

GUEST ESSAY

# Democrats Cannot Just Buy Back the Working Class

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Librado Romeo/The New York Times

**By David Paul Kuhn**

Mr. Kuhn, a co-producer of the forthcoming PBS documentary “Hard Hat Riot,” is the author of “The Hardhat Riot: Nixon, New York City, and the Dawn of the White Working-Class Revolution.”

Democrats are spending tens of millions of dollars to understand the working class that once defined their party. They face an identity crisis at the very moment they are trying to attract blue-collar voters who no longer think the political left sees them—or cares.

That soul-searching raises an excruciating question: Why did the working class switch sides?

To find a way forward, Democrats might want to look back to when they first lost the working class and the New Deal coalition fractured. While some Democratic challenges have changed, too many struggles remain all too familiar.

In May 1970, after President Richard Nixon expanded the Vietnam War into Cambodia and the National Guard killed four Kent State students, the antiwar movement radicalized like never before. In New York City, campus turmoil from N.Y.U. to Columbia spilled over onto city streets, especially around Wall Street. By chance, thousands of tradesmen were also downtown building the city’s skyscraper renaissance.

From their steel perches, workmen watched protesters chanting support for the other side fighting their kin and kind in Vietnam. On May 8, workers descended from the World Trade Center and other half-built towers. In a clash that engulfed Lower Manhattan and came to be known as the “hard hat riot,” masses of workmen pummeled student protesters.



Patrick A. Burns/The New York Times



Neal Boenzi/The New York Times

“Surely, the most critical week this nation has endured in more than a century,” The New Yorker concluded, even after years of upheaval from civil rights tumult to political violence.

The icons of Franklin Roosevelt’s coalition had attacked the left’s future. It shocked power brokers. The New Left was at war with the Old.

The class war over the real war concentrated larger social conflicts. Vietnam concerned not only how one lived but how one might die: Blue-collar families knew what sort of people got student deferments, fled to Canada, were saved by draft boards or retained lawyers to safeguard them. And it chafed many working families to see student protesters, from campus sanctuaries, lecture Americans with less status about social justice while their boys went to war in students’ place.

For weeks, tradesmen, longshoremen and Teamsters demonstrated daily. Two breeds of Democrats were now in the streets, clashing over social values and who felt valued. The worker activism culminated with up to 150,000 laborers flooding downtown in a sea of American flags. Time magazine coined it the “workers’ Woodstock.”

**There was no single turning point** in the story of America’s conservative party winning the working class, but this period captured a conflict that few realized was even underway, a class war boiling beneath the emerging culture wars.

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To many Americans, the counterculture was belittling what had once earned societal status — not only respect for soldiers and the flag, but also for motherhood, elders, the workingman. Once celebrated, blue-collar workers were now dismissed as reactionary, racist and ignorant suckers. The counterculture invalidated even their alienation.

As a 1960s student protest leader, Todd Gitlin, later acknowledged, his fellow activists were indeed often “children of privilege” who had not reckoned with the “class war.” That war meant Vietnam but also issues from lost industrial jobs to poor schools to urban upheaval. Even as the crime rate rose more than 100 percent in the 1960s, the left seemed to be asking Americans to tolerate crime in the name of toleration.

And as the Twin Towers rose, the city sank further. Deindustrialization began decimating urban life even as globalization was celebrated. “New York City is liberalism’s Vietnam,” wrote Ken Auletta of what followed.

The hard hats were typically blue-collar Catholic Italians, Irish and Eastern Europeans who lived in the boroughs outside Manhattan, many a parent or grandparent removed from immigrant peasants or poverty. Most were also Democrats. Their childhood homes often prominently displayed two portraits: Jesus and Roosevelt.

Some Republicans saw their chance to win that Democratic base. The day after the “workers’ Woodstock,” Pat Buchanan advised President Nixon, “These, quite candidly, are our people now.”

By the 1972 campaign, labor sought to salvage blue-collar Democrats as well as its influence. The A.F.L.-C.I.O.’s political director declared, “We aren’t going to let these Harvard-Berkeley Camelots take over our party.” But they did.

At the Democratic convention, George McGovern became the standard-bearer. The New Left had won the party.

