



Cornell University
ILR School

Cornell University ILR School
DigitalCommons@ILR

Articles and Chapters

ILR Collection

2010

Introduction to *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class*

Jefferson Cowie
Cornell University, jrc32@cornell.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/articles>

 Part of the [Labor History Commons](#), and the [Labor Relations Commons](#)

Thank you for downloading an article from DigitalCommons@ILR.

Support this valuable resource today!

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the ILR Collection at DigitalCommons@ILR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articles and Chapters by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@ILR. For more information, please contact catherwood-dig@cornell.edu.

If you have a disability and are having trouble accessing information on this website or need materials in an alternate format, contact web-accessibility@cornell.edu for assistance.

Introduction to *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class*

Abstract

[Excerpt] What many pegged as the promise of a working-class revival in the early 1970s turned out to be more of a swan song by decade's end. The fragmented nature of the labor protests—by organization, industry, race, geography, and gender—failed to coalesce into a lasting national presence. The mainstream labor movement failed in its major political initiatives. Market orthodoxy eclipsed all alternatives, and promising organizing drives ended in failure. Deindustrialization decimated the power of the old industrial heartland. The vague class alliances of the major parties began to lose their distinction. As hip-hop writer Nelson George put it, "The first story is full of optimism and exalted ideas about humanity's ability to change through political action and moral argument. The next story, the plot we're living right now, is defined by cynicism, sarcasm, and self-involvement raised to art. The turning point was the early seventies." By 1981, Time magazine predicted little more than "Gloom and Doom for Workers."

Keywords

working class, labor movement, blue collar workers, deindustrialization

Disciplines

Labor History | Labor Relations

Comments

Suggested Citation

Cowie, J. (2010). Introduction [Electronic version]. In *Stayin alive: The 1970s and the last days of the working class*. New York: The New Press.

Stayin' Alive


The 1970s and the Last Days
of the Working Class

Jefferson Cowie



THE NEW PRESS

NEW YORK
LONDON



© 2010 by Jefferson Cowie
All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, in any form,
without written permission from the publisher.

Requests for permission to reproduce selections from this book should be mailed to:
Permissions Department, The New Press, 38 Greene Street, New York, NY 10013.

Published in the United States by The New Press, New York, 2010
Distributed by Perseus Distribution

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Cowie, Jefferson R.

Stayin' alive : the 1970s and the last days of the working class / Jefferson Cowie.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-56584-875-7 (hc)

1. Working class—United States—History—20th century. 2. Working class—
United States—Social conditions—20th century. 3. United States—Economic
conditions—1971–1981. 4. United States—Social conditions—1960–1980.

I. Title.

HD8072.5.C69 2010

305.5'62097309047—dc22

2010010884

The New Press was established in 1990 as a not-for-profit alternative to the large,
commercial publishing houses currently dominating the book publishing industry.

The New Press operates in the public interest rather than for private gain,
and is committed to publishing, in innovative ways, works of educational,
cultural, and community value that are often deemed insufficiently profitable.

www.thenewpress.com

*Composition by Westchester Book Group
This book was set in Adobe Caslon*

Printed in the United States of America

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

INTRODUCTION

Something's Happening to People Like Me

At only twenty-six years of age, sporting long sideburns, slicked back hair, and mod striped pants, autoworker Dewey Burton could barely contain his rage over the state of politics or his frustration with his job in the spring of 1972.

Dewey loved nothing more than customizing and racing automobiles, transforming old parts into dazzling metallic-flake creations, but he could barely tolerate his job at the Wixom Ford plant just outside of Detroit where he felt sentenced to a trivial role in assembling them. Satisfied with his pay, he was part of a widespread movement across the heartland fighting the mind-numbing tedium of industrial production. Reflecting the broad discontent on the floors of the nation's factories, some of which grew into open revolt, he remarked, "I hate my job, I hate the people I work for. . . . It's kind of stupid to work so hard and achieve so little."

Politically, Burton identified himself as a committed New Deal Democrat, but he was livid over plans to bus his son across Detroit in order to conform to the Supreme Court's idea of racial integration—policies driving his politics quickly to the right. Like the nation as a whole, Burton was simply being torn in too many directions at once. He was a figure in transition, the type of person journalist Pete Hamill had in mind when he wrote "The working-class white man is actually in revolt against taxes, joyless work, the double standards and short memories of professional politicians, hypocrisy and what he considers the debasement of the American dream."¹

Dewey Burton may not have been the typical disgruntled worker of the 1970s, but the *New York Times* believed that he came pretty close. He proved to be an able ambassador to the newspaper's professional middle-class readership

interested in the increasingly exotic state of disaffected blue-collar America. He first surfaced in a *New York Times* article on industrial discontent at the Wixom plant in 1972. Shortly thereafter, a reporter selected him to explain to an incredulous readership the reasons for northern workers' support for backlash populist and presidential candidate Alabama governor George Wallace, to whom Burton had turned because of his opposition to busing. The *New York Times* returned to interview Dewey during the fall 1972 campaign, the 1974 midterm elections, and the presidential contests in 1976 and 1980. Smart and well spoken, Burton had a demeanor that merged proletarian and mod, greaser and beatnik into a synthesis of optimistic sixties unrest and claustrophobic seventies resignation that would be hard to sustain as the decade unfolded. As a result, Burton noted, "I received my fifteen minutes of fame four times."²

