



TDS STRATEGY MEMO:

PROGRESSIVES NEED TO APOLOGIZE TO OLIVER ANTHONY

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HE CAN TALK TO THEM BETTER THAN THEY CAN
AND IF DEMOCRATS EVER WANT TO REGAIN THEIR LOST
WORKING CLASS SUPPORT THEY NEED TO SHUT UP
AND LISTEN TO GUYS LIKE HIM INSTEAD OF TELLING HIM
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BY

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When Oliver Anthony's country-folk song, *Rich Men North of Richmond* became a viral sensation with millions of listeners, the mainstream press, noting that the song was being heavily endorsed by the conservative media and leading MAGA Republicans like Margarie Taylor Green and Kari Lake, quickly decided to categorize it as part of a trend that included other more clearly MAGA/GOP influenced songs and movies that have been released this summer.

Progressives had two reactions – some fiercely condemned Anthony while others condescendingly lectured him.

Rolling Stone called the song “welfare-bashing, and conspiracy-tinged.” Writing in *The Nation*, Nicholas Lehman said, “The American right is singing a new tune [whose] lyrics chime with dominant social myths of Trumpian politics...[the song is] in the wheelhouse of the Q anon movement. Everything about the breakout appeal of “rich men north of Richmond” is steeped in an evangelical culture of bellicose ideological confrontation” and Greg Sargent opined that, “the message is that the overworked and underpaid should blame their plight largely on high taxes, welfare cheats and cultural elites monitoring their thoughts for any departure from woke orthodoxy. Business lobbyists and right-wing politicians have told versions of this distorted story for decades.”

Other commentators were more sympathetic to the strong working class elements in the song but regretted that Oliver did not understand who his real enemies were. As one commentary noted, “I have no doubt that Oliver Anthony is genuine in his rage but Oliver my red-haired brother while you are getting mad about how much taxes comes out of your check have you ever thought about how much your boss takes out of your check?”

But after the GOP exploited his song as a prop in the first debate, Anthony dropped a hand grenade in the discussion that blew up the whole farce. Anthony announced, “It’s aggravating seeing people on conservative news trying to identify with me like I’m one of them. **I wrote that song about those people.** That song has nothing to do with Joe Biden. You know, it’s a lot bigger

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than Joe Biden. That song's written about the people on that stage and a lot more too, not just them, but definitely them."

... I see the right trying to characterize me as one of their own and I see the left trying to discredit me, I guess in retaliation."

He continued:

"I do need to address the left ... because "they're sending a message out that ... 'Rich Men North of Richmond' is an attack against the poor. If you listen to my other music, it's obvious that all of my songs that reference class defend the poor." "At some point, I will dissect all my lyrics of all my songs if that's what I need to do," he said.

So, instead of just attacking him, let's stop and listen to what Oliver Anthony actually says. In a Facebook post he says the following:

I wrote the music I wrote because I was suffering with mental health and depression. These songs have connected with millions of people on such a deep level because they're being sung by someone feeling the words in the very moment they were being sung. No editing, no agent, no bullshit. Just some idiot and his guitar. The style of music that we should have never gotten away from in the first place.

So that being said, I have never taken the time to tell you who I actually am. Here's a formal introduction:

My legal name is Christopher Anthony Lunsford. My grandfather was Oliver Anthony, and "Oliver Anthony Music" is a dedication not only to him, but 1930's Appalachia where he was born and raised. Dirt floors, seven kids, hard times.

In 2010, I dropped out of high school at age 17. I worked multiple plant jobs in Western NC, my last being at the paper mill in McDowell county. I worked 3rd shift, 6 days a week for \$14.50 an hour in a living hell. In 2013, I had a bad fall at work and fractured my skull. It forced me to move back home to Virginia. Due to complications from the injury, it took me 6 months or so before I could work again.

From 2014 until just a few days ago, I've worked outside sales in the industrial manufacturing world. My job has taken me all over Virginia and into the Carolinas, getting to know tens of thousands of other blue collar workers on job sites and in factories. I've spent all day, everyday, for the last 10 years hearing the same story. People are SO damn tired of being neglected, divided and manipulated.

There's nothing special about me. I'm not a good musician, I'm not a very good person. I've spent the last 5 years struggling with mental health and using alcohol to drown it. I am sad to see the world in the state it's in, with everyone fighting with each other.

This doesn't sound very much like GOP propaganda. And neither do the lyrics in his song:

*I've been sellin' my soul, workin' all day
Overtime hours for bullshit pay
So I can sit out here and waste my life away
Drag back home and drown my troubles away...*

*Young men are puttin' themselves six feet in the ground
'Cause all this damn country does is keep on kickin' them down...*

*...Cause your dollar ain't shit and it's taxed to no end
'Cause of rich men north of Richmond.*

This doesn't sound like *"The American right singing a new tune [whose] lyrics chime with dominant social myths of Trumpian politics."* It's basically saying that workers are getting screwed by rich men. Since when has this been conservative dogma?

