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TDS STRATEGY MEMO:

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WORKERS FEEL ABOUT JOBS,
LISTEN TO SOCIOLOGISTS, NOT ECONOMISTS.**

BY

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DEMOCRATS: TO UNDERSTAND HOW WORKERS FEEL ABOUT JOBS, LISTEN TO SOCIOLOGISTS, NOT ECONOMISTS.

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Democrats want to better understand how workers feel about jobs and employment but the problem is that they consistently seek answers from the wrong people. They should start listening to the sociologists and anthropologists who actually live and work alongside working class Americans instead of relying entirely on economists.

As deindustrialization became a major social trend in the early 1980's it produced a deep and angry reaction. Major plant closings were not widely reported in the national press but they generated mass protests in many rust belt areas.

Trade unions took a leading role in these protests and workers anger was not immediately directed at Democrats because Reagan and then G.H.W. Bush were the presidents at that time. Workers generally perceived the villains as greedy and irresponsible corporations seeking lower wages rather than blaming Democratic officeholders.

This changed with the election of Bill Clinton. Although the economy grew during his administration and muted the discontent over deindustrialization, anger nonetheless simmered below the surface. The Clinton Administration's eager embrace of NAFTA and free trade and its rejection of the major trade union proposed amendments to the treaty were unpopular with the unions and workers who saw it as encouraging the export of jobs to other countries. During the 1992 campaign independent candidate Ross Perot warned about the "great sucking sound" of jobs being pulled to Mexico but the administration seemed entirely unconcerned.

In response to the complaints from unions and "old-fashioned" labor Democrats, the advocates of the market oriented "Third Way" approach that was favored by the Clinton Administration replied with arguments supplied by economists who asserted the inevitability of the coming "knowledge economy" that would replace the old industrial order. The proper solution to the dislocations of factory closings, these economists casually said, was for workers to increase their education and obtain new skills so that they could move up to new and better jobs.

In op-ed commentaries and articles this thesis was put forward in an extraordinarily condescending and dismissive way. Increased education as the solution was described as simply "*economics 101*," the unquestioned "*right*" answer that "*every economist*" agreed was the only way that workers could actually "*increase their human capital*."

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It is, in fact, amazing to read today the extraordinarily cavalier and self-satisfied way that these economists dismissed the concerns of industrial workers and embraced globalization and lowering barriers to the flight of jobs and capital to other countries. The lingering resentment among working class people was not simply not acknowledged as a legitimate issue by these economists—Clintonian Democrats as well as Republicans.¹

Had Democratic strategists listened instead to the analyses published by the sociologists and anthropologists who were studying the human effects of factory closings they would have been exposed to a profoundly different perspective.² What these sociologists reported was that the post World War II “deal” that industrial workers accepted in working class America was based on the widespread view that that in the “American Dream,” a man should be able to provide for his family by hard work, self-discipline and self-sacrifice even if he had only a high school education. The easy advocacy of higher education sounded sensible to people who themselves had advanced degrees but was cruel to many workers who did not consider advanced education as an option.³

In the aftermath of the 2008 economic collapse, the “*everyone should just stop complaining and get a degree*” attitude became untenable. Candidates began to hear from working class voters an angry and indignant assertion that “*Hey, not everyone should have to go to college.*” In response, advocates of education switched to emphasizing apprenticeship and vocational education. Even today, many Democrats genuinely believe that this alone can be a sufficient democratic response to working class concerns.

But, in reality, even the recommendation of advanced technical training is galling to many working class Americans and Democrats need to understand why.

¹It would be “beating a dead horse” to go back and present any of the vast number of quotes of this kind that exist because a number of the economists connected with the Clinton administration—notably Larry Summers—have forthrightly admitted their error and its disastrous political consequences.

²See, for example:

Ruth Milkman’s *Farewell to the Factory*

Kathryn Marie Dudley’s *The End of the Line*

Gregory Pappas’ *The Magic City*

³See for example:

Michelle Lamont, *The Dignity of Working Men*

“Not everyone should have to go to college”

The advocacy of education or technical training as the major solution to the decline of well paid industrial jobs contains an unexamined assumption about how scholastic ability is distributed in the working class population. In essence, it assumes that such ability is distributed in a normal bell-shaped curve and that therefore the vast majority of working class people ought to be able to master either (1) college level work with proper educational support at the high school level or (2) at least some level of technical education. Those who cannot do either would, in this view, be assumed to constitute a very small number of individuals clustered at the tail end of a normal curve distribution—a number small enough not to have major political implications. In fact, in the neoclassical view that many economists accept, the implicit advice for this group would be that they should simply accept their “lousy” jobs and low salaries because this is all that their labor is really “worth” in the free market.