The media attention lavished on workers like Burton was part of a broad blue-collar revival in the 1970s, as working-class America returned to the national consciousness through strikes, popular culture, voting booths, and corporate strategy. Making sense of what *Newsweek* called the "far-ranging, fast spreading revolt of the little man against the Establishment" bordered on a national obsession. *Fortune*, along with countless other magazines and television news features, recognized the workers of the early seventies as "restless, changeable, mobile, demanding" and headed for "a time of epic battle between management and labor" given the "angry, aggressive and acquisitive" mood in the shops. As many big contracts expired, inflation ate up wage gains, and workers challenged the rules of postwar labor relations, the country witnessed the biggest wave of strike activity since 1946 (which was the biggest strike year in all of U.S. history). In 1970 alone there were over 2.4 million workers engaged in large-scale work stoppages, thirty-four massive stoppages of ten thousand workers or more, and a raft of wildcats, slowdowns, and aggressive stands in contract negotiations. Like so many other observers of the seventies labor scene, *Time* magazine connected the seventies' unrest to the battered ideals of the Depression decade. "Blue collar workers," the newsmagazine reported, "are gaining a renewed sense of identity, of collective power and class that used to be called solidarity."³

Despite the frequent analogies to Depression-era militancy that often cropped up in coverage of the nation's "blue collar blues," the workers bursting upon the national stage in the seventies were hardly the stock proletarian character of the 1930s popular imagination. They appeared less as social-realist heroes of the industrial age than in ways that were simultaneously profound and strange, militant and absurd, traditional and new, male and

female, insurgent and reactionary, as well as white, black, and brown. Whether re-christened as the "hardhats," "the unmeltable ethnics," the "forgotten man," the "Silent Majority," the "working class majority," the "middle Americans" or the "new militants" depended upon at whom the observer looked; whether the Dewey Burtons of the world were in the midst of an industrial insurgency or political backlash depended upon where the observer stood. The acid-dipped lyrics of urban jazz poet Gil Scott-Heron may have captured the basic tension best: "America doesn't know whether it wants to be Matt Dillon or Bob Dylan." Indeed, as the crosscurrents affecting Burton begin to suggest, whether the country wanted to be led, tall in the saddle, to a restoration of the *ancien régime*, cowboy style, by Marshall Matt Dillon of the television show *Gunsmoke*, or whether it wanted to meld the workerism of Woody Guthrie with the New Politics of the sixties à la early Bob Dylan remained one of the core dilemmas of the decade. "In the 1970s," labor leader Gus Tyler declared, "fury comes easily to the white worker. He is ready for battle. But he does not quite know against whom to declare war."⁴

I

Political forecasters in the seventies saw working people's hope layered with anxiety and their traditions undermined by a confusing phalanx of new problems. The seventies had the potential, as two labor intellectuals put it, of becoming "Labor's Decade—Maybe." Advancing the old class politics of the thirties in concert with the new social movements of the sixties could make the 1970s "not the dawning of the Age of Aquarius," but "a new era for the workingman." Famed left wing intellectual Michael Harrington, trying to make sense of the crosscurrents in blue-collar America, said that the nation was moving "vigorously left, right, and center at the same time."⁵

Burton found himself caught in the turbulence. After the tumultuous 1968 primary campaign and the disaster of the Chicago Democratic Convention, he readily toed the unions' line for their bread-and-butter man, Hubert Humphrey. Regarding himself "as a union man coming from a long line of F.D.R. Democrats," it seemed the only sensible position for a worker to take. "People have been telling me since I was a child that when the Democrats were in office, everybody was put to work," Dewey noted. That 1968 race, however, was the last time Burton would call himself an unwavering Democrat as busing all but shattered his faith in the mainstream of the

party. Extending the separate-is-not-equal logic of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the Supreme Court decided in *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* (1971) that integrating school children through mandatory busing was an appropriate remedy for racial segregation in the public schools. And in Burton's Detroit, plans were to integrate not just the schools within the city, but the suburbs with the city. "What burns me to the bottom of my bones is that I paid an excessive amount of money so that my son could walk three blocks to school," he explained about his family's small bungalow on the edge of Detroit. The leafy affluence of the term "suburb," however, hardly matched the rows of plain-stoop homes of Dewey's Redford, a township hugging the border of Detroit where many streets, including the Burtons', still remained unpaved. "I'm not going to pay big high school taxes and pay more for a home so that somebody can ship my son 30 miles away to get an inferior education," he declared.⁶

Burton decided that the answer to the busing threat was to pull the lever for the pivotal political figure of the era, George Wallace, for the Democratic nomination for president in 1972. The governor of Alabama, who famously stood in the schoolhouse doorway to defend segregation and who swore never to be "out niggered" in politics, was busy rattling the stale presumptions of both major parties. As an independent candidate in 1968, Wallace drew together the segregationist South with anti-liberal northerners concerned about blacks moving into their neighborhoods, fearful of the riots, and feeling simply forgotten. His candidacy enabled the political transformation of a substantial slice of white working people to become dislodged from the Roosevelt coalition and move toward what Kevin Phillips famously called *The Emerging Republican Majority* (1969). By the time George Wallace returned as an insurgent candidate in the fragmented Democratic primaries in 1972, his performance was roughly equal to any major candidate. He earned Dewey Burton's vote en route to a victory in the Michigan primary on the day after he was crippled by the bullet of a would-be assassin in suburban Baltimore.⁷

