THE WHITE WORKING CLASS TODAY
Who They Are, How They Think and How Progressives Can Regain Their Support

ANDREW LEVISON
CHAPTER 1

The Surprising Size of "White Working Class" America — Half of all White Men and 40 Percent of White Women Still Work in Basically Blue-Collar Jobs

In the spring of 2012 an energetic argument about voting trends among white "working class" voters and the right way to properly define the group itself mushroomed across the pages of the New York Times, the U.K. Guardian, The New Republic, The Washington Monthly and a variety of other political journals.

As Tom Edsall noted in a round-up article in the New York Times:

Political analysts, journalists and academics are fighting over white working-class voters—over how to define them and what their political significance is. Part of the reason for the furious tone of the argument is that this is an issue of central importance in American politics. And it's not just crucial for the presidential election: understanding what the white working class is and where it is going is fundamental if we want to understand where the country is going...

...Part of the problem is that different people mean different things when they are talking about the working class. Is this cohort made up of those without college degrees; those in the bottom third of the income distribution; or those in occupations described by the federal government as "blue-collar"? 1

The most careful and systematic recent analysis of how to best define the white working class was presented by Ruy Teixeira and Alan Abramowitz in a 2008 Brookings Institution study. Teixeira and Abramowitz carefully compared the advantages and disadvantages of each of the approaches above and developed a sophisticated composite index that made use of all three forms of data Edsall noted as well as people's own self-description of their class position. 2

In that same analysis, however, Teixeira and Abramowitz also noted that for several very practical reasons most polling companies, political strategists and media commentators today accept education rather than occupation or income as the best single way to define the term "working class."

On the one hand, although the traditional conception of the term "working class" and most people's mental image of working class individuals has historically been based on occupation, collecting useful data in this area presents serious practical problems. When polling companies call people on the telephone, getting them to provide clear, unambiguous definitions of their specific job and occupation is often extremely difficult and accurately categorizing those responses into broad categories like "blue collar" versus "white collar" frequently presents problems. In contrast, asking a person about the highest level of education he or she has obtained is generally straightforward.

The alternative approach of defining "working class" simply in terms of income level produces even greater complications. Low income individuals include all sorts of people—the retired, students, homemakers, the chronically ill or disabled and others who are not working at all and the group is simply not what political analysts and commentators really mean to refer to when they use the term "white working class." The inescapable fact is that "lower income" people and "working class" people are actually
very distinct sociological categories.

While it avoids these problems, using education to define the term white working class does, however, also have its own downside. While, as we will see, education and occupation do indeed substantially overlap, they are not identical. When commentators use the term “the white working class” they are generally visualizing blue collar or other essentially physical or manual workers—a group that has very distinct social and cultural characteristics—rather than the more sociologically amorphous and hard to visualize social category of “less educated” individuals. In most people’s experience, blue collar and other basically manual workers are significantly different from white collar office workers, sales workers or technical workers who happen to have less than a four-year college degree and it is the former group rather than the latter that people generally associate with the term “working class.”

The Disappearing White Working Class

In fact, there is a deep and unacknowledged political schizophrenia in American public attitudes toward the traditional, “blue collar” white working class. In the three or four months before elections journalists head to Ohio and Pennsylvania and send back reports from the blue collar diners, bowling alleys and pot-luck dinners in white working class neighborhoods in those states because it is universally agreed that they are key battlegrounds in the elections. Other reporters go on the road and file dispatches from NASCAR races, tractor pulls, country music concerts and other parts of red state America to sample the mood of the other, “real” U.S.A. For a few weeks the papers and TV news programs are filled with images of the white working class—the America of weather-beaten, wood-siding houses with metal swing sets and cars with chipped and faded paint in the front yard, the America of deer hunters, roadside churches, Ford and Chevy trucks hauling john boats and off-road motorbikes to state parks on weekends and crowded bars that play commercial country music and show mixed martial arts on their TV’s. This world suddenly becomes visible because it is recognized that this is where the election will be decided.

But then, two or three weeks after elections are over, the white working class suddenly disappears. Commentators quickly revert to describing America as a block of socially homogenous “middle class” voters while the profound social chasm that exists within the white electorate is completely ignored. Whites, other than pro-Democratic professionals, are routinely analyzed as rural or suburban rather than urban, red state rather than blue state and old rather than young. But they are rarely if ever distinguished as blue collar versus white collar.

Underlying this lack of attention to white working class Americans is the powerful image of the “modern digital economy”—the deeply rooted conviction that in the knowledge-based, post-industrial world traditional blue collar workers simply can’t be very important—politically or sociologically. This is reflected in the major clichés and buzzwords of modern political commentary. In the 1990’s images of a new white-collar electorate became popular—the famous “soccer moms”, “office park dads” and “wired workers”. More recently the “new working class”—“pink collar workers” or “waitress moms” among women and low paid, dead-end “lousy jobs” for young men—have also become journalistic clichés.

But traditional blue collar workers do not have a current cliché of their own. The 1950’s era image of the “average Joe” or “ordinary guy”
who was a basically decent fellow and reliable Democratic voter became transformed into the image of the conservative “Joe six-packs” and “hard hats” in the 1970’s. In recent decades the images switched to geography and culture rather than occupation—the gun owning, pickup truck driving “rednecks” and “bubbas” who supported George W. Bush and the religious right. In the 2008 election the most significant—and misleading—images of blue collar workers were both starkly Republican—“Joe the plumber” and Todd Palin.

The White Working Class is More Than Just Industrial Workers

The basis for this relative disinterest in the traditional white working class is the notion that it represents a rapidly shrinking minority of the electorate and society as a whole. Because this decline seems almost self-evident, factual support for the view is usually limited to the presentation of just a few illustrative statistics—the most common being that manufacturing workers declined from 40 percent of the labor force in 1940 to 10 percent today.

There is, however, a profound fallacy in this approach. While the demographic assertion about the decline of industrial workers is technically accurate it is also deeply and fundamentally misleading. The number of manufacturing workers has indeed declined, but “industrial workers” represent only a small sub-set of the larger sociological categories “blue collar” or “working class.”

