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John Hudak | July 21, 2014 11:41am

Blue Collar Dreams: Will the Decline of Manufacturing Jobs Damage Social Mobility?



The United States is falling short on two fronts: the generation of upward social mobility and the generation of quality manufacturing jobs. Are they connected? Certainly many of the progressives gathered at Netroots Nation—a progressive political action conference—in Detroit, think so. The state of the middle-class worker was the focus of numerous panels. In the past, the weakening of labor unions would have been the main topic. This year, wage stagnation, income inequality, jobs gaps, investment, and worker respect and dignity had the spotlight.

Detroit: Graveyard of the American Dream

Detroit was an ideal backdrop for such a discussion. In many ways, it is a graveyard of the American Dream, where rows of vacant, stone buildings line the skyline; tombstones of a once bustling urban economy. In an earlier era, this is where Henry Ford pushed wage hikes, automakers created hundreds of thousands of jobs, and workers felt they could pull themselves up and make a better life for their future generations.

Netroots panelists lined up to lament the loss of that world. Saket Soni of the National Guest Worker Alliance noted that wage earners, once the thriving backbone of America's middle class, were now "experiencing a life of narrowing choices." Data exist to back that up. Social mobility rates are

stagnant. For many, wages no longer keep pace with increases in productivity and have grown slowly over the past 40 years. Economic confidence and morale are weak, particularly among certain segments of society.

There is plenty of disagreement over all these trends. But it is clear that many ordinary workers feel like they're falling behind and that their children may fall even further behind. Whatever the statistics show, that *perception* is damning, and nowhere is that more true than in the manufacturing sector.

Manufacturing Mobility

Decently-paid, blue collar manufacturing jobs were once an important means for middle class advancement. A Netroots Nation panel focused specifically on changes and challenges to that sector. Titled, "Manufacturing a Middle Class with Quality Jobs," the panel debated how America's investment in itself required an investment in its workforce. Panelists argued that the returns on workforce investment would not simply be financial – though it would likely generate wage gains for American manufacturers and other blue collar sectors – but would have social, psychological, and inter-generational benefits and would boost the prospects of upward mobility.

The challenges faced by middle-income Americans are attracting growing attention from both sides of the aisle, including the "Reformicons" on the right. The difficulty is constructing and enacting policies that can make a difference. And this is a difficulty faced by both parties. After criticizing the GOP, U.S. Rep. Dan Kildee (D-MI) added: "we need to hold Democrats' feet to the fire."

Social mobility, middle-class wage growth and manufacturing investment are often treated as separate issues. But in Detroit, they appear to be symptoms of the same disease, a disease that threatens the American Dream itself.

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John Hudak is a fellow in Governance Studies and Managing Editor of the FixGov blog. His research examines questions of presidential power in the contexts of administration, personnel, and public policy. Additionally, he focuses on campaigns and elections, bureaucratic process and legislative-executive interaction. He is the author of the new book, *Presidential Pork*.

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Focusing on the manufacturing jobs is a mistake. It's not that we don't want manufacturing, but manufacturing jobs not just in the US but in virtually all countries (even China) are starting to go the way of agricultural jobs - the whole sector is shrinking down to a smaller percentage of the economy and labor market. It's never going to be the primary pathway to middle-class prosperity for low-education workers that it once was.

Instead, we need to focus on improving the Service Sector jobs that come up to replace them.

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