Separating George Wallace's race baiting from his "stand up for the common man" theme is as difficult as untangling race from class in U.S. history, but his blue-collar rhetoric spoke to themes that no one else on the national stage addressed. Among northern wage earners like Burton, Wallace's populist anti-elitism, anti-crime, and anti-busing messages worked best, but his overt embrace of segregation, his snarling rhetoric, and petty resentments failed. In a typical stump speech, Wallace effectively stirred the pot of popu-

list anti-elitism that had been simmering in American politics since Andrew Jackson:

Now what are the real issues that exist today in these United States? It is the trend of pseudointellectual government where a select elite group have written guidelines in bureaus and court decisions, have spoken from some pulpits, some college campuses, some newspaper offices, looking down their noses at the average man on the street, the glass workers, the steel workers, the auto workers, and the textile workers, the farm workers, the policemen, the beautician, and the barber, and the little businessman, saying to him that you do not know how to get up in the morning or go to bed at night unless we write you a guideline.

At the heart of the Wallace phenomenon was ambiguity about his cause. As one trucker explained, "I'm for either him or the Communists, I don't care, just anybody who wouldn't be afraid of the big companies." While conservative strategists were originally skeptical of Wallace's "country and western Marxism," they quickly found it the key to their own populist appeal in the 1970s—a key that would eventually open the door to the white working class vote for Ronald Reagan.⁸

The DayGlo® "This Family WILL NOT Be Bused" sticker on the Burtons' screen door was a complicated thing. Many anxious old liberals and impatient New Leftists dismissed votes like Dewey's as clear racism, but his political choices cannot be dismissed so simply. Raised poor (the first indoor running water he had was when he moved from southern Illinois to Detroit as a teenager), Dewey nonetheless profited from generations of segregated housing patterns, silent white privilege, and occupational segregation. Still, he felt open to black people as both leaders and neighbors. He touted his black union local leader as "the best president we've ever had" and claimed that he would welcome anyone into his neighborhood. "If a black mom and daddy buy or rent a house here and send their kids to [my son] David's school and pay their taxes, that's fine. Busing black kids to white neighborhoods and white kids to black neighborhoods is never going to achieve integration. It's upsetting. It's baloney." Like Wallace, Burton also detested "welfare free-loaders," pointing to an unruly white family that lived down the block. His protest against liberalism had as much to do with control of his life, the fate of his family, and his modest and tenuous place on the social ladder as it did anything else.⁹

For working people, the social upheavals associated with the sixties actually took root in most communities in the seventies, which was not simply a different decade but a distinctly less generous economic climate. From a policy perspective, the Democratic Party faced a dilemma that it could not solve: finding ways to maintain support within the white blue-collar base that came of age during the New Deal and World War II era, while at the same time servicing the pressing demands for racial and gender equity arising from the sixties. Both had to be achieved in the midst of two massive oil shocks, record inflation and unemployment, and a business community retooling to assert greater control over the political process. Placing affirmative action onto a world of declining occupational opportunity risked a zero-sum game: a post-scarcity politics without post-scarcity conditions. Despite the many forms of solidarity evident in the discontent in the factories, mines, and mills, without a shared economic vision to hold things together, issues like busing forced black and white residents to square off in what columnist Jimmy Breslin called “a Battle Royal” between “two groups of people who are poor and doomed and who have been thrown in the ring with each other.”¹⁰

The mercurial nature of the politics of '72 was such that when Wallace was eliminated from the race, Dewey voted for the most left-leaning candidate of any major party in the twentieth century, Democratic senator George McGovern. The choice did not come easily. The autoworker was genuinely stumped about whether incumbent Richard Nixon's Silent Majority or challenger George McGovern's soggy populism best represented his interests. It would be a betrayal of everything he stood for to vote for a Republican, he believed, but he had grave concerns about McGovern and his entourage of student radicals. He also sensed a “meanness” creeping into McGovern's campaign after he threw vice presidential nominee Tom Eagleton off the ticket due to his earlier problems with mental illness. Much of the labor movement, especially the hierarchy of the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), could not stomach McGovern's New Politics with its anti-war positions, youth movements, and commitment to open up the Democratic Party to wider spectrum of Americans. The labor federation, fearing for its traditional kingmaker role in the Democratic Party, fought the McGovern insurgency with every scrap of institutional power it could muster.¹¹

Meantime, Richard Nixon, taking his cues from Wallace, was designing his own heretical strategy to woo white working-class voters away from the party of Roosevelt. His plans to build a post-New Deal coalition—the “New

Majority” he liked to call it—around the Republican Party in 1972 was based on making an explicit pitch for white, male, working-class votes by appealing to their cultural values over their material needs. His targets were men like Burton, who had first been dislodged from the Democratic mainstream by George Wallace. Despite Nixon’s courtship of Dewey’s vote, the autoworker remained suspicious of Nixon’s loyalties. “Nixon hasn’t proved anything to me when he raises the prices of new cars and freezes the wages of the people who build them,” Burton explained about falling back on bread-and-butter Democratic politics with his vote for the left-leaning McGovern. “I really don’t think McGovern will win,” he finally concluded. “But maybe if we vote for him we can show Nixon what we want, what the working man wants.” The majority of white working-class voters disagreed, selecting Nixon by wide margins over the most pro-labor candidate ever produced by the American two-party system.¹²

