a good union man."*

The Good Union Man

What was this *"good union man"*? The authors explain it as follows:

> Through an analysis of hundreds of statements from union records, university archives and interviews we have noticed several kinds of repeated messages that serve to define and reinforce beliefs about the good union man. For clarity and brevity we will refer to these three tenants of the union man as workers *mutual commitment, historical awareness and occupational pride.*

Mutual commitment was a sense of brotherhood or comradeship that was [most clearly] expressed in support for fellow workers if they were injured on the job or became sick. When a fellow unionist was sick, injured, unemployed, grieving or for any reason unable to perform normal work or union duties others would support him. Workers gave support and assistance to other union members because they were "union brothers."

Historical awareness was the memory of what working class life had been like without unions which was passed down from fathers to sons. It produced an appreciation and even a feeling of debt among union members for the sacrifices their predecessors had made in building the union.

Occupational pride was created by the fact that in steel making and other occupations such as mining and auto assembly the jobs were physically demanding, often dangerous and required unique, complex skills and specialized knowledge.

These three characteristics produced a shared sentiment that unionists called "solidarity." It was an outlook that has now been largely lost – a powerful sense of brotherhood, comradeship and shared fate that today is only to be found in groups like units in the military. It is the sense that *"we're all in this together"* which made the common expression *"my union brothers and sisters"* among union workers a genuine reflection of their sentiments and not an empty phrase.

Unions in the community

What reinforced this sentiment and gave it tremendous social power was the extensive and important role that unions played in the local community.

As Newman and Skocpol note :

> Beyond collective bargaining and workplace services unions reached into recreational sports leagues, family affairs, community events, places of worship, schools and local politics across much of the Rust Belt and even other regions of the country. **Unions became cornerstone institutions in the fabric of community relations.**

Union based sports leagues abounded. There were free golf days, field days and fishing and hunting clubs. Unions partnered with several different religious organizations to plan celebrations of Labor. Unions and churches seem to be the two big local organizations that tied the communities together.

Union halls played a major role. Many union and non-union events were held including weddings and banquets as well as conferences, negotiating sessions and governing meetings. The union halls served as rent free sites for all kinds of union recreational activities as well as clubs for teenagers or a scout troop wanting to hold a meeting. A family has a big wedding. A community organization is anxious to sponsor a social affair. Union halls served many of the same kind of needs for community meeting spaces as did the halls owned by the most successful fraternal orders before them. As one unionist expressed it:

> *When I was a young man coming up through the ranks in Pennsylvania every town had two or three union halls. Weddings, community meetings and other affairs would be held there. Union meetings were a place one went for camaraderie and not just to discuss the problems of the day.*

In the 50s Democratic candidates regularly made the rounds of union owned halls and other community institutions. The cycles of social events that were held created space for casual peer-to-peer political talk.

This profound social role was reinforced by the other major social institution in working class life – the local churches which were often socially progressive and firmly pro-union. As the authors note:

In many mid-century industrial communities priests, ministers and other religious leaders were involved with the labor movement, co-sponsoring events with local unions and at times even participating on the picket lines during strikes.

Close Knit Neighborhoods

As Newman and Skocpol note:

Most members of their local unions were congregated in relatively small residential areas and often worked under the same roof as their neighbors for much of their careers. Geographical proximity facilitated additional collegiality and mutual support. As one retired union member put it:

> *"One thing I remember from being a kid was that everyone on the street was in the steel industry, everyone's dad was a steel worker… we had a nice tight knit community the parents all knew each other."*

The fact that many union members were also next door neighbors reinforced the solidarity, shared identity and related social attitudes that made the ideals espoused by and for union men socially credible and civically powerful. Combined with the grass roots, neighborhood role played by Democratic Party precinct captains in many northern working class cities the result was a mutually reinforcing network of pro-union and pro-Democratic social influences in working class life.

The Effects of Union Decline

Around 1960 approximately 186 unions were organized into more than 78,000 union locals across the country with a total of over 18 million members. The largest unions included the Teamsters, United Steel Workers and United Auto Workers, along with the unions of machinists, carpenters, electrical workers and mine workers. In the mid-20th century over a third of the non-agricultural workforce belonged to a labor union.

Four decades later, in 2000, the membership of the largest unions would account for less than 4% of the US labor force. Only 16 United Steel Workers locals remained in operation in western Pennsylvania out of the original 143 USW local unions.

This dramatic decline had a whole series of interconnected impacts on union and worker solidarity.