The social scientists who actually lived and worked with working Americans in order to do their research, however, often noted that working class people’s cognitive ability varied in a “lumpy” rather than smooth fashion. In any work group of 8 or 9 construction workers one will usually find at least one and often two or even three workers who simply and categorically do not like reading or sitting in classrooms. After barely making it out of high school, they will explain that they then firmly decided that they would never, ever, ever go back into a classroom or any other setting where they would be required to read books or training manuals and pass written tests. They will say: *“No way that I’m sitting in a classroom reading books and taking tests again—it just drives me fucking crazy.”*

These workers are not in any conceivable sense “dumb.” They can be smart, clever, profound and witty and visualize construction blueprints in three dimensional detail as well or better than the architects they work with or modify petroleum engineers’ oil refinery pipeline diagrams to suit site conditions or go hunting and fishing with their children and explain forest ecosystems and animal behavior to them in as much detail as college zoology students. But they very specifically do not like to read textbooks or training manuals or sit in classrooms.⁴

In the past these workers were not noticeably distinct from other workers because most job training was done through old-fashioned one-on-one apprenticeships that were taught while on the job. In construction apprentices would begin as laborers, gradually learn basic carpentry and then progress to skills like framing, trim carpentry and cabinetmaking. In the past there were many occupations that could be learned in this way and which gave these workers just

⁴This distinct and seemingly incongruous variability in scholastic aptitude can, in fact, be traced, not to any defect of overall intelligence, but rather to very specific types of neural-level cognitive functioning – e.g. the fluency and speed of visual or oral computation or specific data errors in visual processing subsystems (e.g. dyslexia). It can also be related to specific neurological patterns that affect physical behavior such as ADHD that make it difficult for some people to sit still for long periods. In the past when “intelligence” was simplistically visualized as a single general IQ, people with these characteristics were often dismissed as “dumb” or “lazy” by teachers and other observers. It is now well understood by cognitive psychologists and neuroscientists that individual learning styles and characteristics are varied and complex but this massive body of research is entirely ignored by economists in their discussions of education as a solution to unstable, low wage jobs.

as much pride, dignity and sense of self worth as any of their co-workers. But this is no longer the case. Many “vocational” certifications for auto mechanics or heating and air conditioning technicians now require associate level college degrees and many other less formal programs still require classroom attendance along with one-on-one, on the job mentoring.

This has profound political implications. In interviews and focus groups one often encounters a deep and intense resentment of Democrats and progressives because so many blithely recommend increased education as if it was something that was easily within anyone’s ability. To the many workers who suffered intensely in school because teachers and the “smart kids” condescended to them because they did not excel academically, the progressive and democratic tendency to treat them in precisely the same way is intensely infuriating. And their friends and relatives share their resentment because they look back to a time when hard work and self discipline were enough to provide a worker with dignity and pride.

Why don’t they just move?

Along with the endorsement of education as the “right” solution to deindustrialization and especially after 2008 when the reality of many “left behind” areas became more apparent, there were also increasing suggestions that workers themselves were at fault for their unemployment and poverty because they refused to move to places with more jobs.



Like the suggestion of education, this also reflects a myopic middle class bias. People with college educations are taught from a young age that they may go off to a college far from home after high school and then move to whatever area offers the greatest opportunities in their chosen profession.

Working class Americans, however, do not share this footloose attitude. Home and family and relatives and community are central to their values and their lives and they do not want to break those ties. John Judis described this perspective well.