It was the first convention for eight out of 10 Democratic delegates. They were diverse by race and sex — but not class. They had twice the wealth and tenfold the graduate degrees of the typical American. With that, the budding party establishment shifted Democrats’ emphasis from social class to social identity.

McGovern’s opponents branded him as the candidate of “acid, amnesty and abortion.” Among his young and ardent crowds, McGovern’s leading applause line was his call for amnesty for “draft dodgers,” though even most Democrats opposed that policy.

Nixon and his advisers seized upon these social issues with a culturally populist playbook that was followed by Republicans from Ronald Reagan to President Trump to frame campaigns as common touch versus out of touch.

McGovern’s own campaign director confided after the election, “If I had to do it all over again, I’d learn when to tell them” — what he called the “cause people” — “to go to hell.”

McGovern was a Dakotan, a pastor’s son, a decorated bomber pilot, but was still defined by the young activists who championed him. Yet class divided youth, like all. Young adults certainly did vote at historic levels in ’72 — for Nixon.

Nixon won 49 states. Between his first bid in 1960 and his last, nearly all his electoral gains were with blue-collar voters. The Republican presidential nominee won the labor vote for the first time since tracking began.

**At the heart of Democrats’ existential question today:** Will Hispanics, in particular, ultimately drift rightward as “ethnic whites” once did?

Last year, Mr. Trump built on his historic performance in 2016 with the white working class to become the first Republican to win Latino men since they became a sizable constituency. He won a majority of Hispanic naturalized citizens. Most of Mr. Trump’s increased Latino support was within the working class.

Mr. Trump’s broad racial inroads in 2024 shocked Democrats into belatedly recognizing that demographics — and a multiracial electorate — did not assure a progressive destiny. Yet it should not have taken *him* to see them. In 2009, at the height of the Great Recession, when Democrats controlled the presidency and Congress, identity politics blinded the party to the economic crisis among the working class.

As the recession receded from headlines, the New Left debates returned, though we called them “woke.” Democrats took on positions that have haunted them — even if, at the time, some knew better because they had lived worse. In 2020, when protests and riots took place in many American cities, Representative Jim Clyburn of South Carolina warned that the mind set “burn, baby, burn” had “destroyed our movement back in the ’60s.” Yet other notable Democrats were less worried about the unrest, arguing that “defunding police means defunding police.”

**But Democrats are not fated** to relive mistakes that confuse some activists’ causes for who they claim to represent or the views of radical youth for the views of the young, or to forget that politicians can win big, boisterous crowds and still lose America.

Blue-collar America has changed. It’s less unionized, less white, less reliant on manufacturing. But most Americans still lack a bachelor’s degree and would find it difficult to pay a \$1,000 emergency expense.



More education also does not ensure more understanding. American intellectuals have long struggled to fathom the average American. One study showed that Democrats' ability to accurately comprehend the other side "actually gets worse with every additional degree they earn."

And it seems, too often, that leading Democrats who seek some populist fire misunderstand how Democrats got burned. In a prominent speech this year, Gov. JB Pritzker of Illinois declared that "voters didn't turn out for Democrats" in 2024 because they think Democrats "don't want to fight for our values." But is it rather that many think Democrats fight most for the wrong values and value others most? More than two-thirds of swing voters who chose Mr. Trump strongly agreed that Democrats held wrongheaded positions on immigration, crime and identity politics.

Economic populism, including Bernie Sanders's and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez' Fighting Oligarchy tour, is the easy part. A populism that ignores most Americans' social outlook has never proven able to win a majority outside dire economic times.

Democrats cannot merely buy back the working class.

There are also progressive headwinds. Democrats who identify as socially liberal rose to 69 percent from 39 percent over the past two decades.

And since the 1970s, loud voices from popular culture to politics have encouraged an orthodox social liberalism that has weighed down swing-state Democratic candidates.

Which inspires yet another question: Have Democrats lost enough to win?

It took larger defeats than 2024 to empower the down-home pragmatists — like Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton — who led Democrats out of a similar wilderness. For even when Mr. Trump's presidency ends, the challenges will persist: After Nixon came Reagan.

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