In fact, when one takes the critical step of looking separately at the occupations of white men and white women rather than combining them together and focuses first on the occupations of white men, the striking fact that quickly becomes apparent is that there are still many white workers who are basically blue collar even though they do not work in large factories. They work in sectors other than manufacturing—as auto mechanics, construction workers, warehouse workers, truck drivers, police and firemen. Nor is this a recent phenomenon. Even in the 1950’s industrial workers were not the only members of the American white working class. Longshoremen, teamsters, construction workers, security guards, night watchmen, janitors, cops, garbage collectors and many others were all part of the broad Democratic conception of “working class” men—the “ordinary guys” or “average Joes” whose support provided the foundation of the New Deal coalition.

But, oddly, in modern political commentary one literally never sees specific calculations of what fraction traditional blue collar workers constitute of the total white male labor force today. In most discussions the combination of the declining industrial work force and the growing white and pink collar “new white working class” composed of both men and women is treated as sufficient evidence to logically deduce that white male blue collar workers are no longer a critical political force.

This notion so deeply ingrained in modern political discussion that anyone who flatly asserted that the number of white men who still work in basically physical or routine manual jobs actually represent half of the white male labor force in America would be dismissed as simply unfamiliar with the data.

But, in fact, if one looks carefully at the detailed Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) tables that list the number of white men who work in some 300 major occupational categories (which includes those “not elsewhere classified”, making it effectively include all white male workers) this is precisely what one finds. Almost exactly half of the white male labor force works in occupations that most political observers, commentators and ordinary voters would quickly and confidently define as basically “blue collar” or manual rather than white collar.

Blue Collar vs. White Collar*

Let us look first at white men and then at white women. Here is a chart that divides the number of white male workers in the major occupations that are tracked by the Bureau of Labor Statistics into the two basic categories “blue collar” and “white collar.”

*The BLS sources for all of the statistics given in this chapter are described in detail in the section “Notes on the Data” at the end of this chapter.
The Surprising Size of "White Working Class" America

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OCCUPATIONS OF WHITE MALE WORKERS – 2007</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Employed (in thousands)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Collar Occupations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managers/ Executives/Professionals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales/Clerical /Office Workers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lower Level Supervisors/ Foremen (Note: not included in either blue or white collar categories. See text)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue Collar /Working Class Occupations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Traditional Blue Collar Workers</td>
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<td>Blue Collar Service Workers</td>
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<td>Blue Collar Clerical Workers</td>
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</table>

Note: in this chart the "traditional blue collar" category includes the two BLS top-level categories "production, transportation and material moving" and "Natural Resources, construction and maintenance." These contain essentially the same set of occupations as the three traditional post-war BLS categories "craftsmen", "operatives" and "laborers".

People who are familiar with the occupational categories used by the Bureau of Labor Statistics will note that—unlike the chart above—BLS statistics do not separate out the blue collar workers in the "service" and "sales, clerical and office" categories from the white collar or pink collar workers in those same two categories. The reason is that the BLS categorization schemes are not designed to quantify the political and sociological categories "blue collar" and "white collar" but rather for quite different demographic and commercial purposes.

Specific Occupations

As a result, it is necessary to look more closely at the list of detailed occupations that lie beneath the broad categories in order to properly estimate the overall numbers of essentially blue collar versus white collar white men. The complete BLS chart is available for examination.¹

Traditional Blue Collar Workers – there are 196 different specific occupations listed in the two BLS categories “Production, Transportation and Materials Moving” and “Natural Resource, Construction and Maintenance.” They range from carpenters, construction laborers and iron and steel workers to auto mechanics, heating and air conditioning repairmen, truck drivers, butchers, factory workers, machinists and tool and die makers.

Traditional blue collar workers include:

Manufacturing workers
- 400,000 welders: average weekly earnings .......... $661
- 44,000 electrical and electromechanical assemblers: average weekly earnings ......................................... $622
- 300,000 machinists: average weekly earnings ..................................................................... $802
- 51,000 cutting, punching and press machine operators: average weekly earnings ......................................... $637
- 1,100,000 Laborers and materials movers: average weekly earnings ........................................................ $508

Transportation workers
- 2,400,000 truck drivers: average weekly earnings ........................................................ $691
- 225,000 bus drivers: average weekly earnings ..................................................................... $660
- 180,000 taxi drivers: average weekly earnings ..................................................................... $570

Construction workers
- 1,100,000 carpenters: average weekly earnings ..................................................................... $624
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- 680,000 electricians: average weekly earnings $890
- 480,000 plumbers: average weekly earnings $793
- 190,000 roofers — average weekly earnings $521
- 115,000 sheet metal workers — average weekly earnings $733
- 1,200,000 construction laborers — average weekly earnings $596

Mechanics and linemen
- 680,000 auto mechanics: average weekly earnings $680
- 340,000 heating and air conditioning mechanics: average weekly earnings $862
- 140,000 phone and cable linemen and installers: average weekly earnings $873

Agricultural and logging workers
- 510,000 miscellaneous agricultural workers: average weekly earnings $415
- 47,000 logging workers: average weekly earnings $613

Blue Collar Service Workers. There are 46 different occupations listed in the service category. For men, it is overwhelmingly blue collar. The largest male occupations in this category include policemen, firemen, guards and prison workers, cooks, waiters, bartenders, and dishwashers, janitors, lawn care, pest control and grounds maintenance workers.

Blue collar service workers include:
- 515,000 police: average weekly earnings $992

245,000 firefighters: average weekly earnings $1055
500,000 security guards: average weekly earnings $519
1,100,000 janitors: average weekly earnings $494
890,000 cooks: average weekly income $401
170,000 dishwashers: average weekly earnings $327
990,000 grounds and landscape workers: average weekly earnings $433
34,000 baggage porters: average weekly earnings $564

Blue Collar Clerical/Sales/Office Workers – Within the clerical, sales and office category there are actually a substantial number of blue collar occupations. The largest blue collar occupations in this category include meter readers, mail carriers, shipping clerks and stock clerks.