Many Americans (primarily but not all white) who once lived comfortably in older Midwestern and Southern towns have had important parts of their identity stripped away by the transformation of the U.S. economy. Many of them once enjoyed lifetime employment from the same company and could identify with that company — whether it was General Motors or Sears. They also may have enjoyed the protection and solidarity of belonging to a union. They lived in neighborhoods and frequented the same bars, restaurants, churches and bowling alleys. They and their friends had gone to the same high schools and followed the same local teams. They owned their homes and had deep, daily relationships with their parents and extended families who all lived nearby. Many of the men had served in the armed forces and belonged to veterans’ groups composed of their friends and neighbors.⁵

⁵https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/magazine/wp/2018/11/29/feature/the-key-to-understanding-americas-red-blue-split-isnt-ideology-or-culture-its-economics/?utm_term=.c123bc542264

For them, the idea of having to move away from their homes has a profoundly different meaning than for middle class youth who are socialized to accept a lifestyle based on having to relocate to growing dynamic cities and areas.

The working class backlash against democratic indifference to their difficulties sharply accelerated after the massive economic downturn of 2008. White working class support for Obama dropped from 40% in 2008 to 36% in 2012 and then the bottom dropped out in 2016 when Hillary received only 29% of the white working class vote.

The shock of Donald Trump's victory did sharply accelerate Democratic rethinking about these issues. The gradually decreasing unemployment rate, it was more clearly realized, obscured the underlying problems of stagnant wages and unstable jobs for millions of workers and motivated Democrats to shift their focus from a simplistic advocacy of education and relocation to policies that would directly increase working class wages and income. Major 2020 Democratic candidates including Joe Biden, Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, Kamala Harris, Amy Klobuchar, Beto O'Rourke, Julian Castro and John Hickenlooper all announced their support for policies like a \$15 minimum wage and revisions in the tax code to raise workers' after tax income. Only a few years earlier the \$15 minimum wage had been considered controversial.

This was unquestionably a major step forward but it still failed to fully come to terms with the attitudes about wages and jobs that were at the heart of many workers discontent.

Why factory jobs were “good” jobs

The studies by sociologists and anthropologists who examined the effects of factory closings on workers converged on the recognition that the relatively high wages factory work provided in the 1950's and 1960's represented only one element of the overall reason for workers appreciation of industrial labor. In unionized factories workers enjoyed an extraordinary range of union provided benefits that included annual vacations, retirement benefits, health insurance and paid sick days, and—absolutely critically—job security and protection from arbitrary dismissal.



And even beyond these material benefits there was a social system in the factory that provided workers with a profound sense of dignity, representation and control over their jobs. The heart of this system was the local shop steward; the worker's representative who was a fellow worker elected by his co-workers and empowered to enforce the rules of the union contract. The union contract set limits on the number hours and shifts that could be demanded, when overtime had to be paid and, critically, on the speed of work that could be demanded from an assembly line worker or the “piecework” rate for jobs paid by the number of items produced per hour. The shop steward system also gave workers protection from arbitrary dismissal or disciplinary action and a “grievance procedure,” an industrial tribunal run by union and management where workers could protest management actions that they felt were unfair.

It was all these factors and not just a worker's wages that made factory work in the post World War II era a “good Job” despite the hard work and self-discipline that it demanded.

Welcome to the modern world of “lousy” jobs

When this is compared with the conditions of work today, the difference is stunning. Consider, for example, the situation in warehouse work which is now a major employer of manual workers.



Here is a description of the conditions on one such job.

My scanner tells me in what exact section — there are nine merchandise sections, so sprawling that there’s a map attached to my ID badge — of vast shelving systems where the item resides. It also tells me how many seconds I should take to get there. Dallas sector, section yellow, row H34, bin 22, level D: wearable blanket. Twenty seconds. At 5-foot-9, I’ve got a decently long stride, and I cover the 20 steps and locate the exact shelving unit in the allotted time only if I don’t hesitate for a second and walk as fast as I can or even jog. Often as not, I miss my time target.

Everyone in here is hustling. At the announcement to take one of our two 15-minute breaks, we hustle even harder.... [because] We lose more time if we want to pee. People who work at Amalgamated are always working this fast...

Near the end of my third day I get written up. I sent two of some product down the conveyor line when my scanner was only asking for one; the product was boxed in twos, so I should’ve opened the box and separated them, but I didn’t notice because I was in a hurry. With an hour left in the day, I’ve already picked 800 items. Despite moving fast enough to get sloppy, my scanner tells me I’m fulfilling only 52 percent of my goal...