As Newman and Skocpol note:

> Decades ago in western Pennsylvania our retired interviewees told us that if they were laid off from one job they could simply go across the street or down the road to a different mill plant or factory and get a new, good-paying union job. Good jobs in the industrial Midwest were plentiful and they were close to where people already lived. But toward the end of the century manufacturing companies stopped building new factories in these regions…
>
> Factory towns became ghost towns. Members of the same local union became spread out across many suburbs or exurbs as workers sought new jobs. Worker dispersion made it harder for local union leaders to persuade rank and file members to be active or to attend union sponsored activities or events while the need for wives to work created added childrearing responsibilities for union men.
>
> As one USW local president explained:
>
> > *We used to have meetings at 7:30 at night but members weren't coming so we started having them right after work at 4:15. We tried cooking food, we tried to get pizza, to give tickets away or jackets. It still doesn't entice the people to come.*
> >
> > *In generations past male married workers could stay out late after work to fraternize with union brothers at a local union hall or ethnic club. Today most attempt to hop to child rearing responsibilities. We used to have union meetings on Friday nights but these younger guys are busy with their families on Friday night.*

> This had a profound effect because a chance to socialize with friends beyond work was a major incentive for members to attend union meetings. After the official business of the meeting concluded members would hang around the union hall with one another, sometimes with food and refreshments provided by the union. Now because many workers' families live miles away and their social circles are comprised of people from their home communities, people either drive off right after work or leave quickly at the end of meetings.
>
> Another lost building block of union solidarity among industrial workers that is worth noting was a decline in occupational pride as industrial unions that were facing massive drops in membership started negotiating mergers or looking for new economic sectors to organize. The loss of a shared work experience could leave blue collar unionists feeling less connected with their unions and each other.
>
> Plant closures also pitted workers against one another. It was every man for himself [in seeking to hold on to the shrinking number of jobs]. Workers became competitive with one another which of course had an adverse impact on workers' sense of mutual commitment and solidarity to one another.

The Rise of New Social Organizations in Working Class Life

With the decline of unions as central institutions in working class life new organizations arose to fill the void.

Gun Clubs

As Newman and Skocpol note:

> Although long part of working class social life, guns were not always a top political flashpoint and gun organizations were historically not able to rival or replace union influence. Indeed for much of the first century of its existence the NRA itself was mainly concerned with instructing gun owners on how to shoot accurately.

This changed as new conservative leadership forged alliances with gun manufacturers and conservative organizations to resist gun control legislation, transforming the clubs into quasi-political organizations.

They continue:

> In our interviews gun clubs were mentioned more than any other category of group when we asked about associations present in today's industrial and ex industrial communities. Within a 100 mile radius of the city of Pittsburgh there are over 250 NRA affiliated gun clubs, hunting leagues and rifle ranges. Such clubs are thriving. Most of the gun clubs in the region are affiliated with the NRA and have websites featuring a plethora of social activities.

The clubhouses of gun groups often serve as community gathering places and they typically encourage adherence to attend monthly membership meetings. Many clubs have holiday parties, ladies' nights, bingo nights or card playing events. Some gun clubs have associated golf leagues or baseball teams.

As one retired steel worker said:

> *The gun club is basically a big bar. You basically went there to socialize. It's not because it was a gun club. It could have been anything.*

In fact, gun clubs have become a hub for community engagement. The gun clubs are a place to go to drink on Sundays when the bar is closed. Many people who belong are social members.

Many gun clubs have also evolved into quasi-political organizations. Gun clubs often host events for candidates running for local or state office and have politically oriented Facebook pages and issue legislation alerts.

The New Mega-Churches

As the authors note:

> Churches were a major presence in the industrial towns of western Pennsylvania during the industrial heydays. After the collapse of industry in the 80s smaller ethnic churches struggled to survive, many closed or joined with other churches.

The new Mega-Churches filled the void. Mega churches usually do not operate simply as one big worship service but instead include many subgroups doing special activities involving subsets of congregants. There are special groups offering various self-help programs, exercise classes, hobby groups and social activities. This arrangement offers many routes for recruiting and retaining new adherents. While many of these churches are theologically non-denominational they overwhelmingly share a generally conservative outlook and philosophy while their social events provide many opportunities for Republican political promotions.

The Tea Party

One of the co-authors of *Rust Belt Union Blues*, Theda Skocpol, also authored the most extensive, in-depth field study of the participants in the Tea Party movement. As she and her co-author note:

> Scholars studying the Tea Party at first tended to accept the word of national professional free market advocacy groups like Americans for prosperity that this was a movement of fiscally conservative people opposed to social spending and federal government deficits. But eventually attitude studies and ethnographic and interview based studies established that at the grassroots most local tea party groups were more intensely animated by cultural conservative causes such as opposition to immigration and

> resentment of social programs that might help black, Hispanic, low income and young Americans. Gun rights advocates and sometimes even armed militia men join tea party groups and about half of grassroots participants were also active Christian right adherents.