Blue collar clerical/sales/office workers include:
- 170,000 mailmen: average weekly earnings $952
- 45,000 bill collectors: average weekly earnings $597
- 670,000 stock clerks and order fillers: average weekly earnings $471
- 260,000 shipping and receiving clerks: average weekly earnings $553

Lower-level Foremen and Supervisors – culturally and politically speaking, lower level foremen and supervisors generally share the blue-collar culture of the men they work with and who are often their friends and neighbors. In
traditional industrial sociology, however, they were frequently considered a distinct, socially ambiguous group because they represent management. As a result, in calculating ratios of blue-collar to white collar workers, they were frequently set aside in a special “neither fish nor fowl” category.

If low-level foremen and supervisors are left out of the calculation, the percentage of blue collar and white collar white men in 2007 was almost precisely equal—50.2 to 49.8 percent. Including lower-level foremen and supervisors as part of the white collar total only increases that total by about 2 percent.

It is important to note that the economic crisis of 2008 actually eliminated almost 2 million working class jobs between 2007 and 2009, lowering the blue collar proportion of the labor force from 50 to 48 percent. It is reasonable to assume, however, that a significant number of these working class jobs will eventually return unless America remains in a permanent economic recession.

The basic conclusion is clear. Taken as a whole, the rather startling fact is that somewhere close to 50 percent of white men today are still in basically blue collar jobs.

For many people, this is quite unexpected. With the disappearance of the vast auto and steel plants of the 50's and 60's it became easy to imagine that the large majority of white American men had become part of an amorphous white-collar majority. But it simply is not true.

The Earnings of White Working Class Men

It is also worth noting a few facts about these white workers' income. During the 1950's and 1960's the cliché of the “affluent worker” became popular as many commentators noted that some skilled blue-collar workers earned more than many white collar workers. Even today, it is often suggested that blue-collar workers earnings are not really substantially lower than most white collar workers.

The facts, however, show the opposite. While many skilled workers and union workers in fields where they have substantial bargaining power can earn “affluent” incomes, most blue-collar workers earn distinctly less than their white collar counterparts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHITE COLLAR VS BLUE COLLAR</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Occupation (men)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Collar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management, business and financial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales and Office</td>
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<tr>
<td>Blue Collar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural Resources, Construction and Maintenance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Production and Transportation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Every major white collar category makes more than any blue collar category. There are many specific occupations where white and blue collar weekly earnings overlap, but, seen on a larger scale, the pattern is clear.

A second point to note is that weekly earnings for the specific Blue Collar Service and Blue Collar Clerical and Sales occupations presented in the preceding pages provide confirmation that the blue-collar workers in those categories are indeed essentially “working class” rather than “middle class.” In most cases they earn less than skilled blue collar workers making them clearly part of the white working class in terms of income as well as occupation.
Finally, it is important to note that looking at median weekly earnings provides a much more “down to earth” picture of workers' financial situation than do annual figures. Looking at the weekly figures one can quickly convert them to the familiar hourly rates that Americans encounter in daily life—10 or 12 dollars an hour for laborers or other unskilled workers and 22 to 24 dollars an hour for construction and other skilled workers.

### The Occupations of White Working Class Women

Now consider the parallel statistics for white women:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OCCUPATIONS OF WHITE FEMALE WORKERS – 2007</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Employment (In Thousands)</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>White Collar Occupations</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Managers/ Executives/ Professionals</strong></td>
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</table>

The Working Class total rises to 40% if the female Clerical and Sales category is assumed to actually be split 50/50 between basically blue collar and white collar jobs.

Note: in this chart the “traditional blue collar” category includes the two BLS top-level categories “Production, Transportation and Material Moving” and “Natural Resources, Construction and Maintenance.”
The surprising size of "White Working Class" America

As the chart above shows, 23 percent—about one fourth of white female workers are in traditional female blue collar/working class jobs. The number rises toward 40 percent when one includes the essentially working class jobs contained within the Clerical, Sales and Office category. Once again, however, it is necessary to look at the detailed occupations to see the real story.

Traditional Blue Collar Workers – There have always been many blue collar occupations for women—circuit board assemblers in electronics plants, laundry workers, sewing machine operators, bus drivers and packaging workers among others. While blue collar "women's work" often requires less gross muscularity than many male blue collar jobs, it frequently requires greater endurance, focus and tenacity making the jobs equally hard, mind-numbing, and exhausting.

Traditional blue-collar occupations for women include:

- 61,000 electronics assemblers: average weekly earnings $481
- 213,000 Miscellaneous assemblers: average weekly earnings $475
- 75,000 Laundry and dry cleaning workers: average weekly earnings $361
- 105,000 sewing machine operators: average weekly earnings $410
- 178,000 packers and packagers: average weekly earnings $398
- 155,000 inspectors, testers and sorters: average weekly earnings $549
- 238,000 bus drivers: average weekly earnings $502

Service Workers – the largest specific occupations in this category include many of the classic white working class jobs

for women—maids, cleaning women, waitresses, cooks, dishwashers, hostesses, counter attendants, ticket-takers and child care workers. These are the kinds of low-level jobs that Barbara Ehrenreich very perceptively described in her book, *Nickel and Dimed.* They are generally low-paid, no-benefit jobs with constant pressure and close supervision. It is the jobs of this kind that led the London Economist to recently define the "modern" white working class as people who "work with their hands or stand on their feet all day." In fact, these jobs actually fit the traditional sociological criteria for blue collar work based on four major factors – (1) primarily physical rather than mental, (2) dull and repetitive, (3) closely supervised and (4) offering limited potential for advancement.

Blue collar service occupations for women include:

- 1,230,000 waitresses: average weekly earnings $381
- 624,000 cooks: average weekly earnings $381
- 200,000 hostesses restaurant and coffee shops: average weekly earnings $337
- 992,000 maids and housekeeping cleaners: average weekly earnings $376
- 539,000 building cleaners and janitors: average weekly earnings $400
- 590,000 hairdressers, and cosmetologists: average weekly earnings $462
- 970,000 child care workers: average weekly earnings $398

Clerical, Sales and Office Workers – the clerical, sales and office category for women is huge—larger than all the traditional white working class occupations combined. But, in fact, a substantial number of these jobs are more accurately described as "white (or pink) collar working class" rather
than simply “white collar.” Some of the major occupations in this category include cashiers, telephone operators, file clerks, tellers, receptionists, and the lowest-level retail sales workers.