Temp agencies keep the stink of unacceptable labor conditions off the companies whose names you know. When temps working at a Walmart warehouse sued for not getting paid for all their hours, and for then getting sent home without pay for complaining, Walmart — not technically their employer — wasn’t named as a defendant. Temporary staffers aren’t legally entitled to decent health care because they are just short-term “contractors” no matter how long they keep the same job. They aren’t entitled to raises, either, and they don’t get vacation and they’d have a hell of a time unionizing and they don’t have the privilege of knowing if they’ll have work on a particular day or for how long they’ll have a job.⁶

Here is another description of warehouse work:

Dickerson quickly discovered that the work wasn’t easy, if there was any work at all. Each morning she showed up at her warehouse, she wasn’t sure whether she’d be assigned a trailer and earn a day’s pay. She says there were days that she and many temps were told simply to go home, without pay, since there wasn’t as much product to unload as expected.

⁶<https://theweek.com/articles/475459/day-life-warehouse-wage-slave>

...The difficulty of a lumberer's day often went according to chance. A lucky lumberer might be assigned a container filled with boxes of Kleenex or stuffed animals, while an unlucky lumberer might pull a container filled with kiddie swimming pools or 200-pound trampolines. For the heaviest lifts, Dickerson would be assigned a partner, and the two would split the pay for the trailer, moving the massive boxes onto pallets by hand.

For a while, Dickerson worked according to "piece rate" — she was paid not by the hour but by the trailer — a stressful pay scheme meant to encourage her and her colleagues to work faster and faster, and one that the labor movement worked hard to abolish in many industries in the 20th century. Each paycheck was different than the last, and most of them were disappointingly low, she says. In her year at the warehouse, Dickerson says she never had health benefits, sick days or vacation days. If she didn't unload containers, she didn't get paid.

...For one former Teamster who found himself unemployed last year, the growth of the logistics industry in Will County looked like his ticket back into the middle class.

But about six months in, he says he started to understand how everything worked by design. He was shocked by the warehouse's turnover rate, as new workers constantly came and went, often leaving under bad terms. He guesses the average worker lasted three months, many of them eventually being "pointed out." As in many of Joliet's warehouses, he and his colleagues were working under a demerit system, receiving points for being tardy, missing shifts or not "making rate." Once you hit 10 points, you're gone, he says.

He now argues that workers don't last in part because they're not supposed to. New workers, after all, are cheaper workers. And he also says the little-known temp agencies are there largely to facilitate the churn.

One year into his job, he says he was canned after barely missing his rate three days in a row, earning three consecutive writeups — a fireable offense. He wasn't shocked. Having just hit his one-year anniversary, he had become expensive, at least by warehouse standards. His pay had risen to \$14 an hour — still not a living wage for the area by some measures, but more than many lumpers will ever see. He had also just started to accrue paid vacation time. Or at least he thought he had.⁷

The problems faced by truck drivers are, in one sense, entirely different from those of warehouse workers. But, at the same time, they reflect the same underlying problem of powerlessness and lack of representation that have become exponentially worse since the degree of unionization in the industry radically declined. As a New York Times article noted:

The 1.7 million heavy and tractor-trailer truck drivers in the United States earned an average of \$44,500 last year, according to government data. That's little changed in inflation-adjusted terms over the past several years. Over the past several decades, inflation-adjusted driver pay has fallen sharply. The 1980 census found that the average male driver — virtually all drivers at the time were men — earned roughly \$17,400 in 1979,

⁷https://www.huffpost.com/entry/new-blue-collar-temp-warehouses_n_1158490

or about \$55,500 in 2017 dollars. That pay drop has coincided with drivers working longer hours — 60- to 80-hour weeks are common, drivers and researchers say — because they spend many more idle hours than they used to at warehouses and stores waiting to pick up cargo and make deliveries, time that typically goes unpaid.

Many truck drivers are paid on a per-mile basis, which means that some of them earn less than the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour. The economics of trucking can be bleaker still for drivers who are classified as independent contractors. Some even wind up owing trucking companies money because a truck lease, insurance, fuel and other expenses can add up to more than their per-mile reimbursement rate...

