Democracy needs workers

Amid turmoil, centre-left parties must ensure that blue-collar voters can find a home under their tent — that means making an effort to court them

Donald Trump shocked the world in 2016 when he was elected US president, winning swing states in America's Rust Belt, including Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, that have traditionally backed Democrats. Much the same story played out in November. The country's former industrial heartland overwhelmingly voted for Trump and his promise to 'make America great again.' According to exit polls, a majority of working-class people in key states – those who did not attend college and earn between $30 000 and $99 999 per year – backed Trump. That was true of white, Latino and Black voters.

This trend is not confined to the United States. In June, 57 per cent of workers voted for the far-right National Rally (*Rassemblement National*) in the first round of the French parliamentary election. And in September, 50 per cent of workers supported the populist Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) in the country's general election, while the Alternative for Germany (AfD) won 46 per cent of workers' votes in the Brandenburg state election.

The Democratic Party in the US, social democrats in Western Europe, and progressive forces in post-communist countries have all lost traction with the working class.

Poland's right-wing party, Law and Justice (PiS), which governed between 2015 and 2023, offers a useful case study of why populist and authoritarian parties are increasingly attractive to workers in Europe and the US, and how the centre left can win them back. PiS had a string of legislative wins, including lowering the retirement age, sharply increasing the minimum wage, and providing direct cash transfers to parents with children under the age of 18. By embracing the causes normally championed by social democrats, PiS promoted the economic interests of Polish workers. As a result, nearly half of this group voted for PiS during last year's parliamentary election (in the end, a coalition of

opposition parties won enough seats to form a majority government).

My research on the less-educated and lower-income voters in Poland's small towns and rural areas, conducted on behalf of the Foundation for European Progressive Studies and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, found an almost total disconnect between this group and the centre left. Working-class participants in my focus groups associated social-democratic parties with the LGBTQ+ agenda, the sexualization of children, openness to migrants, and efforts to undermine state sovereignty. Instead of consuming traditional media, they get their news from niche groups on social-media platforms. These voters are proud of their anti-establishment stance, and see themselves as engaged in a fight for their livelihoods and access to 'objective' information.

These findings match those of a systematic review of 51 studies examining declining support for centre-left parties in the West. The Democratic Party in the US, social democrats in Western Europe, and progressive forces in post-communist countries have all lost traction with the working class. To reverse this trend, they must implement worker-friendly policies and change the way they communicate with this crucial segment of voters.

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Progressives on both sides of the Atlantic have campaigned for years on increasing support for working families, including by spending more on public services, health care, education, and infrastructure. This has even helped them win elections (although often against unpopular conservative governments). Consider the 2008 and 2020 US presidential elections, when Democrats Barack Obama and Joe Biden, respectively, won, as well as the Labour Party's resounding victory over the Tories in the United Kingdom's general election earlier this year.

Once in office, however, these parties often fail to deliver on their campaign promises. Talking about creating good jobs in the industries of the future is not the same as actually doing it. Workers want bold, effective leaders who will take concrete action. The centre left must accept that it cannot communicate with blue-collar voters in the same way that it does with wealthy urban elites. Instead of dismissing workers' concerns about migration, globalization, and the green transition, the Democrats in the US and social-democratic parties in Europe should

address these fears on the channels and platforms that this segment of the population already uses. In that sense, they could learn a thing or two from the far right, which has become a dominant force on TikTok and X. Creating videos that put a more positive and pro-democratic spin on populism is less a matter of taste than of necessity.

The working class has played an essential role in building liberal democracies over the past two centuries, pushing for universal voting rights, the creation of social programmes, and other policies expanding economic well-being and underpinning political stability. In times of turmoil, like now, centre-left parties must ensure that blue-collar voters can find a home under their tent. That means making a concerted effort to court them, which starts by taking their concerns seriously and meeting them where they are. If they fail, the far right will continue to exploit workers' anger to fuel their anti-democratic agenda.

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