In sociological terms, it is clear that there is a deep social schism within this broad occupational category. Female real estate brokers and executive secretaries obviously live and work in a profoundly different environment than cashiers or telephone operators. White collar or pink collar working class jobs for women are, in general, preferable to working on an electronic assembly line for a minimum wage or scrubbing floors and making beds in hotels but many of these jobs come close to fitting traditional sociological definitions of white working class status based on effort, monotony, lack of mobility and close supervision as well as in regard to broader issues like pay, benefits and social status.

Jobs for women in the clerical, sales and office categories that fit many of the traditional sociological criteria for “working class” occupations include:
- 1,700,000 cashiers: average weekly earnings .................................................. $366
- 1,350,000 retail salespersons: average weekly earnings ........................................ $421
- 307,000 tellers: average weekly earnings ............................................................... $490
- 46,000 telephone and switchboard operators: average weekly earnings ............... $588
- 206,000 file clerks: average weekly earnings .......................................................... $583
- 400,000 office clerks: average weekly earnings ......................................................... $597
- 1,000,000 receptionists: average weekly earnings ..................................................... $529

As far as earnings are concerned, for women as for men, all of the white collar occupational categories earn more than any of the blue collar ones.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation (women)</th>
<th>Median Weekly Earnings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White Collar</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management, business and financial</td>
<td>$972</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>$912</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales and Office</td>
<td>$600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue Collar</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural Resources, Construction and Maintenance</td>
<td>$537</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Production and Transportation</td>
<td>$473</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service</td>
<td>$423</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The bottom line result is simple: close to half of white men and 35-40 percent of white women in the labor force are still essentially “working class.” Their occupations are basically blue collar rather than white collar and their earnings fall far below their white collar counterparts.

In one respect, this seems a new and startling conclusion. In another sense, however, it is something most people really suspected all along. The data that has been presented here dramatically illustrates that in the real world white blue-collar workers are a far more important social group than is generally recognized. They are not the desperate and jobless workers who “shaped up” in front of the factory gates every day to beg for work as factory workers did during the great depression. Many make decent money and vast numbers work as small independent contractors rather than hired employees. Nor do most white working class men still talk or act like the inarticulate,
hulking laborers portrayed by Marlon Brando in the 1950’s and Sylvester Stallone in the 1970’s. But they are united by sociological traits and cultural values that define many aspects of their social identity. Unlike the affluent or highly educated they see themselves as “real Americans” who are “just getting by”, They are “hard-working,” “practical” and “realistic.” They believe in “old-fashioned traditional values” and trust in “character” and real-world experience rather than advanced education. They rely on “common sense” not abstract theories. These characteristics have not basically changed since the 1950’s when these workers considered themselves good Democrats and they remain important determinants of their political outlook today.

The fact that white workers are actually a far larger and more politically important group than the common wisdom of recent years has suggested explains why political reporters and campaign strategists suddenly find themselves focusing on the mood in blue collar diners, bowling alleys and pot-luck dinners in white working class neighborhoods in Ohio and Pennsylvania as election day approaches while other reporters go on the road and file dispatches from NASCAR races, tractor pulls and country music bars. If traditional blue collar white working class people were really as socially and politically marginal as the popular clichés suggest, this would simply not be necessary.

In fact, traditional white working class voters are still a central force in American politics—a far larger force than most political commentators recognize. This is a fact that would clearly emerge if public opinion polls could accurately categorize employed voters by their occupations. As the next section reveals, however, education is actually quite closely correlated with occupation, enough to allow public opinion researchers to use education as a valid proxy for the traditional occupationally based conception of white working class status.

Notes on the Data in Chapter 1

The data on detailed occupations comes from the following unpublished table provided by the BLS:

“employed persons by detailed occupation sex and race 2007-2009 - annual averages.”


In calculating the data that appears in the two tables comparing blue collar and white collar employment in this analysis, five changes were made to the original BLS presentation of the data. The changes are displayed in the revised excel file titled:

“Employed persons by detailed occupation sex and race 2007 and 2009 - revised.”


The four changes are as follows:

1. The top-level BLS occupational categories (e.g. “Management, Professional and related occupations”) that were not included in the original BLS excel table were added to the revised excel file.

2. In the revised file the entire top-level category “service workers” was moved from above the “Sales and Office workers” category to below it instead.

3. The major blue collar occupations from the “Sales and Office workers” category were extracted and placed in a newly created category called “blue collar sales and office workers”

4. All “supervisors and managers” from the blue collar categories were extracted and placed in a newly created category called “first line supervisors and managers”

Apart from these broad changes no attempt was made to move individual occupations out of their positions in the original BLS tables.

The revised spreadsheet also has excel versions of the two tables included in the article (in the tab labeled sheet 1) and data extracted from the BLS table on occupation and employment (in the tab labeled sheet 3)

The data on earnings and occupation are derived from the following unpublished BLS table:

Table A-26. Usual weekly earnings of employed full-time wage and salary workers by detailed occupation and sex, Annual Average 2010
Education and Occupation Overlap – Three Quarters of High School Educated White Men are in Blue Collar Jobs.

One important benefit of the revised view of white working class occupations provided in the preceding sections is that it provides a missing sociological underpinning for the modern approach of most political analysts, pollsters and strategists who now define the term “working class” in terms of education. Since 2000, and stimulated by the demographic work of Ruy Teixeira in his 1999 book, *The Forgotten Majority – Why the White Working Class Still Matters* and his subsequent studies, public opinion analysts have increasingly come to visualize the “working class” as those survey respondents who have either just a high school diploma or less than a college education.

Teixeira’s point of departure was the fact that in the modern economy people who had no more than high school diplomas were very severely limited in their occupational choices to either blue collar or the lowest level white collar jobs. Regardless of the precise nature of the work that was involved, individuals with only a high school education were confined to the kinds of jobs that offered relatively low wages, meager or non-existent fringe benefits, very limited job security and opportunities for advancement, low social status and a variety of other negative characteristics. This made these jobs substantially different from the jobs available to individuals with higher education.
The resulting insight that education could therefore be used either as a very close proxy for occupation in studying the white working class or be visualized as representing a new non-occupational way of defining the white working class was tremendously important for political analysis because education levels are, as we saw, relatively easy to collect on opinion surveys while obtaining useful data on occupations has always been fiendishly difficult. Today, in political and polling analysis, education has become the most widely accepted way to define white working class.