The tea party easily morphed into the MAGA footsoldiers of the Trump campaign.

The Future

There is a fundamental strategic conclusion that flows from this analysis – one that profoundly challenges basic Democratic assumptions about the way Democratic politics should be conducted today.

It can be stated simply. A Democratic political strategy that is entirely based on promoting Democratic programs, policies and messages can only have a very limited impact on working class attitudes.

Advertisements on TV or social media and speeches by candidates cannot deeply influence working class attitudes unless they are supported and reinforced by a working person's circle of friends, neighbors, co-workers and other members of the local community. If on the other hand such proposals or messages are widely rejected by a person's social circle, whatever initial plausibility they might initially seem to contain quickly dissipates under the weight of social disapproval. Without the social support of local institutions such as unions or progressive churches that in the past reassured a voter that a candidate or political party could be trusted because it was "on their side" few individuals will embrace a view just because it initially seems plausible when presented to them in a speech or TV ad. This is the case regardless of whether the policies and messages being promoted present more progressive economic policies or more "moderate" cultural positions.

The result is that in modern politics variations in the specific policies and messages in a Democratic candidate's platform can only make a significant difference in extremely close elections. In the vast number of red state districts across America today, on the other hand, the massive weight of community opinion makes most voters "follow the crowd."

Many Democratic activists will resist this conclusion. They deeply believe in the power and importance of policies and messages and will insist that the "right" policies and messages can somehow successfully break through the partisan divide and win workers' support. For political commentators and campaign managers this belief is central to their careers and professional lives. They are bewildered that the progressive policies and messages in Biden's reelection campaign have had so little resonance in working class America and insist that the only practical response is simply to push on.

The alternative is deeply daunting – so much so that many Democrats will dismiss it as impossible. It is that Democrats need to gradually and systematically rebuild locally based community institutions that can win workers' trust and act as a counterweight to the conservative/MAGA perspective that now dominates much of working class America.

The rebuilding of local Democratic organizations and grass roots community institutions in working class areas is inescapably a long, slow process that cannot be completed in a single election cycle. It will require years of patient effort before even very modest results can be seen.

The challenge is entirely different from the door to door persuasion and voter mobilization operations that are organized by political campaigns for each candidate and election. The proper comparison is instead with the gradual, painfully difficult struggle for trade union organization that occurred in the 1930s – a process that took most of the decade before the first meaningful union contracts began to be signed.

Newman and Skocpol accurately define the scope of the challenge:

> Democrats have to establish an ongoing cooperative presence in states and districts where electoral wins seem impossible in the near term. Indeed, the meaning of electoral success itself should be redefined to include running locally attuned candidates in every contest and at every level, doing community outreach everywhere and aiming to improve democratic electoral margins even in defeat.
>
> To do this at the local, state and regional levels Democrats cannot just send in operatives from afar every four years for presidential contests. There must be an ongoing progressive presence through credible local voices. This means building for the party even in regions of the country that have become solidly red like many of the western Pennsylvania counties. It also means finding candidates and party leaders who represent the workers of a region not simply members of the intellectual elite.[2]

Many Democrats will object that this approach requires too long to wait for change in working class America but the simple reality is that there is no alternative "quick fix" available. Short term canvassing and get out the vote efforts have very temporary effects which quickly dissipate after an election. Democrats can either commit themselves to the long and hard struggle to rebuild an enduring Democratic presence in working class communities or accept that there will be no progressive change at all.

And there is one important practical step that can be taken now. Democratic strategists are aware that a substantial amount of modern political spending is significantly ineffective. Some races receive massive financial contributions beyond the point where the funds can be productively invested while others are underfunded. TV advertising for many races is purchased beyond the point of diminishing returns.

According to an article in Forbes Magazine, Democratic political spending in the 2020 elections was 4.7 *billion* dollars. Diverting just *one percent* of this sum could finance major long term organizing work along the lines Newman and Skocpol suggest in a wide range of working class districts and communities that now vote heavily Republican. This, more than anything else, will begin to lay a foundation for an enduring Democratic majority.

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[2]Strategies for pursuing this approach are discussed in greater detail in the following TDS Strategy memos:

1. A Serious, Step by Step political strategy for regaining support from a pivotal group of white working class voters who now support the GOP

2. Why Don't Working People Recognize and Appreciate Democratic Programs and Policies That are Clearly in Their Interests?

Note: There are a range of progressive and pro-Democratic organizations that do now conduct organizing and community building efforts in red state and working class areas. They are without exception underfunded and largely unsupported by the national infrastructure of Democratic organizations. The RUBI Directory of Rural Organizations, (https://ruralurbanbridge.org/rubi-publications) as just one example, lists over 120 grass roots organizing efforts, many of them located in largely working class districts and areas.