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Obama and the Invisible Workingman

By **David Paul Kuhn**

This month, the Obama administration renewed its push for stimulus dollars to be directed to minority groups and women. But government data paints a Great Recession that has not discriminated in its casualties, at least not in the modern liberal sense. It's blue collar workingmen who bear the greatest burden of this crisis—black, white and brown alike.

Three-quarters of the recession's total job losses have fallen on blue collar workers. Two-thirds of all Americans who have lost jobs are blue collar men. And more than 4-in-10 of the total job losses are blue collar white men.

The blue collar backbone of the American economy has finally broken. This is the central story of the Great Recession. Decades of withering blue collar jobs hit a tipping point. And the liberal establishment has failed to address a crisis that once defined its cause. No great voice rallies Washington to this fight.

Once again, progressives have confused blue collar troubles with shades of identity politics and, by consequence, limited their policies, their message, and their coalition.

Consider the recession's total pink slips: 43 percent are blue collar white men, 13 percent blue collar Hispanic men and another 7 percent blue collar black men.

The term "blue collar" is out of fashion. Tellingly, the Bureau of Labor Statistics no longer uses it. But by the government's traditional definition, from the third quarter of 2007 to the third quarter of 2009 — roughly the span of this recession — a downturn that began on Wall Street has ended on the back of blue collar America.

Men still work most of these jobs. That's why men constitute nearly three-fourths of all jobs lost in this recession. And, as I've [written](#), the outcome is an economic downturn that has fallen more disproportionately on one gender than any financial slump since at least the Great Depression.

But one cannot isolate this blue collar recession to men. Importantly, blue collar women constitute 11 percent of all jobs lost. Workingmen did lose the bulk of the jobs. But their wives and children suffer with them. And service occupations, where more women work, shrink along with communities' spending power.

Drive the nation today and witness the wake of America's industrial empire. Ghost towns of bygone industry. Decaying infrastructure. Millions of working class families reduced to economic refugees.

"At campaign time, they are celebrated as the people who built America. Now they just want to know how much they can get for a wedding band," [wrote](#) The Washington Post's Anne Hull in a powerful feature on Ohio's fading steel towns.

The Blue Collar He-Cession

Breakdown of working class joblessness in Great Recession

77% of total job losses are blue collar jobs

66% of all job losses blue collar men

July-Sept '07 to July-Sept '09

This blue collar crisis worsened in today's Washington. Ironically, the party that claims to represent the "people who built America" is in power. And yet working people have

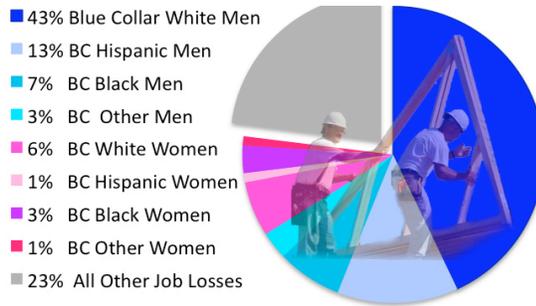


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Source: Bureau of Labor quarterly occupation surveys. Whites are non-Hispanic whites. Photo by AP. —David Paul Kuhn

been forgotten by the powerful.

Democrats' balkanized interest groups are fragmenting all over again. Interest groups are, of course, tasked with looking after their own. But the vast majority of blue collar Americans are without an advocate.

The year began with Council of Economic Advisers' economist Christina Romer reportedly stating that, "The very first email I got [was]

from a women's group saying 'We don't want this stimulus package to just create jobs for burly men.'"

This month, Rep. Barbara Lee, the chairwoman of the Congressional Black Caucus, told a McClatchy reporter: "Behind virtually every economic indicator you will find gross racial disparities. We believe that tackling systemic inequality requires specific, concrete and targeted action."

The McClatchy story's headline: "Obama wants stimulus projects to hire more minorities, women." U.S. Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood recently sent a letter to governors urging precisely that. President Obama has, of late, struck the same chord publicly. And in doing so, a president who ran on unity is making the old modern liberal mistake: exaggerating the divisions in the shared experience of hard times.

In the late 1980s, poverty advocate Michael Harrington noticed that he and his political left overlooked a trend. He noted that between 1979 and 1983, more than nine million Americans were added to the poverty rolls. Of these nine million more than half were from white, male-headed families.

"Why do we ignore white poverty in general and white male poverty in particular?" Harrington asked.

The story of how this all came to pass is the story of my 2007 book. This country is "the only nation in the western world where the conservative party consistently wins the vote of the workingman," I wrote then. And we are living one explanation.

The September 2008 market collapse upended our political tectonics, as dramatic events tend to do. But this past year, Democrats' inability to effectively address the crisis has gradually brought back the tectonics of old. And the flag bearer of the Democratic Party has paid the price: President Obama's approval rating has fallen from the high 60s in January to the high 40s this month. It marks the largest first-year decline of any president since Jimmy Carter.

Obama's broad support has been lost due to his inattention to the broad nature of this blue collar crisis, a crisis that does not fit the fashionable identity politics of liberalism.

Now we live double digit unemployment. And consider the nature of today's joblessness. White men had the most jobs before the crisis. One expects them to lose the most jobs. But even within each group, white men have lost more than twice their share of jobs as white and Hispanic women, and more than black women as well.

It's not blacks, but more specifically black men, who have uniquely fallen prey to this recession. Their unemployment rate was highest before the recession began. And black men do constitute a far smaller portion of all jobs lost than white men. But they have suffered most as a group. The number of jobs held by white men has fallen by 6 percent. Hispanic men by 5 percent. But the number of black men employed has fallen by 11 percent.

In the end, in this recession, the economic experience of black men has more in common with working class white men than with black women. Yet progressives continue to return to the vice of their historic virtue. Liberalism's good fight for equality has often limited Democrats' imagination to the America of that original fight.

It does not help that Democratic presidential candidates have increasingly attempted to cobble together a coalition without the white working class, men in particular. Now we witness the result of the white male gap, and a broader working class disconnect that

alienates the largest swath of blue collar America.

Democrats have **squandered opportunities** in 2009. There was no great effort for a new New Deal. Obama never truly sought to emulate FDR's jobs strategy. Obama's agenda has been broad. But he has not been consumed with the crisis of his time. That crisis is blue collar joblessness. It's *always* been about jobs. Yet the Democratic leadership seems to have only recently noticed.

In the year ahead, Obama and Democrats can still reconnect with the blue collar workers who once defined their coalition. It will be difficult, however. The failure to do this from the outset, exemplified by the stimulus package, has exacerbated Democrats jobs burden.

But Obama must find a way. He must summon a larger working American vision and steward that vision to action. It is a challenge suited to Obama. But thus far Obama's failure to meet that challenge, wrapped up in the promise of his campaign, has only made his presidency appear smaller. And if anything, it is the bigness Obama personified at this year's outset that appears so absent at year's close. This blue collar crisis begs that bigness.

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