The early seventies’ political confusion had its analogue in the discontent boiling up on the shop floors. Employees at the Wixom Ford plant where Burton worked were a minor part of a national epidemic of industrial unrest in the first half of the 1970s. They fought with supervisors on the line, clogged up the system with grievances, demanded changes in the quality of work life, walked out in wildcat strikes, and organized to overthrow stale bureaucratic union leadership. Yet it was a conflicted set of movements. As Dewey explained, workers were harnessed to union pay but longed to run free of the deadening nature of the work itself—and sometimes free of the union leaders who spoke on their behalf. “Once you’re there, there’s no other way to make as much money and get the benefits. Ford’s our security blanket. I’m a scaredy-cat. If I leave, I lose eight years seniority,” he lamented. Chained to his paycheck, he dreaded his future at the plant. “Each year I felt like I accomplished something. Suddenly I realized that I’m at a dead end and I’ll probably be hacking on the line for 30 years.” Burton’s “mouthing off” at the plant had resulted in a string of disciplinary notices for relatively minor infractions, which blocked his hopes of improving his skills and position at Ford. Too “pushy” and outspoken, according to his foreman, Burton was trapped at the bottom of the industrial order. As one of his co-workers lamented, “There’s only three ways out of here. You either conform and become deader each day, or you rebel, or you quit.”¹³

Commentators often referred to the unruliness on the assembly lines as the “Lordstown syndrome,” after the infamous three-week-long strike in 1972 by a group of young, hip, and inter-racial autoworkers at a General

Motors (GM) plant in Lordstown, Ohio, who battled the fastest—and most psychically deadening—assembly line in the world. “With all the shoulder-length hair, beards, Afros and mod clothing along the line,” explained *Newsweek* of the notorious GM plant, “it looks for all the world like an industrial Woodstock”—suggesting the possibility of an upheaval in class relations for the seventies equal to those of race and culture of the 1960s. “At the heart of the new mood,” declared the *New York Times*, “there is a challenge to management’s authority to run its plants, an issue that has resulted in some of the hardest fought battles between industry and labor in the past.” There were also new leaders to match the new temperament. Ed Sadlowski, for instance, a rank-and-file leader emerging from the ashen haze of South Chicago’s steel works, preached what the *Village Voice* called “a populist message of class conflict and class consciousness that hasn’t been heard in this country since the ’30s.” As he liked to put it, “There’s a fire in the steelworkers’ union, and I’m not gonna piss on it.” When New York television talk show host David Susskind asked Dewey Burton and a panel of other discontented workers, “Who had the power to change the situation?”—management or the union—all four guests chimed in unison, “the rank and file.”¹⁴

The old guard mostly found such militancy naïve, talk of the “rank and file” bordering on the mystic, and the challengers ungrateful for collective bargaining riches that the previous generation had already won for them. As the Steel Workers president I.W. Abel explained, “Young workers don’t appreciate what the union has built. They didn’t go through the rough times.” Rejecting the continuous analogies between the seventies and the thirties, union leaders also feared the insurgents’ alliances with “outsiders”—especially meddling liberals and young activists turning from the campuses of the sixties to the union halls of the seventies. Both the mainstream labor leadership and management seemed to understand—and endorse—historian David Brody’s fundamental insight about postwar labor relations machinery, a system in which all issues were to be funneled strictly through statesman-like negotiations. “The contractual logic itself,” Brody argued, “actually evolved into a pervasive method for containing shop-floor activism.” That activism was exactly what insurgents hoped would make the seventies into a new era of working-class mobilization by bringing unions into the New Politics, delivering remedies to the new shop floor demands, and organizing more inclusive and dynamic unions. In contrast, the union bureaucracy saw the upheavals as threatening to its power and as crippling labor’s ability to deliver the goods.

Yet the insurgencies of the early seventies, resisted so mightily by the union hierarchy, were the main source of whatever hope there may have been for updating the old order. The postwar collective bargaining machinery had delivered the goods, and nobody wanted to get rid of it. "People wanted to kick the machine. But they didn't want the machine to stop."¹⁵

Working class discontent was puzzling to a generation accustomed to assuming that "the labor question" had long been answered. The problems of workers and class may have once existed in the United States, went the dominant logic, but it was solved back in the thirties by union recognition and the enlightened New Deal state. The "liberal consensus," the reigning ideology of the postwar era produced by that bargain, was in fact premised on the assumption that the set of problems that haunted capitalism for one hundred years had been resolved in the technocratic settlement that recognized workers' representatives as junior partners in the success story. In a trenchant critique of the "ideology of the liberal consensus," however, Godfrey Hodgson exposed how class conflict may have been "contained" in postwar America, but "the abolition of the working class, in fact, was a myth." By the seventies, as workers grew restless with their containment, it became clear that the immense institutional achievements of the previous generation—from labor legislation to the building of big unions to the strength of the Democratic Party—were both sources of power as well as systems of constraint on the future fortunes of the American working class.¹⁶

