

## Wayne O'Leary

# The Party That Was

The worst-kept secret in American politics today is that Democrats are no longer the party of the working class. With the exception of African Americans and union members, the working class, a core component of the old Roosevelt coalition, has begun voting for the GOP. This is a large part of the reason for the Democrats' "shellacking" in the recent midterm elections; it also goes far to explain the perverse appeal of the tea party and faux working-class warriors like Sarah Palin.

The process of electoral class realignment is most striking in the rust-belt states of the Upper Midwest, the region that's been loosely defined as running from Oshkosh, Wis., to Scranton, Pa. This, of course, is the one-time industrial heartland of the US, the home of those celebrated well-paid manufacturing jobs that once provided an entrée into the middle class. But a third of those jobs have disappeared since 2000, decimating the associated union movement, former bedrock of political liberalism. The trouble with the Democrats is they don't seem to care and haven't for some time.

When's the last time Democrats did something for average workers besides helping to facilitate the shipment of their jobs overseas? On most of the economic priorities of the Obama administration — the belated attempt to strengthen the National Labor Relations Board is an exception — the working class has been an afterthought. Job One was to save the big banks, followed by enactment of the NAFTA-style South Korean free-trade agreement. The promised Employee Free Choice Act aimed at card-check unionization quickly disappeared without a trace. There was the stimulus, to be sure, but most of its work provisions were geared to preserving essential public-sector jobs (policemen, firemen, and the like) and generating high-tech employment — "the jobs of the future" — in areas like green energy.

The erstwhile Democratic working class is more interested in the disappearing jobs of today, which are fast becoming the jobs of the past. By and large, the Obama administration and its complacent supporters in Congress are just as glad to see these jobs go — or, at least, not sufficiently concerned to question the relentless deindustrialization that's eliminating them. This accounts for the startling admission of frustrated Democratic Rep. Marcy Kaptur, who represents a struggling blue-collar district in Ohio, that she's ready to work in the upcoming 112th Congress with tea-party Republicans willing to address the crisis in manufacturing employment. The clear implication is that the present policies of the Democratic White House won't help her constituents.

That perception may well be correct. Barack Obama is the third Democratic president in a row, following Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton, to emerge from the so-called centrist wing of the party, which subscribes to conservative, pro-corporate economic policies. Carter started the ball rolling with transportation deregulation in the late 1970s. Over the ensuing generation, the political Zeitgeist shifted so far to the right that today Carter seems positively left-liberal compared to those who followed him.

Clinton, part of the wave of "third-way" advocates that co-opted the world's center-left political parties in the 1990s, set the template Democrats are still following. This has produced an establishment party that partners with high finance, keeps business taxes low, ignores labor

unions (except at election time), rejects policy solutions that are not market based, favors economic globalization and free trade, and identifies with the prosperous upper-middle class. None of this is surprising at a time when about half of Congress is composed of millionaires (compared to 1% of the population) and the median annual income of the entire body hovers around \$900,000. It also jibes nicely with the corporate takeover of Democratic campaign funding, a product of the Clinton years.

Barack Obama and the people around him are completely at home in the political world created by the Clintonian centrists. In fact, Bill Clinton has in a sense become Obama's guru. There was Bubba in late December, his face ravaged by too many soulless compromises, conferring his blessing on Obama's wretched tax-cut agreement, calling it a good deal. The current president himself, surrounded by contented Republicans, approvingly brandished his extension of the Bush tax cuts for the rich with the words, "This is what compromise looks like." It can be argued that Obama had no choice but to compromise, and that may be so; yet, his unseemly eagerness to embrace the concept suggests that, in this instance, it was not a hard decision. Meanwhile, the president's few words of combative rhetoric were reserved for the reluctant and unenthusiastic liberals of his own party.

Make no mistake, the deficit-enhancing tax cuts for the rich instituted a decade ago are now permanent. Obama's vow to get them repealed in 2012 is so much political window dressing; it won't happen in a presidential election year, especially with Republicans dominating Congress. The bad news for the wavering Democratic working class is that it will almost certainly pay the price and make up the revenue shortfall by absorbing "bipartisan" spending cuts aimed at the retirement programs it most cherishes: Social Security and Medicare. This is while a Democratic administration simultaneously pursues further free-trade deals that undermine the jobs critical to sustaining these same working-class Americans during their pre-retirement years.

Much was made of the progressive successes of President Obama during the late lame-duck session of Congress, but it's notable that most of those successes were on strictly noneconomic issues of limited import to the working class. Corporate America, which ultimately calls the shots, doesn't care if gays enlist in the military, as long as they don't join a labor union when they're discharged. Social reforms like the repeal of "Don't ask, don't tell" are a safe bet for contemporary Democrats, but enacting economic reforms beneficial to working-class Americans is something else entirely; Wall Street wouldn't like it, and bipartisanship won't allow it.

It's far easier to ask the working class for continued sacrifice, in order to please the middle-class independents who are becoming Obama's most sought-after voting bloc. But as Democrats are learning to their sorrow, the once-loyal working class is mad as hell and undisposed to take it anymore, even if that means casting counterproductive protest votes for Republicans.

*Wayne O'Leary is a writer in Orono, Maine, specializing in political economy.*

**From The Progressive Populist, February 15, 2011**

---

[Populist.com](http://www.populist.com)

[News](#) | [Current Issue](#) | [Back Issues](#) | [Essays](#) | [Links](#)

[About the Progressive Populist](#) | [How to Subscribe](#) | [How to Contact Us](#)

---

**Copyright © 2011 The Progressive Populist**  
PO Box 819, Manchaca TX 78652