...The American Trucking Associations, citing its own research, claims that long-haul drivers with irregular routes can earn more than \$53,000 a year. The group adds that many trucking companies offer signing bonuses to try to attract new workers, and that drivers who work for private corporate fleets often earn salaries of more than \$86,000 a year. Indeed, drivers who work as direct employees of companies like Walmart and UPS make a middle-class income, have predictable schedules and enjoy other benefits. Some drivers in the industry, including at UPS, are represented by the Teamsters union. **But those drivers are the top echelon of the occupation and are not representative of the hundreds of thousands of people who toil in the industry's underbelly.**

Many long-haul truck drivers work for much smaller companies that pay modest rates — for one eight-day trip in 2013, Mr. Oliveira took home \$482.85 for driving 6,156 miles — and few are unionized. These companies typically haul cargo for retailers, manufacturing companies and other businesses on a for-hire basis. They often get called at the last minute to pick up loads and compete intensely on price.⁸

One could cite similar examples of job insecurity, poor working conditions and lack of representation in industry after industry in the modern economy. In the huge fast-food industry a major problem is industrial safety and particularly the danger of serious burns and injuries caused by trying to work too fast in an environment filled with boiling hot cooking oil and constantly operating stoves and griddles. In the retail sales industry, a major complaint is the widespread practice of requiring workers to be “on-call” without compensation and often given inadequate hours of work which is a particular problem for workers with children. Similar “job conditions” issues for workers can also be found among restaurant workers, waitresses and in a host of other occupations in the modern economy.⁹

As these examples illustrate, what makes so many of the working class jobs in the modern, de-unionized economy “bad jobs” is not simply their hourly wage. It is the specific and distinct daily conditions of work in different industries and the employee's lack of any control, power or dignity on the job.

⁸<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/11/opinion/sunday/the-trouble-with-trucking.html>

⁹See, for example:

Gary Fine's *Kitchens*

Greta Paules' *Dishing It Out*

If Democrats want to convince workers that they are genuinely “on their side” and will work to represent them in the political system, they have to show that they understand this basic reality. Just saying in speeches that “workers need higher wages” cannot substitute for showing workers that Democrats authentically understand the specific reasons why the jobs of today are so profoundly inferior to the “good jobs” of the industrial past. Workers need to see and hear Democratic candidates who can speak specifically and sincerely about the wide range of specific on the job problems that exist and how they disrupt workers’ lives.

But what can Democratic candidates propose? In circumstances where unionization is possible, it represents one major strategy for reform and in recent weeks Elizabeth Warren, Joe Biden, Amy Klobuchar and Pete Buttigieg have shown up on the picket line in support of striking workers at the Stop and Shop grocery chain which is a welcome and important trend. But there are many situations where unionization is simply not a practical option. Since the 1970’s Republican administrations have repeatedly weakened the legal status of unions to the point where organizing drives frequently face insuperable obstacles. In addition, vast numbers of workers do not see the value in unions because they no longer have any memory of the benefits that unions once provided.

One practical step democratic candidates at every level can take, however, is to place ordinary working people in their campaign organizations and incorporate their ideas and insights into speeches and proposals. A great deal of the working class support Trump received in 2016 was not because working people actually believed that he would be able to reverse the loss of factory jobs. They voted for him simply because he was the first to explicitly identify with their discontent and sympathize with their problems.

There is, in fact, an interesting situation developing for the 2020 elections. Next year Trump and other GOP candidates will be basing their campaigns on claiming credit for the growing economy while studiously ignoring all the continuing sources of discontent in the daily working life of working class Americans. As a result, Democrats will have the opportunity to speak to the enduring sources of working class discontent—as Trump did in 2016—while Trump and the GOP will be opposing every specific Democratic proposal that addresses workers genuine problems and concerns. GOP boasts about the “wonderful” economy can be made to look quite hollow if they are directly contrasted with the rejection of democratic proposals to address real working class needs.

Democrats lost the respect and support of factory workers when they did nothing as jobs disappeared. Are they going to do the same thing again with auto mechanics and construction workers?

Beyond this, Democrats also need to understand the way that work in specific occupations is intimately linked to workers’ larger lives and culture. Democrats failed to understand why workers deeply regretted the loss of factory jobs (*After all, weren’t there all those “better” jobs” waiting for them*) and why jobs and professions that educated middle class people view with disdain are deeply valued by working class Americans.