Few studies, however, have tried to directly relate the specific occupations that people hold with their level of education. But basic data is in fact available and provides a deeper sociological picture of people with high school or less than college educations.

Here is a chart that shows the situation for white men, once again from the BLS:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>High School or Less</th>
<th>Some College (including AA degrees)</th>
<th>BA or Above</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Collar</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue Collar</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: in this chart “blue collar” includes the three BLS top-level categories “Production, Transportation and Material Moving”, “Natural Resource and Construction” and “Service” occupations. The “White collar” total includes the BLS categories “Sales and Office” and “Management and Professional”. (It is worth noting that if the blue collar workers in the clerical and sales category were allocated to the blue collar category the total would be even higher).

What this chart shows is that for white male workers with no more than a high school diploma—74 percent—three-fourths of the total—worked in blue collar jobs while only 26 percent had white collar occupations. For those with “some college”—Associate of Arts degrees or some college credits but no diploma—exactly half were blue collar and half white collar.

The heavy concentration of the high school educated in blue collar jobs is hardly surprising. It is in high school where young men and women’s social identities are formed and it is largely these social identities—the sense of “who I am”—that substantially determine the kinds of occupations and the level of education they seek when they graduate.

Across a wide variety of American high schools, the two basic social identities that always emerge are the opposed cultures of “Jocks vs. Burnouts”, “Greasers vs. Preppies”, “Punks vs. BOMC’s (Big Men on Campus)”, “Trash vs. Collegiates”. The particular names that are used vary from region to region but they always reflect the basic divide between white working class and middle class students.

As anthropologist Penelope Eckert notes in her study, Jocks and Burnouts—Social Categories and Identity in the High School:

The Jocks and Burnouts are adolescent embodiments of the middle and working class, respectively; their two separate cultures are in many ways class cultures; and opposition and conflict between them define and exercise class relations and differences...

Although the majority of high school students do not define themselves as full-fledged members of one category or another, an important part of most adolescent’s social identity is dominated by the opposition between the two categories.¹

In terms of occupational choice, the Jock vs. Burnout distinction marks the division between those who are aiming for college and a middle class life versus those who are gradually accommodating themselves to a future in the white working class.

Many white working class students tend to orient themselves toward occupations they perceive as “manly”. In Texas, for example,
EDUCATION AND OCCUPATION OVERLAP

anthropologist Douglas Foley describes the white working class students’ attitudes as follows:

Going to college was “too hard” and “cost too much money.” Most aspired to working class jobs like their fathers, such as driving a tractor, trucking melons, fixing cars, setting irrigation rigs, and working in packing sheds. Some wanted to be carpenters and bricklayers or work for the highway road crews.... [Working on road crews] was the rural equivalent of working in a factory or foundry. It was dangerous dirty heavy work that only “real” men did... They considered working with their hands honorable, a test of strength and manliness. In contrast school work was seen as boring “sissy stuff”.

While college is considered unattainable, students like these still seek to graduate high school because even most white working class jobs now require at least a high school diploma. But they see the diploma as simply a piece of paper.

As sociologist Lois Weis notes in Working Class without Work – High School Students in a De-industrializing Economy:

In spite of the deeply felt sense that schooling is the only way to “keep off burgers” (i.e. work at a Burger King) most concern themselves only with passing not with excelling, competing or even doing well. The language of “passing” dominates student discourse around schooling much as obtaining a union card dominated the discourse of previous generations of white working class males... most end up with C’s and D’s but they do pass...

The connection between a high school diploma and working class status is therefore extremely tight. Once in the labor market, men and women with only high school diplomas find themselves largely restricted to relatively dead end jobs and white working class lifestyles.

There is, however, also a second major group within the white working class—the more “aspirational” individuals who go on to community college. Many skilled working class jobs like automobile mechanics and heating and air conditioning installation and repair that were previously learned in union apprenticeship programs or through on the job training now require an Associate of Arts degree. As a result the more ambitious and disciplined white working class students go to community college to get the necessary credential.

The very strong class distinction between students who attend community college and students in the 1,000 leading four year colleges is clearly indicated by their economic situation. As Tom Edsall notes:

...Student bodies in competitive colleges and in community colleges reflect two very different economic worlds. At the 1,044 competitive colleges, 76 percent of the freshman came from families in the upper half of the income distribution. In the nation’s 1,000-plus community colleges, almost 80 percent of the students came from low-income families.

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Within the community college world, the social distinction between the blue collar and white collar graduates is captured by their distribution between technical and academic degrees. Of the men with technical degrees, 57 percent were employed in blue collar jobs. Of those with academic degrees, 57 percent were in white collar jobs.

Looking at the educational data more broadly, in 2008, 40 percent of white men had no more than a high school education, 26 percent had some college and 34 percent had at least a bachelor’s degree. Using a “narrow” definition of “white working class” as those with no more than
a high school diploma, 75 percent were employed in blue collar jobs. Using a “broad” definition of white working class—people with less than a four year college degree, 66 percent were blue collar workers.

Thus, either three-fourths or two-thirds of those men who are “working class” as defined by education are also blue collar workers in occupational terms. The white working class as defined by education is not identical to the white working class as defined by occupation, but the two approaches very substantially overlap.

Among women the ratio of blue collar to broadly defined white collar workers at the various educational levels cannot be accurately calculated with the available data because of the huge clerical, sales and office category which contains a complex mixture of both groups. But, the general picture is as follows: around one-third of women workers have a high school education or less, one-third have “some college” but less than a college degree and one-third are college educated. At the same time, about 40 percent are blue collar in occupational terms. Again, the “working class” as defined by education and by occupation substantially overlaps.

The overlap between occupation and education is not only important because it allows public opinion data from high school and less than college respondents to be used as a valid guide to the opinions of the “working class.” It is also critically important because it dispels the notion that the less-educated can be visualized as a unique and distinct social group, rather than simply as another way of describing working class Americans.

Notes on Chapter 2

The data on education and employment are derived from the following unpublished BLS table.