So exactly what are Oliver Anthony's deep ideological thought-crimes against progressivism?

In one verse he sings:

*Lord, we got folks in the street, ain't got nothin' to eat
And the obese milkin' welfare
Well, God, if you're 5-foot-3 and you're 300 pounds
Taxes ought not to pay for your bags of fudge rounds.*

It's easy for Progressives to condemn this attitude – it not only stereotypes welfare recipients but slips in a gratuitous micro-aggression against the obese.

But there are two things that Progressives should keep in mind before allowing their sanctimony to get totally out of hand.

First, anyone who reads the hundreds and hundreds of pages of focus groups where working class people complain about welfare cheating will notice one interesting fact. A vast number of the anecdotes the participants offer are not repetitions of conservative clichés about African-Americans and "welfare Cadillacs" but rather very specific stories about these workers' able-bodied friends, neighbors and relatives who are drawing undeserved disability payments or workman's compensation or cashing social security checks that should be going to someone else in the person's family **and their sense of contempt for these people who they know personally is far stronger than it is against any abstract stereotypes.**

Second, the sense of injustice that workers feel about able-bodied people getting money without working is a far different thing when a worker's job is hard, physical labor than it is when the job is sitting at a desk in an office or working remotely from home. To the office worker, the injustice is abstract but to a construction worker who spends all day driving nails into 2 by 4s with a 30 lb.

nail gun or running PVC pipe or 110 volt electrical wire through a crawl space, on the other hand, the unfairness is a raw physical reality. They come home with throbbing cramps in their calves and palms of their hands and aches in their back and stiffness and swelling in the joints of their knees and hips that does not go away even hours after coming home and leads many to self-medicate with alcohol or drugs as Anthony Oliver does.

Now here's an interesting sociological thought experiment. Take 20 people who work at a desk all day long and who think that workers' complaints about welfare cheating are just Republican propaganda and then make them work as mason's apprentices for a year moving bricks and cinder blocks around on a construction site and then ask them about their attitudes again. The results would be quite revealing about the sociological roots of workers' views regarding welfare.

The second of Oliver's ideological thought crimes is a passing reference to the outrage over Jeffrey Epstein's sex scandals.

*I wish politicians would look out for miners
And not just minors on an island somewhere*

Many observers link this to the internet based Q anon propaganda that attacks Democrats as sex perverts who run child sex rings. The fact that Oliver's social media includes some right wing memes is taken as proof that he is "*in the wheelhouse of the Q anon movement.*"

But wait a minute. In recent years all kinds of internet-based conspiracy ideas have become widely circulated in working class America. There is no escaping it. Any time nutty old aunt Alice sends a phony news clip that a worker clicks on in Facebook or some other social media site it starts a computer driven algorithm that diverts all kinds of right wing material to him, all of it elegantly crafted to elicit clicks, that pile up in his or her social media.

But what alternative media do you expect a working class person to be reading or listening to instead – the latest issue of the Nation? The 7 O'clock news on MSNBC? Special issues of Jacobin? The information world in which millions of working class Americans live is filled with conservative material and if reading that stuff automatically makes a worker an extremist, even if he is as pro-worker as Oliver Anthony, then Democrats might as well give up any hope right now and move to Norway.

Oh, yes, and Oliver's final ideological thought crime was "finding Jesus" after his accident and expressing his pro-worker attack on rich men in Christian terms. Responding to the GOP use of his song in the first debate, Anthony opined that, "*Just like those once wandering in the desert, we have lost our way from God and have let false idols distract us and divide us. It's a damn shame*" which led one Progressive writer to dismiss him as "*steeped in an evangelical culture of bellicose ideological confrontation.*" Geeze, dude, you need to switch to decaf.

So what's the final judgment on Anthony? His views make him less than the pure and noble working class hero that Progressives wish would emerge – a swaggering, white working class hero who looks like Indiana Jones, presents progressive ideas like a combination of Bernie Sanders, Cornel Wild and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and who speaks like he's memorized the latest edition of the official guide to proper *“Woke, systematically Non Caucasian hetero-patriarchal elocution.”*

But in the real world where American workers live things are not so neat and tidy.

But now here's an irony. When the heroic organizers of the industrial unions in the 1930's went out into homes and factories to organize unions, the workers they encountered were far more conservative than many workers today. The vast majority were so deeply opposed to taking “handouts” from the New Deal government that they refused to accept government “relief” money, even in the depths of the Great Depression. They were clearly and passionately Christian, casually and deeply racist in a way that modern Progressives cannot even begin to imagine and millions listened to the radio programs fiery right wing demagogues like Father Coughlin and Hwey Long. If the union organizers of the 1930's took the same sanctimonious attitude toward white workers that many Progressives take today, there never would have been an industrial trade union movement or a New Deal.

So I'll say it again:

Progressives need to apologize to Oliver Anthony.

He understands working people better than they do, he can talk to them better than they can and if Democrats ever want to regain their lost working class support they need to shut up and listen to guys like him instead of telling him to shut up listen to them.