The complexity of Dewey Burton's life cuts against the simplistic "hard hat" stereotype that dominated the decade and that was brought to life each week in the most popular sitcom of the decade, *All in the Family*. Dewey found little opportunity for leisure or entertainment, other than his passion for customizing cars, but, like the rest of the country, he never missed the break-through CBS show he and his wife, Ilona, affectionately referred to by the name of its iconic main character, "Archie." *All in the Family* served as a sort of national therapy session as the generations, the races, the genders, and the classes clashed over post-sixties values and politics in some of the finest, most controversial, and popular television ever created. His wife, Ilona, feared that the *New York Times* reporter saw her as too much of an "Edith"—inadequately liberated and at the mercy of the needs of her family even though she, too, clocked in for a full shift installing trim for GM. Despite Archie becoming the national symbol for the bigoted blue-collar worker, however, Dewey Burton saw nothing of himself in the main character. "He's a fool,"

Dewey reported about Archie. "He's taken hate and bigotry and turned them into the most funny things I know. It's like Mark Twain's satire—it's hilarious."¹⁷

All in the Family may have been the most important representation of white working-class men in popular culture during the early seventies, but it was hardly the only one. A multifaceted resurrection of blue-collar America appeared in commercial culture from Nashville to Hollywood, echoing the issues in the factories and the voting booths. In addition to America's weekly encounter with Archie, the top shows in the mid-1970s included *The Waltons* (return of the Great Depression); *Welcome Back Kotter*, *Good Times*, and *Sanford and Son* (life and poverty in the inner city); *The Jeffersons* (black upward mobility); *Laverne and Shirley* (working girls in the classless fifties), and *One Day at a Time* and *Alice* (working single mothers take on the world). The new shows' emphases on class-infused social problems were a far cry from their staid but popular predecessors like *Marcus Welby* and *Gunsmoke*.

Exaggerated pathologies of violent, angry white men received the bulk of the attention in popular culture during the first half of the decade, but the overall message was more akin to what The Temptations called the "Ball of Confusion" in the nation as a whole. The ideological breakdown was evident all around. Reporters descended on factories for special programs to explain the "blue collar blues," and filmmakers turned their lenses toward working-class themes across the spectrum—from Peter Boyle's portrayal of the neo-fascist *Joe* to Al Pacino's brilliant identity meltdown in *Dog Day Afternoon* to Jack Nicholson's use of the blue-collar world as a playground of authenticity in *Five Easy Pieces*. Similarly, the themes of country music, a genre that once expressed the simple longings of lost souls and broken hearts, became embattled terrain in the class wars of the 1970s. By mid decade, however, any faith in the future of the common man was becoming difficult to hold. Robert DeNiro's portrayal of the pathologically alienated Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver*—based on the Warholian diary of the man who shot George Wallace solely for the fame it would deliver—provided the nation with a new and threatening vigilante anti-hero living outside the boundaries of civil society. Just as in the nation's politics and workplaces, there was a tug of war in popular culture over the meaning and political potential of the working class, a struggle not fully reconciled until the second half of the decade.

II

The hope and possibility marbled throughout the confusion of the early part of the decade began to fade into the despair of the new order emerging in the second half. "I wanted to be somebody," Dewey Burton declared in 1974. "It wasn't the money so much as that I just want to have some kind of recognition, you know, to be more tomorrow than I was yesterday, and that's what I was working for." In addition to plugging away down at the Ford plant, Burton had been trying to start his own custom auto painting business, chipping away slowly at a college degree, and even playing guitar. "He drove himself," Ilona explained. "He'd work all day and study all night and then take his books with him to work and read on his breaks." Looking a lot more "sixties" by the mid-1970s, with his long hair and black turtleneck, he decided to surrender his hopes for the future in order to "concentrate on today," as he put it. "It takes so much to just make it that there's no time for dreams and no energy for making them come true—and I'm not so sure anymore that it's ever going to get better," he explained with a poetic fatalism. His creeping despair resonated with what Peter Marin identified in *Harper's Magazine* in 1975 as a "new world view emerging among us," focusing on the self with "individual survival as its sole good." Burton framed the problem more succinctly. "I realized I was killing myself, and there wasn't going to be any reward for my suicide."¹⁸

When Dewey made those remarks in late 1974, he stood not simply at the middle of a decade but at a watershed between eras. The 1970s might appropriately be thought of as half post-1960s and half pre-1980s, but they were also more than that—they served as a bridge between epochs. A broad spectrum of observers, from conservative ("the decade that brought you modern life—for better or worse") to liberal ("the great shift in American culture, society, and politics") to postmodern ("the undecade that was perhaps the most important decade"), have formed a consensus that within the gloomy seventies we can find the roots of our own time. The period has been named "pivotal" not because of its monumental events, its great leaders, or its movements, but because society, from its economic foundations to its cultural manifestations, really did move in a new direction. It stands as a bookend to the New Deal era: that which was built in the thirties and forties—politically, economically, and culturally—was beginning to crumble barely two generations later. More than a time of mere fads for which it is mercilessly teased, it was a time of fundamental realignments.¹⁹