"Table 10. Employed persons by intermediate occupation, educational attainment, sex, race, and Hispanic or Latino ethnicity (25 years and over), Annual Average 2008 (Source: Current Population Survey)

It can be downloaded at http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/Table10_Employed-persons-by-intermediate-occupation-educational-attainment-sex-race-and-Hispanic-or-Latino.pdf"
pass baggage handlers in airports and security guards at malls. But because each of these encounters is with a single individual or small group rather than with large masses like the long files of workers who once walked into steel mills and auto factories at 7:45 every morning, the typical person only "sees" a succession of individuals and not representative members of a social group. We see individual workers continuously, but never consciously "notice" working class Americans.

Second, many blue collar workers today have much more frequent contact with white collar and professional workers and with customers or clients as well. As a result, they have become less distinct and recognizable in style, diction and behavior. Daily contact and interaction with customers has significantly reduced their physical isolation and cultural distinctiveness. By the 1980's a large proportion of the children of the workers of the 1950's no longer fit the traditional stereotype of the hulking, inarticulate, brutish blue-collar worker exemplified by Marlon Brando's character Stanley Kowalsky in the 1956 film version of *A Streetcar Named Desire* or Sylvester Stalone's *Rocky* in the 1970's. The typical 30 year old electrician or auto mechanic one talks to today is very unlikely to bring any of these stereotypes to mind.

Third, many workers are now also small businessmen. In large cities one can still walk by large construction sites where hundreds of unionized hard-hat workers are employed but in single family home and small commercial construction, you will see instead a collection of pickup trucks and vans with the signs of independent contractors stenciled on their sides. This vast web of small contractors includes not just electricians and plumbers but bricklayers, stucco contractors, insulation, sheetrock and heating and air conditioning contractors, grading and foundation contractors, paving installers, trim carpenters, welders, glaziers, roofers, stonemasons, cabinetmakers, landscapers and security and home entertainment system installers. Even after construction is complete there remains a still-vast network of lawn and garden contractors, equipment repair technicians, exterminators and other providers of ongoing services all of whom work as independent contractors rather than salaried employees. This same pattern is easily seen in gardening, automobile and appliance repair and janitorial and cleaning services among many others.

Many small stores and businesses also employ a wide range of manual workers—stocking clerks, dishwashers, drivers and delivery men. These men and women are perceived as "employees" rather than "blue collar workers". These small businesses range from bowling alleys and beauty shops to hardware stores and auto parts and body shops and employ huge numbers of working class people.

But finally, and perhaps most significantly, many workers are literally invisible during the day on the job. The large factories of the 50's were iconic images of America and pictures of large groups of workers entering and leaving the factory gates were common. Millions of workers today work in industrial parks and warehouse districts in every city in America but there is no iconic image of the place where they work. There are vast acres and miles of warehouses in all major cities, but workers are not visible in large crowds like those who once worked in automobile or steel factories. These workers work on loading docks and drive fork lift trucks down long aisles of reinforced metal shelves that rise two and three stories into the air. They roll metal carts and jack up wood pallets to store boxes of goods in bins, shelves and boxes but are rarely seen by anyone from outside.

Here is one description of this invisible part of America:

Like nearly everyone else in Joliet without good job prospects, Uylonda Dickerson eventually found herself at the warehouses looking for work.

"I just needed a job," the 38-year-old single mother says.

Dickerson came to the right place. Over the past decade and a half, Joliet, IL and its Will County environs southwest of Chicago have grown into one of the world's largest inland
ports, a major hub for dry goods destined for retail stores throughout the Midwest and beyond. ...

Dickerson, grateful to have even a temp job, was taken on as a “lumper”—someone who schleps boxes to and from trailers all day long. As unglamorous as her duties were, Dickerson became an essential cog in one of the most sophisticated machines in modern commerce—the Walmart supply chain. Walmart, the world’s largest private-sector employer, had contracted a company called Schneider Logistics to operate the warehouse. And Schneider, in turn, had its own contracts with staffing companies that supplied workers.

...Such subcontracting enables corporations to essentially take workers off their books, foisting the traditional responsibilities that go with being an employer—paying a reasonable wage, offering health benefits, providing a pension or retirement plan, chipping into workers’ compensation coverage—conveniently onto someone else. Workers like Dickerson, of course, aren’t accounted for when Walmart touts that more than half of its workforce receives health coverage.

Dickerson quickly discovered that the work wasn’t easy, if there was any work at all. Each morning she showed up at her warehouse, she wasn’t sure whether she’d be assigned a trailer and earn a day’s pay. She says there were days that she and many temps were told simply to go home, without pay, since there wasn’t as much product to unload as expected. Sometimes Dickerson was told they didn’t have any trailers light enough for a woman, she says.

But on most days the warehouse teemed with lumpers, many of them wearing different colored t-shirts to signify the different agencies they worked for. Dickerson herself would work for two different labor providers within the same warehouse in a little more than a year.

The difficulty of a lumper’s day often went according to chance. A lucky lumper might be assigned a container filled with boxes of Kleenex or stuffed animals, while an unlucky lumper might pull a container filled with kiddie swimming pools or 200-pound trampolines. For the heaviest lifts, Dickerson would be assigned a partner, and the two would split the pay for the trailer, moving the massive boxes onto pallets by hand.

The job was fast-paced and stressful. Dickerson says supervisors would walk along the warehouse’s bay doors, marking the workers’ progress over time. The supervisors, Dickerson and other workers say, often told them to speed it up if they wanted to be invited back.

“By the end of the day, your body hurts so bad,” says Dickerson, who was among a small minority of females working as lumpers at the warehouse. “You tell them you can’t do it the next day, ... they’ll tell you, ‘We’ve got four more people waiting for your job.’”

For a while, Dickerson worked according to “piece rate”—she was paid not by the hour but by the trailer—a stressful pay scheme meant to encourage her and her colleagues to work faster and faster, and one that the labor movement worked hard to abolish in many industries in the 20th century. Each paycheck was different than the last, and most of them were disappointingly low, she says. In her year at the warehouse, Dickerson says she never had health benefits, sick days or vacation days. If she didn’t unload containers, she didn’t get paid. “It all depends on how fast you work,” she says. “It’s like
a race. You're racing to get done with the trailer so you can get another one. Otherwise, you won't get enough money."