It is profoundly important for Democrats to understand this because there are now two other major working class occupations that are extremely threatened by new technologies that could cause them to decline as dramatically as manufacturing. The new electric, battery operated cars require very little repair and maintenance and a transition to them will gradually but steadily shrink the entire automobile repair industry. As an example, A BMW M3 has 1,200 separate engine parts while a Tesla Model 3 has 50.

In similar fashion, the quality of factory manufactured modular homes is now rapidly approaching the level where these products can be used not just to construct homes in the \$200,000-300,000 range but even for quality houses in the \$800,000-1,000,000 price range—and for small- and medium-sized commercial and multifamily housing as well. This has the potential to fundamentally change the residential and small commercial construction industry.

These two industries play a massive role in modern working class life and their decline will have an impact not only on the workplace but also on working class social life and culture.

The auto repair industry, for example, does not just provide relatively well paid skilled jobs but also profoundly shapes contemporary working class leisure and culture. The effects extend from fathers and sons repairing and rebuilding car engines in their back yard garage to the spread of specialty machine shops that design custom motorcycles (made popular by TV shows like “American Chopper”) to attendance at the wildly popular spectacles of the Indie 500 and Monster Truck racing. The importance of automobile engine repair in working class popular culture is enshrined in famous movies and TV shows that range from Burt Reynolds turbocharged Trans-Am in “Smoky and the Bandit” to the Dodge Charger called “The General Lee” in “The Dukes of Hazard” TV series to the obsessively portrayed high-performance muscle cars in the modern “Fast and Furious” movie franchise.

The mastery of cars and their engines is thus a deeply embedded part of working class culture and its appeal is easy to understand. Repairing and supercharging automobile engines is something that gives sense of self-worth, mastery and achievement for someone who cannot write C++ computer programs or design immersive video games.

The construction industry provides and even more dramatic example of the importance that an occupation can have beyond its hourly wage. There is a large ethnographic literature about the distinct perspective of construction workers – the immense pride and sense of mastery that comes from the craftsmanship that is required to build houses out of stacks of wood and brick. Construction workers will routinely say that they profoundly enjoy working out of doors and feeling the physical strength they develop from daily hard labor. Many will say simply that “I’d go right out of my friggin’ mind sitting behind a desk in an office all day. I just flat couldn’t do it.”¹⁰

¹⁰See for example

Herbert Appleblum’s *Royal Blue*

Mike Cherry’s *On High Steel*

Khris Papp’s *Working Construction*

Assembling manufactured housing, which is done to a large extent using specialized cranes and forklift trucks, requires far less labor than conventional construction and offers relatively little of the attractions above. Progressives and Democrats will not be viewed by construction workers as being meaningfully “on their side” if their only response to the decline of the industry is in essence: “Well, yes, you need to just accept things and adjust to other service sector jobs but don’t worry, we Democrats will develop and implement plans that will increase your wages and benefits.”

The political reality must be faced. Industrial workers in the Rust Belt did not perceive Democrats to be “on their side” or “defending their interests” when so many economists in the Democratic world essentially presented the “you just need to learn to adjust” perspective during the 80’s, 90’s and 2000’s and auto mechanics and construction workers will be no more impressed by that same perspective in the coming years. On the contrary, they will view progressives and Democrats as being profoundly out of touch with their life and culture and unaware and deeply indifferent to their feelings.

Economists will predictably howl that there is no way to stop technological progress and they will unleash stern and sanctimonious finger-wagging warnings about the dangerous “siren songs” of “protectionism,” “luddism” and “techno-phobia.” But, in fact, there are many sensible ways to cushion the social impact of technological change – one being simply to reject the inevitable industry sponsored legislation that will artificially encourage the elimination of jobs. The truth is that the “export” of industrial jobs to other countries in the 1980’s was not simply the result of abstract “market forces.” On the contrary, it was tremendously encouraged and facilitated by specific legislative changes achieved by aggressive lobbying from business and industry groups.¹¹

The political reality should be stated clearly. Economists were fundamentally wrong in the 1980’s and 1990’s when they casually dismissed working class concerns about deindustrialization and they will be wrong again when they repeat the same dismissive arguments today. It’s time that Democrats start paying attention to the social scientists who actually live and work among working class Americans if they sincerely want to win the trust of those Americans and genuinely represent them.

¹¹Judith Stein’s *Pivotal Decade*