Part of Burton's "no time for dreams" sensibility was reconciling himself to his future on the line, but another part was more than personal—it was a national disposition. Historian Andreas Killen portrays 1973 as the year of the collective "nervous breakdown," a year full of dire news but also "alive with a sense of new possibilities and openings to the future, harbingers of an emerging new postmodern cultural configuration." It was "a deeply schizophrenic moment," he found, in which "reality itself seemed to be up for grabs." That year was the buildup to a troika of disasters that rattled the American psyche—the oil embargo that threatened the nation's supply of energy, the beginning of the stagflation that sapped the nation's economic strength, the president's 1974 resignation that drained its faith—and then the fall of Saigon in 1975 shattered the remains of national purpose. Writing in 1974, Michael Harrington noted "a collective sadness" that had descended upon the nation as if it were in mourning for a dying era—the promise of modernity itself slipping out of reach.²⁰

Above all, the mid-1970s marked the end of the postwar boom. The years prior to the 1973–74 crisis had been the most economically egalitarian time in U.S. history, the point on the graph where the bounty was shared most equitably, and unemployment was at historic lows. The year 1972 was also the apex of earnings for male workers. Starting in the 1973–74 years, real earnings began to stagnate and then slide as workers began their slow and painful dismissal from their troubled partnership with postwar liberalism. By mid-decade the record-breaking strikes, rank-and-file movements, and vibrant organizing drives that had once promised a new day for workers were reduced to a trickle in the new economic climate. They were then replaced by layoffs, plant closures, and union decertification drives. White male workers' incomes had risen an astonishing 42 percent since 1960, but those incomes stagnated or fell for the next quarter century following the early seventies. Real earnings first stagnated and then were driven down by oil shocks and inflation; deindustrialization, plant closings, and anti-unionism; and a global restructuring of work itself that would continue over the ensuing decades. Most telling of the lost opportunities was that even the relative rise of women's wages since the 1970s was greatly attributable to the decline in male earnings.²¹

Burton too saw little hope or opportunity in the new emerging reality at mid-decade. Peering out from underneath what he called his "despondency," he framed the problem as effectively as any of the sociologists of the time. "Something's happening to people like me—working stiffs, as they say—and

it isn't just that we have to pay more for this or that or that we're having to do without this or make do with a little less of that. It's deep, and hard to explain, but it's more like more and more of us are sort of leaving all our hopes outside in the rain and coming into the house and just locking the door—you know, just turning the key and 'click,' that's it for what we always thought we could be."²²

Dewey Burton managed to make it to the polls for the 1974 midterm elections, but his heart was not in it. The nation delivered the famously liberal sweep to Congress in the wake of the Republican humiliation of Watergate, but the class of '74 consisted of a new breed of post-1960s, free-market, social liberals, who were skeptical of workers' needs and suspicious of their institutions. The new politicians, inspired to do something about urgent issues of race and gender inequality, also tended to be chary of structural solutions in an era of inflation. For Dewey, however, the problem centered less upon his political choices than the lack of meaning in the entire political process. His sentiments were echoed in sociologist Robert Nisbet's 1975 book *The Twilight of Authority*, which charted the decline of the political community in the deepest sense of the term. "All we see are enlarging aggregates of atom-like individuals whose disenchantment with politics and party has become translated into indifference, always a dangerous circumstance in a democracy," he argued in refrains of Tocqueville. Predicting a new militaristic Leviathan emerging from the toxic political seas, he lamented not the direction of the nation but the lack of one, not the politicization of culture but its vacuity. Dewey would have agreed. "You can't blame it all on the politicians," Burton argued in earthier terms. "But I wish just for once that one of them would say, 'now folks, I swear to God, if you'll elect me, I won't do a damn thing.' That's the fellow I'd vote for. Somebody who'd just let us alone."²³

III

In 1976, Dewey Burton announced that he found someone whom he believed could deliver the nation out of its malaise: former actor, California governor, and long-shot presidential candidate Ronald Reagan. He explained that he was going to be a "primary jumper"—a Democrat voting in the Republican primary in order to support the California governor's bid to unseat President Gerald Ford from the right. In Reagan, Burton found the same freshness, independence, backbone, and scrappy spirit that Wallace had shown

in 1972 but “without the shadow of racism behind him” that bothered Dewey about the Alabama governor. “Four years ago, it was all fire and brimstone—busing and the Vietnam War. And then it was Watergate,” he recalled about the earlier contests. “Now there aren’t any issues, except maybe the economy,” he explained about both the rapid changes in the nation and the hollowing out of the political process by 1976.²⁴

The workers down at the plant regarded Dewey as a “rebel” and a “radical” for backing what he saw as Reagan’s boldness rather than staying within the Democratic Party. Dewey no longer had busing to worry about since the Supreme Court’s decision in *Milliken v. Bradley* (1974) exempted the suburban districts outside of Detroit from any part in desegregating inner-city school systems, a decision that left a suffocating ring of white flight around impoverished major cities in America. Yet he continued to feel a powerful draw to the right. “Sure, I’ve got qualms deep down inside me about voting for a Republican,” he explained. “But a man’s got to grow up sometime,” he remarked half-consciously brushing aside not just his own youth but the idealism of an earlier time. Reagan lost to incumbent Gerald Ford in the Republican primary that year, leaving Burton with what he found to be a rather unremarkable contest between Ford and Georgia governor Jimmy Carter. It had not been just any Republican that fired Dewey’s imagination or drew his loyalty, as he showed almost no interest in Ford. The election was so dull to Burton that by 1980 he had forgotten for whom he voted back in the ’76 national contest. “Silly, we voted for Ford,” Ilona reminded him.²⁵

