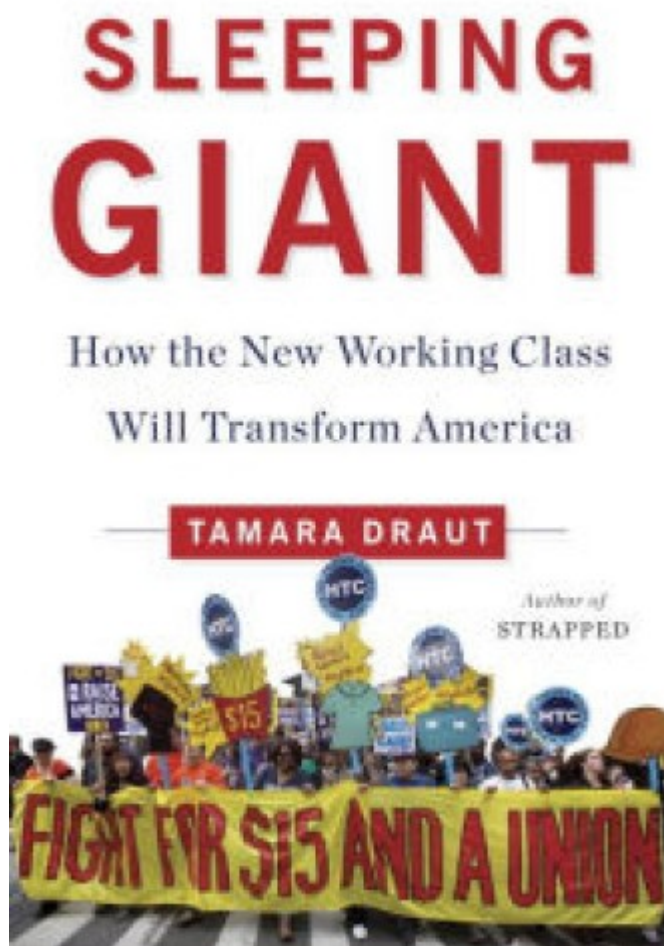


Uniting the new working class

Today's laborers are more likely cleaning toilets than mining coal. But there's still a need to organize.

by [Lillian Daniel](#) in the [November 8, 2016](#) issue

In Review



Sleeping Giant

By Tamara Draut

Doubleday

In a political campaign marked by extremes, the issue of class seems to have turned itself inside out. Union members who supported Bernie Sanders are not necessarily Hillary Clinton supporters—some may turn to Donald Trump in their suspicion of a Democratic Party that has done little for unions lately. “Brexit” and anti-immigrant rhetoric across the globe pit underpaid workers against each other. Can we even talk about a single working class anymore?

Tamara Draut, an executive at Demos, a public policy organization, believes that we can and must. But it’s not your grandfather’s working class: working men in physically challenging and dangerous manufacturing jobs whose unions ensured that they were compensated fairly across the board.

Today’s working class is more female, more diverse, and less likely to work en masse in a factory. They are paid by the hour with little chance for advancement: checkout clerks, salespeople at the mall, hamburger flippers, and janitors. Many of them earn a living taking care of society’s oldest and youngest members as home health aides or child-care providers. They’re seldom protected by labor laws or unions. They may have to ask permission to take a bathroom break. Draut defines the working class as “individuals in the labor force who do not have bachelor’s degrees.” Say what you will about the cost and value of a college education—it’s still the best predictor of occupation and income.

According to Draut, this new working class is a sleeping giant just waiting to wake up, unite, and become a force that could change the nation. “Its sheer scale in size and diverse demographics will shape the future of American politics.” But currently this giant seems to be asleep at the wheel. How might it be awakened?

The answer depends, in part, on the subjects of Draut’s prior book, *Strapped: Why America’s 20- and 30-Somethings Can’t Get Ahead*. Draut appears regularly on late-night talk shows and news programs, where she taps into the frustration of young college graduates who are disgusted about the state of our nation. Many of these young people were Sanders supporters. They’re organizing unions and fighting for a living wage for themselves and others. Will this group come together with the new ethnically diverse working class?

And even if young labor leaders are on board, what about the Trump supporters who their unions represent? Our presidential campaign has revealed the widespread

ethno-nationalism of white workers who think they've been screwed. They see people of color not as colleagues and collaborators but as the cause of their problems. Working-class Americans hold vastly diverse views on race and police violence, from Black Lives Matter to the reactionary All Lives Matter. Given this volatile diversity, does anything bind the working class together?

Draut sees possibilities for working-class activism epitomized by the Fight for \$15 movement, which went from “laughable to doable.” Supported by the Service Employees International Union, that movement has pushed cities, states, and even Walmart to raise wages for the working poor. But they still don't have a union, and the reasons for this are complex.

At its peak, labor represented a third of the nonfarm workforce. It was the Democratic Party's largest voting bloc, capable of determining elections and setting the course of the nation. Today, labor is weak and antilabor laws are strong. Many workers' advocates hoped that the Employee Free Choice Act would facilitate more union organizing in the groups Draut writes about by shielding nascent movements from the campaigns of antiunion employers, which are expensive to fight. But Democratic senators from Walmart-dominated landscapes (and a president who prioritized the health-care fight) allowed the bill to languish without a vote.

Draut admits there is a problem in perception when it comes to the labor movement. Jobs in the United States aren't as dangerous for the average person as they once were. Technology has made jobs like coal mining safer and the need for unions less obvious.

Still, as a pastor I hear more and more stories about wage theft, something that's rampant in businesses too small to unionize but large enough to let workers quit rather than pay them the money they are owed. These employees can easily be replaced by other workers, some of whom are undocumented. Draut tells the story of LaShawn, a commercial sanitation driver in Atlanta whose managers routinely clock him out while he is still working in order to avoid paying overtime. Religious leaders and worker centers have played a key role in calling local business owners to account regarding wage theft. Interfaith Worker Justice, a nonprofit organization I've worked with, has drawn national attention to the issue.

But unions still matter. Occasional news stories highlight organizers from unions like UNITE HERE, which fights against international hotel chains and casinos. Such

organizing can unite the working class with clergy organizations and even scholars of religion. For example, members of the American Academy of Religion and the Society for Biblical Literature respected a hotel boycott at their 2012 annual conference and subsequently formed a task force on labor policy. (I wrote about this boycott in "[Inconvenient solidarity](#)" in the November 1, 2012, issue of the *Century*.)

When I was a pastor in Chicagoland, I observed citywide protests that resembled the general strikes of the past. Originally led by the Chicago Teachers Union, this vast group now includes transit workers, Fight for \$15 campaigners, anti-death penalty protesters, pro-Palestinian activists, and several distinct branches of the Black Lives Matter movement. These protesters have united across party lines to fight two local friends of the elite: Democratic mayor Rahm Emanuel and Republican governor Bruce Rauner.

I suspect Draut would find hope in a story like that. It hints at the future to which she points: a new working class in America, racially and ethnically diverse, but awakening and uniting to change the course of history.

A version of this article appears in the November 9 print edition under the title "Waking up the working class."