While the classic automobile assembly line was a familiar image of American life years ago, few Americans have any comparable vision of modern warehouse work. As Dickerson concludes:

"I don't think people know what the people in those warehouses have to go through to get them their stuff in those stores. If you don't work in a warehouse, you don't know."

Warehouses are by no means the only such "unknown" working class environments. Most middle class people have never set foot inside an oil refinery, an electric power plant, an auto or motorcycle machine shop, a solid waste treatment facility or an overnight rest stop for long-haul truckers. Along with the other factors described above, this profound isolation of many working class jobs from outside eyes helps to explain why the white working class seems invisible in daily life.

Geography: The Rust Belt, Small Towns and the Urban Fringe

At the same time that their dispersion into small groups and "behind closed doors" working environments makes white working class Americans less visible in the workplace, they are also less visible where they live.

In the major industrial cities in the early Post-World War II period white ethnic working class neighborhoods were a well-known and easily recognized part of the urban environment. Many of these areas became iconic symbols of white working class America—Brooklyn in New York, Southie in Boston, Hamtramck in Detroit and the ethnic neighborhoods of the south side of Chicago.

As automobile ownership became widespread among white workers by the mid-1950's and early 1960's, however, and more affordable homes in new suburbs became available, fewer and fewer white working class people remained in the tight-knit urban neighborhoods that were walking distance from the factories. These new suburban communities were not, properly speaking, "affluent" but rather modest and included a mixture of both blue-collar and white collar households. But they became the broad "middle" of American society in that era.

Since that time, however, with the rise of gated communities and exclusive suburban subdivisions and neighborhoods, the separation of whites with modest incomes from the affluent has become far more extreme. As one recent study noted:

Back in 1970, the vast majority of Americans lived in neighborhoods that did mix people of substantial and modest means. No more. In fact, says a new study just released by the Russell Sage Foundation and Brown University, the share of Americans living amid intense income segregation has more than doubled.

America's rich haven't just become richer, show the study data from Stanford University sociologists Sean Reardon and Kendra Bischoff. They've become far more likely to live among their own kind. The same for the poor...

...Nearly one out of three families in America's large metropolitan areas, the Stanford analysts found, spent 2007 in either a severely segregated rich or a severely segregated poor neighborhood. In 1970, by contrast, only one in seven American families lived in neighborhoods that rated as segregated rich or poor. In that same year, 65 percent of Americans lived in neighborhoods where over half the resident families rated as middle income. By 2007, that share of Americans living in middle-class neighborhoods had dropped to 44 percent.
...this segregation, *Newark Star-Ledger* commentator Tom Moran observed last week, is taking an ever heavier toll on our political psyche. Growing income segregation, explains Moran, "means people of different means don't rub elbows as much, their kids don't play together as much, the parents don't chat over the back yard fence." In this segregated environment, people know less and less about people not like themselves. They more easily embrace stereotypes.\(^2\)

In fact, many white workers today do not simply live in different neighborhoods from the relatively affluent but in entirely different geographic areas. Many reside in three distinct locations: the rust belt, small towns and the urban fringe. We see these areas as we drive past them but, since they no longer sit next to giant automobile factories and steel mills, our eyes do not immediately process them as "working class" communities.

The geographic region that remains most associated with the traditional post-war white working class is the "Rust Belt" that stretches from Pennsylvania and upstate New York to Michigan, Ohio and Illinois. Although no longer the location of massive industry, to a significant degree this vast archipelago of working class communities retain their distinctive blue-collar character.

Here is a description of one such community:

Steubenville, Ohio – This place on the bank of the Ohio River is a vintage working-class community. Longtime residents have a memory of the steel mill's whistle, of crowds on downtown sidewalks and plenty of jobs that could let a person with only a high school diploma raise a family and own a home...

...Jefferson County used to be a Democratic bastion, thanks to the strong union presence, but the unions have been in decline along with the steel industry. The county is socially conservative and, like many blue-collar communities in this part of the world, has a lot of Reagan Democrats. The upshot is that Steubenville and the nearby towns are in a profound political and economic transition.

This was once a place that seemed geographically blessed, growing prosperous on a 1,000-foot-wide navigable river that led downstream to the Mississippi, the Gulf of Mexico and the world beyond. Steubenville had four railroad lines leading to all points of the compass. ...The banks of the Ohio became an industrial artery, with a series of mills, foundries, glassworks, ice factories and world-famous potteries.

It was a good place to grow up and get a job, as Dino Crocetti, born in 1917 on South Sixth Street in Steubenville, the son of a barber, discovered when he went off to work at the mill in nearby Weirton—though his honeyed voice led him to riches and fame under the name of Dean Martin.

Retired millworker John Meatris, 62, spent 41 years dealing with molten steel. He remembers how, when he was a child, downtown Steubenville was so crowded you could barely walk down the sidewalk on a Monday morning. He also remembers the soot falling out of the sky, coating everything to the point that you could write your name on a car windshield....

...In the corner of the steakhouse, sitting at the counter on a stool closest to the grill, John Abdalla monitors a slow night in the restaurant. He's the head of the Jefferson County Democratic Party and mayor of the village of Stratton, population 300.

His voice is hoarse, and he has tubes feeding oxygen into his nose from a small tank sitting on the adjacent stool. "I was a boilermaker for some 20 years," he says. "A lot of fly ash and asbestos. The lungs. Just shot on me."
The article then turns to another nearby community:

It's hard to imagine a place more stressed, and depressed, than Mingo Junction, home to another stunning monument to the Age of Steel, a mill with soaring blast furnaces and smokestacks but not a solitary worker. Thousands of people used to walk down the steep hill and across a narrow bridge above the railroad tracks to earn their living here.

People have been hoping for years that the mill would reopen, and that the blast furnaces would again bring heat and light and jobs to the community. That is not going to happen, apparently; the mill has been purchased by a company that deals in scrap metal.

Much of downtown Mingo Junction is boarded up and condemned. The senior center has run out of money and may soon close. The city hopes to save money by turning off hundreds of streetlights. So few people walk the streets that it could be a movie set for a film about a deadly germ from outer space.

"We don't even have no gas station. No bank. Our grocery store's shut down," says Mike Benko, 51, a self-employed heating-and-air worker drinking a $1.75 light beer at the American Legion hall, one of half a dozen bars still serving Mingo's hardy holdouts and survivors.