The president of Burton’s union, in contrast, held out grand—perhaps grandiose—hopes for Jimmy Carter, whom he believed to be a new hybrid liberal for a complicated political age. When the United Auto Workers (UAW) president endorsed Carter, he hoped he would be the guy who could tame the Wallace supporters, entice the black voters, and still offer up something for the industrial workers, all while using his Georgian charms to turn the South back around to the Democratic column. When Carter gained the executive branch after the Democrats had suffered a painful eight-year absence from power, many thought a resurrection in labor liberalism was in the making. Plans were hatched in the labor, civil rights, and liberal groups to revive the old New Deal formula through full employment legislation, labor law reform, national health insurance, and industrial policy. A new, shared economic foundation for politics, they hoped, might mitigate the divisiveness then tearing at the party. It was, however, a New Deal revival that never happened. Missing from the seventies’ progressive agenda

were policy innovations that could effectively draw together the economic politics of the thirties and the social politics of the sixties, mobilization strategies that might work with a post-Vietnam/post-Watergate electorate skeptical of the efficacy of the state, and policies that would not exacerbate the nation's main economic problem, stagflation. By late 1978, Carter had already lurched right in his efforts to beat back inflation and pinned the nation's problems not on material issues but on what he called a "crisis of the spirit."²⁶

By the turning point election of 1980, Dewey Burton's earlier rebelliousness had melted into a defensive gratitude for the limited job security he possessed. Back in 1972, a unionized manufacturing job seemed like an existential dead end, but, in the twilight of the industrial golden age, that same job had become a rare and coveted source of security. The dwindling numbers of workers who had claim on those high-paying industrial jobs found themselves to be labor's new aristocracy—shrinking in numbers, paid beyond the imagination of the vast unorganized majority, and politically detached from those toiling in the swelling ranks of the non-unionized service sector. Dewey was certainly doing quite well. He had earned a slot painting parts and then, finally, a much-sought-after position in the skilled trades. His promotions, ironically, were partially management's reaction to his media fame. While he continued to pour his soul into building his T-bucket hot rods, Burton's advancements allowed him to move his family up and out toward the more comfortable suburbs further outside of Detroit. He had come to reflect AFL-CIO president George Meany's boast that modern union members have "a great deal more to lose" than in the past. With little concern for the unorganized or labor's dwindling power, Meany complacently explained, "The more of the world's goods a person has, the more conservative he becomes."²⁷

Dewey Burton may have been a good deal more comfortable than he had ever been, but, as he might have told a complacent George Meany, he was also the last of a dying breed. "It's the first time in 16 years that I've ever been threatened with losing my job," he reported in 1980. Like much of the economy as a whole, the auto industry was in a tailspin as Chrysler turned to a federal bailout and Ford and GM slashed employment levels. "A lot of my friends lost their jobs. They won't never come back to the plant," he lamented about a layoff of 3,200 workers at the Wixom Ford plant—a pattern that rippled across the heartland. Organized labor lost not just the percentage of workers they represented in the economy, but, by the end of the decade, the

problem had crossed into the loss of real numbers as well (and even then, dramatic growth in the public sector masked dramatic losses in the private sector). The complacency evident in labor's failure to organize new workers or to help create a more expansive working-class identity beyond the industrial core of the AFL-CIO became evident as organized labor's strength began to dissolve. Without a strong counter-presence in the growing and diverse service and clerical industries—as well as political reforms, new labor leadership, and new voices necessary to organize new sectors—the unions' ability to withstand the attacks from politicians and business leaders weakened along with their industrial base.

By 1980 Burton completed the most significant transformation in postwar political history: from New Deal faithful to icon of discontent to Reagan Democrat. In his mind, there was little choice for the 1980 general election. "Carter's had four years. He didn't stabilize the country. Don't give me no more promises. Let me try somebody else's promises for a change," he concluded in his last interview. "If Carter's so good for the working people, how come they're not working?" he demanded about the president's disastrously ineffective first and only term. Organized labor rallied to defeat Reagan, but Burton believed that the unions' political influence on him and the rest of the rank and file had greatly diminished over the course of the decade. He also knew that even the UAW's support for Carter was little more than "lukewarm"—if for no other reason than the union had supported Ted Kennedy's attempt to unseat Carter from the left in the 1980 primary. On the eve of the 1980 election, the *New York Times* concluded its decade-long look at one autoworker, noting, "Dewey Burton has become a happy man, and he will gladly vote for Ronald Reagan for president on November 4 . . . [even though] he is a strong union man, a Democrat by upbringing and conviction."²⁸

