

Newman, L. and T. Skocpol (2023) *Rust Belt Union Blues: Why Working-Class Voters Are Turning Away from the Democratic Party.* Columbia University Press.

Review by Jack Metzgar

When I was in my teens in the late 1950s, I played baseball for a team sponsored by Franklin Local 2635 of the United Steelworkers of America. We played teams sponsored by the Steelworkers' Lower Cambria Local, the Italian Sons and Daughters of America, and the like. Now the best two teams in what is a comparable league in my home town of Johnstown, Pennsylvania, are both sponsored by local pharmacies, and there are no teams representing union locals or ethnic lodges anymore.

This look back to a younger time is occasioned by reading *Rust Belt Union Blues: Why Working-Class Voters Are Turning Away from the Democratic Party* by sociologists Lainey Newman and Theda Skocpol. Based on interviews with retirees, an early chapter evokes the dense social networks in steel towns back in the day (the 1940s into the 1970s) built around the Steelworkers and other unions as well as churches and ethnic clubs. I can't guess how meaningful that chapter would be for people not from that old world, but it grabbed me by the heartstrings, and I had to try and resist the temptation to wallow in reminiscences of "when life was slow and oh so mellow" (which I really like doing!).

But this is a book of serious political analysis, and Newman and Skocpol use that chapter not to evoke nostalgia in old-timers, but to try and convey how strong unions once were and the differences they made in all aspects of community life beyond workplaces, but especially in politics. Their argument is that politics is social, and that voting, as well as other forms of political activity, is rarely a relationship between an individual and a candidate, party, or program. Rather, our political views are shaped by our social worlds and the institutions that help create those worlds – institutions like churches, ethnic clubs, and, most importantly for their political analysis of Western Pennsylvania, unions.

Newman and Skocpol sometimes exaggerate how Democratic union members and union households were at mid-century. Union households rarely voted more than 60% Dem in Presidential elections nationally. And those unions who by the 1970s had slipped away from year-round political economic education and just announced their endorsed candidates at election time had waning political influence well before the full-blown crisis of unionism in the early 1980s. But Newman and Skocpol are not looking at only that direct relation between what union leadership does and how members vote. As sociologists, they tease out the impacts a local union has when, for example, its hall is a gathering place for other groups' meetings, for wedding receptions, Christmas parties, and such. A union's impact back in the day included its positive

presence in the larger community, whether with money like sponsoring baseball teams or the civic participation of its members in every area that mattered. Unions' impact on politics was not restricted to union members and households, but also reached into the broader community – not primarily in endorsing candidates, but in the consistent hearings unions got on any issue of local, regional, or national importance.

It is no surprise that the decline of unions from representing a third to only a tenth of workers has greatly harmed the Democratic Party nationally and especially in former union strongholds like Pittsburgh and its surrounding area. But Newman and Skocpol go beyond the quantitative relationships in showing the full scope of union power when it was strong. This helps us not only better understand what has been lost, but also what aspects of unionism might be valuable to restore beyond the mighty numbers the labor movement once enjoyed.

Rust Belt Union Blues is a regional study with limited generalizability, especially outside the Rust Belt. Pennsylvania is a key battleground state, however, and Dems desperately need to do better there than in the recent past. Western Pennsylvania used to be strongly Dem in many areas; now only Allegheny (Pittsburgh) and Erie counties were blue in 2020, and they are by no means a lock for Dems in 2024. But this regional study is especially valuable in revealing the complex texture of political thoughts and feelings among groups of workers who were once a progressive force, but are no longer.

In their interviews, the authors found not a singular political psychology, as so many analysts who don't do interviews so often conjure – either a social psychology where resentment, racism, and xenophobia are key or one of wholesome, good-hearted folks who are lost and confused. Rather, they found people, like the rest of us, trying to make sense of their experience and of the wider world in which that experience occurred. They found people crippled by resentment, sure enough, and some confused wholesome folk. But mostly they found a powerfully shared sense of betrayal across many different political leanings, a sense of betrayal rooted in having been betrayed.

Steelworkers and other manufacturing workers were betrayed and left behind in the decades around the turn of the century. Specific federal government actions sought to beat back the inflation of the 1970s with free trade policies based on meager wages and degraded conditions in other countries – and then just doubled down on those policies even after inflation disappeared. Workers were not the only ones who suffered. So did the myriad towns for whom union wages were their primary engine of economic activity. The economic disasters visited upon various cities and towns, especially in the Rust Belt, are well known. Newman and Skocpol, however, explore the social and political vacuum created by the demise of manufacturing and its unions. A vacuum that over time got filled by gun clubs, megachurches, Tea Party outfits, and MAGA mania.

Restoration, making things “great again,” and retribution resonate with folks who have been betrayed and left behind. Newman and Skocpol give a sympathetic rendering to a variety of voices, not all of them wholesome, but almost all more complex than survey data could ever capture. They highlight one man's explanation for why he voted again for Trump in 2020 even though the former president had done nothing to bring steelmaking and coal mining back to Western PA, as he had promised while campaigning in 2016: “A lie is better than nothing.” (p. 224) This makes little sense unless you realize that Trump's “paying attention,” even if just blowing smoke, occurred

while the national conversation, whether from Democrats or Republicans, had for decades been acting like this man and his ilk do not exist.

Reading this book can cause some despair, as the authors exaggerate how good things were in the past, when tens of thousands of union steelworkers voted for Eisenhower, Nixon, and Reagan, and how bleak they seem today. The authors miss the more dynamic parts of the US labor movement by focusing exclusively on industrial and building trades workers (predominately white men) while not contextualizing with some attention to today's unionists, who are more likely to be in service and public sector jobs and are much more diverse.

I also wish the authors had paid more attention to those hardy souls in MAGA country who remain Democrats (about a third of voters in the 20 counties around Pittsburgh) or who are genuine Independents. There are many voters for whom Trump's phony rhetoric resonates, but not enough to vote for him. And, likewise, there are those who voted for Trump in 2016 but not 2020 – and even those who voted for him twice but without conviction. Combined, this is a large group of voters, and moving even a relatively small percentage of them toward Biden in 2024 will ensure Pennsylvania stays blue, which is a necessary condition for keeping our one-day dictator out of the White House.

American politics would be better with more and stronger local unions to agitate for Dems, but voters who live in union households are still about 20% of all voters, and a bit more than that in Pennsylvania. The recent upsurge of strike activity and highly publicized victories – in auto and at Starbucks, at both ends of today's labor movement – may give unions a more credible voice, both among their members and all the people those members might influence. And President Biden has made a big bet by identifying himself as “union Joe,” both symbolically and in substantive policy. With some luck and a little help from their friends, unions could once again be decisive in places that have long been left for dead.

Reviewer Bio

Jack Metzgar, a retired adult educator at Roosevelt University, is a founder and past president of the Working-Class Studies Association. He is the author of *Striking Steel: Solidarity Remembered* and *Bridging the Divide: Working-Class Culture in a Middle-Class Society*.