In the corner, parked in her regular spot with a view out the window, is Cecelia Pesta, 88, whose parents started the market nearly seven decades ago.

"It was a beautiful town," she says. "We had a lot of little stores. A lot of old-country people—Slovak people—lived here. But they're all gone."

A regular customer, Herb Barcus, 81, comes into the store. One of the employees quickly fetches him a stool so he can rest while his groceries are gathered for him. Barcus worked for 46 years as a boiler operator in the mill.

"That job was good to me," he says. "Bought a house. Put my kids through college. Had a decent pension."

Towns like Steubenville were, of course, victims of the massive closure of American factories from the mid-1970's to the 1990's. Several well-conducted ethnographic studies have examined the effect of plant closings on working-class communities in Ohio, Wisconsin and New Jersey. They include Gregory Pappas' The Magic City, Kathryn Dudley's The End of the Line and Ruth Milkman's Farewell to the Factory. Pappas' study presents the most finely observed and detailed description of the day-to-day effects of unemployment and the struggle to adjust after a factory closing while Milkman's study provides the best description of the unique and powerful working-class culture that existed in the factory life of her subjects and the profound psychological effects of its disappearance on the unemployed workers.

Much of the production that had taken place in those communities was "offshored" to foreign countries but a significant fraction also moved a shorter distance to smaller, more isolated towns in more rural areas of the country where anti-union, pro-business local governments created a more "favorable business climate."

One perceptive analyst of this part of working-class America is Joe Bageant, author of the 2006 book, Deer Hunting with Jesus. Born and raised in the working-class town of Winchester, Virginia, Bageant left the town and region as a young man and then returned in 2000, seeking to study and then sympathetically interpret his former home and neighbors to liberals and Democrats for whom they are largely an enigma.
As Bageant says:

Winchester is foremost a working-class town... you can make light bulbs at the GE plant, you can make styrene mop buckets at Rubbermaid or you can “bust cartons”, “stack product” and cashier at Walmart or Home Depo. But whatever you do, you’re likely to do it as a “team assembler” at a plant or as a cashier standing on a rubber mat with a scanner in your paw. And you’re gonna do it for a working man’s wage—for about $16,000 a year if you are a cashier, $26,000 if you are one of those assemblers.

Yet this place from which and about which I am writing could be any of thousands of communities across the United States. It is an unacknowledged parallel world to that of educated urban liberals—the world that blindsided them in 2004 and the one they need to come to understand... 4

Along with the relatively insulated small town communities like Winchester, another major area where working-class Americans live today is in the vast number of relatively nondescript “shallow rural” communities that encircle all major American cities and secondary urban areas.

The most perceptive observer of this distinctly working-class environment is Aaron Fox, an anthropologist and ethnomusicologist who, beginning in the early 1990’s, became deeply involved over a period of 14 years, personally as well as academically, with the people and communities around Lockhart, Texas, located on the outskirts of Austin.


People choose to live here, “out the country” as they say, limping their trucks and used car lot specials thirty-five miles each way to Austin, Urbana, Savannah, Meridian and so

many other cities around America. If you stood beside the state highway, you’d see them slipping back out to its margins at sunset, back out for another night of beer drinking, cigarette smoking, music playing, slow dancing, talk-heavy sociability in those windowless beer joints that line the road, shielding their patrons from the gaze of cops and passerby’s...

...to the stranger this is a place to pass through quickly and quietly, those fences and dogs and windowless beer joint walls telling the outsider to keep on moving, following the signs to the famous barbecue joint in town....

...unmistakably these are working-class people, too painfully thin or overweight or muscled or bent or broken to be any other kind, perfumed with cigarettes and beer, still sweaty from the day’s labor or dressed-up in Chinese-made western-style clothes from the Wal-Mart. 5

He then offers a more detailed description of the areas’ very distinctly working-class character.

Most of Lockhart’s working-class citizens are not farmers or employed directly in agriculture. A significant number travel to work in Austin, San Marcos, and San Antonio, where wages for both skilled and unskilled labor are higher and jobs more plentiful. For men this means jobs as truck drivers, electricians, factory and construction workers, and state and federal employees (e.g., road maintenance workers, postmen). For women this means jobs as nurse’s aides, cleaners, waitresses, school bus drivers and clerical workers and assembly jobs in the high-tech factories of south Austin. The local economy includes a number of small manufacturers... More stable, if dirty and dangerous, job exist in the oil and
agricultural services sectors (drilling equipment maintenance, feed lots and trucking). Many men operate informal small businesses in trucking, auto repair, or the building trades... many women supplement family income with transient work as barmaids, supermarket checkers, waitresses, and cleaners. In a pinch, as in the case of illness in the family, a divorce or a breakup, or the loss of a business, minimum wage jobs at convenience stores and fast food restaurants are a frequent resort.  

One important consequence of this geographic shift in where working people live is that the popular image of the white working class has increasingly merged with the popular image of rural or small town whites. In the early 1970's the most vivid images of the conservative working class was the image of Archie Bunker, Hard-Hat construction workers and anti-bussing protests in Boston's "Southie" and Cicero, Illinois—all distinctly Northern and urban locales. By the 1990's the new axis of political conflict had become the clash between Red States and Blue States, between the small towns of Sarah Palin's "real America" and the urban, coastal areas that voted consistently Democratic.

As Lisa Pruitt noted in an academic research paper titled, "The Geography of the Class Culture Wars":

Just as liberal elites shun and ridicule the white working class, they similarly express disdain for rural and small town residents. Indeed, among denizens of the largest cities and "coastal elites," rural Americans have become a proxy for the working class—the uncouth, the uncultured, and—yes—the illiberal...

...social progressives reserve their greatest contempt—and increasingly also their ire—for whites in rural America, the vast majority of whom are working class... the culture wars are now largely being fought—at least rhetorically—across the rural-urban divide.

As a result, the clichés of the "redneck", "bubba", "NASCAR Dad", "trailer park trash", "pick-up truck with a gun rack type-guy" are now stereotypes of both rural/small town and blue-collar/working class people at the same time.

Thus, the American working class has not really disappeared; it is an integral part of the "Real" America that is contrasted with the urban, coastal and educated sectors of the population.