Burton's choice for the presidency in 1980 helped usher in a new and complex era of working-class political history. The new, more populist right proved effective in offering cultural refuge for blue-collar whites, while also being the central protagonist in the new economic transformations devastating working-class communities across the heartland. At a time when the traditional working-class ally, the Democratic Party, offered precious little material comfort to working people, Ronald Reagan's New Right offered a restoration of the glory days by bolstering morale on the basis of patriotism, God, race, patriarchy, and nostalgia for community. The Reagan administration did squeeze inflation out of the economy but only by allowing historic levels of unemployment, industrial decline, and the decimation of the

collective bargaining system—all of which combined to fight inflation by lowering wages and raising unemployment. After the president's attack on organized labor, most dramatically in the firing of over ten thousand striking members of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization, and the restructuring of the tax schedule in favor of the wealthy, he looked a lot less like the working man's champion. In many parts of the industrial belt, the Depression-era analogy became true not in terms of working-class insurgencies as it had in the early seventies but, by the early eighties, in terms of material reality. As Dewey later confessed, "Reagan blindsided us."²⁹

As in the political world, the range of working-class possibilities in popular culture was similarly diminished by the second half of the 1970s. Working-class story lines hardened into three options: escape one's class position; find ways to forget it; or, lacking any civic outlets, bury its pains deep inside. Tony Manero, the lead in the immensely popular and decade-defining film *Saturday Night Fever*, declared his loser buddies in Brooklyn to be all "assholes back there" before escaping to upwardly mobile Manhattan. His pals were left behind in a simmering racial and ethnic stew with neither a future nor any narrative sense of what might happen to them. The future belonged to the chosen ones who could get out. Not surprisingly, the urban professionals—the "yuppies"—would become for the eighties what workers had been for the media in the seventies. By 1980 the ruthless oil baron J.R. Ewing of the immensely popular television show *Dallas* eclipsed Dewey's beloved working-class Archie as the media's new totem for the new decade.

To absorb the narratives of popular culture of the late seventies was to relegate the working class to faraway times and places—including the most distant, the isolated hearts of working people themselves. The runaway popularity of Johnny Paycheck's country novelty song, "Take This Job and Shove It" captured the new powerlessness. The blue-collar anthem saturated the radio stations, workplaces, and bars of the nation during the second half of the decade. Despite the title, the song is less about open rebellion than it is about a "hidden transcript" of resistance that takes place internally, far from the outward contest of power relations that defined the first half of the seventies. The narrator is unable to act; his rebellion is only a fantasy: "I'd give the shirt right off of my back / If I had the nerve to say / Take this job and shove it!" The surface militancy of the song was actually more about what two sociologists dubbed the smoldering "inner class warfare" of the seventies, in which "struggle between men leads to struggle within each man." Bruce Springsteen followed up his Whitmanesque paeans of mid-decade

escape with ballads of rustbelt workers who failed to make it out, left to struggle alone “in the darkness on the edge of town.” Music, television, and film turned from the hopeful crosscurrents of the early years toward a rather unified message: save yourself or face irrelevance.³⁰

IV

What many pegged as the promise of a working-class revival in the early 1970s turned out to be more of a swan song by decade’s end. The fragmented nature of the labor protests—by organization, industry, race, geography, and gender—failed to coalesce into a lasting national presence. The mainstream labor movement failed in its major political initiatives. Market orthodoxy eclipsed all alternatives, and promising organizing drives ended in failure. Deindustrialization decimated the power of the old industrial heartland. The vague class alliances of the major parties began to lose their distinction. As hip-hop writer Nelson George put it, “The first story is full of optimism and exalted ideas about humanity’s ability to change through political action and moral argument. The next story, the plot we’re living right now, is defined by cynicism, sarcasm, and self-involvement raised to art. The turning point was the early seventies.” By 1981, *Time* magazine predicted little more than “Gloom and Doom for Workers.”³¹

The 1970s, mocked as an era of questionable fashion and bad politics, simultaneously appear both irrelevant and the foundation of our own time. Yet the history of class in America reveals the profundity in the nothingness of the decade, a wholesale transformation without a narrative. One of the great constructs of the modern age, the unified notion of a “working class,” crumbled, and the new world order was built on the rubble. Issues from stagflation to racial backlash, Vietnam to deindustrialization, have been fingered as the culprit for the decline of the impulse that animated the chaotic great strikes of the Gilded Age, fueled the concerns of the middle-class reform impulse of the Progressive Era, finally built the New Deal, and then voted in the Great Society. Yet the seventies suggest the fragility at the heart of the self-definition of “the working class.” It was a conceptual unity that could briefly but imperfectly be identifiable as a unionized voting block from the New Deal to the 1970s. It ultimately died of the many external assaults upon it, yes, but mostly of its own internal weaknesses.

As the decade drew to a close, people with literary flare and political drive were penning tracts such as French theorist Andre Gorz's *Farewell to the Working Class* and British historian Eric Hobsbawm's *The Forward March of Labor Halted?* An entire generation of postmodern thought blossomed on the gnarled vines of disappointment in the failures and rigidities of the post-1968 working class. But if there is hope to be found in the bleak history of the 1970s, it is in the idea that the very storm that left Dewey Burton's "hopes out in the rain" may have also cleared the air for the return of a broader, more vigorous and inclusive incarnation of the working-class ideal.³²

Burton, as usual, had a simpler take. Speculating from his Florida home where he retired—getting out not long before the final closure of the Wixom plant—he explained, "As far as working people go, it's gone and it's not gonna happen again."³³