



Americans Don't Believe in the American Dream

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The American Dream is Dead, gone along with the era of good union jobs, comprehensive employer benefits and real upward mobility, and most working people are fully aware of the fact.

That's the takeaway from the latest installment of the American Dream Survey, a study of working Americans' views of the political-economy released in late September.

It paints a picture of an increasingly frustrated working majority who are having a harder time raising their families than the generation before them did, and who believe that things will be even worse for their kids. They have reason to believe it -- a 30-year assault on organized labor, neglected minimum wage increases, fewer educational opportunities and the constant tide of pro-business propaganda being pumped out by right-wing think tanks and business roundtables that enforces the idea that working people are faceless "inputs" -- costs that need to be controlled -- have left Americans with far less social mobility than they had a generation ago. Contrary to common belief, Americans have less opportunity to move up the economic ladder than Canadians and Western Europeans (except for those in the UK).

To some extent the Dream was always a myth, especially for people of color, but in a very real sense we've reached a point in which we're looking at a break in America's implied social contract -- we were supposed to trade security, in the form of the kind of robust safety nets that they have in social democracies, for "dynamism," for supposedly unlimited opportunity. But the fact is that working people are walking a tightrope with little in the way of safety net, and they have less chances of making it big than their counterparts in other advanced economies.

Conservatism killed the American Dream, and most working people understand that on some level. But while they blame the same elite corporatists as progressives have pointed to as the culprits for years, they are also deeply uncomfortable with the idea of class and, after 15 years of Democratic Party "triangulation," aren't sure which political party is responsible for casting them adrift, rudderless, on the currents of the global economy.

The American Dream survey tested working people's views on a range of issues that fit into the frame of what people think of when they contemplate the "American dream." According to the researchers who conducted the survey, that consists of four cornerstone issues: "jobs with pay that can support a family, access to quality health care, chances for your children to succeed, and a secure and dignified retirement." Only full-time, nonmanagerial working adults with a household income

of less than \$100K were eligible for the study.

When asked about these core issues of economic security, three out of four respondents said it's becoming "harder these days to achieve the American dream"; two thirds said it was harder for them than it was for their parents, and a similar number predicted it would be even more difficult for their kids. Eight of ten said that the economic situation that the next generation will face is likely to be worse than it is for adults working today.

While the Bush administration and others on the right try to paint Americans' growing economic insecurity as some sort of irrational manifestation of the *Zeitgeist* -- a common claim is that the economy is going gang-busters but people are too down about the mess in Iraq to notice -- the truth is that stagnating wages and rising costs for housing, food, healthcare and gas are driving working America's pessimism. As one participant who hadn't seen a raise in some time put it, "There's no progress. There's no option. No more salary. That's it. We're static there. We all [have a] fear of being dismissed ... if you leave there's like ten people in line waiting to get your job."

Healthcare and retirement security are both key issues for working people that the business class in D.C. dance around but never address. Two-thirds of those surveyed said that they are either now or have recently been without health insurance, and more than half believe that they will retire at a later age than they had planned just five years ago.

Working America doesn't buy the idea that these are the "natural" consequences of economic modernization -- innate rules of an economy created by God and untouchable by man -- and they don't believe that they're to blame for their eroding economic security. More than nine out of ten respondents -- including self-identified conservatives -- said that in America, hard, full-time work *should* lead to economic security for working families. They see run-away corporate power, the greed of upper management and a short-term fixation on the bottom line as the primary obstacles to the American dream. Two-thirds agreed with the statement: "When corporations are profitable, the benefits are not shared with workers but go only to the top," and a similar number believed that "the government doesn't do enough to rein in greedy and unethical behavior by corporations and CEOs."

Finally, the survey showed that the death of activist government intervention has been greatly exaggerated. More than four in five workers want their government to "make sure employers keep their promises to employees, including protecting their pensions and health care," and to "create a more progressive tax system that is fair to workers and makes billionaires pay their fair share in taxes." More than three in four said that it should "hold large, global, multinational corporations accountable to pay their fair share for the problems they create in the world, such as environmental pollution and low wages" and "make it less profitable for companies to outsource jobs by removing tax breaks for sending jobs overseas."

Intuitively, that should leave the country ready to embrace progressive economic policies, but they remain ambivalent to notions of class. One worker in an Illinois plant told researchers, "It's America not England you know. We don't have that class

system," and another said: "I don't see myself as, I don't, I'm not referring to high class, middle class, or low class. It's just us -- it relates to work." It's the result of the great triumph of the corporate class -- the notion that we are all in the same boat and that it's somehow crass to note that the game is rigged against ordinary working people.

The real takeaway is for Democrats and the corporatocracy's legion of Beltway supporters: Overwhelming majorities of working Americans -- self-identified swing voters and conservatives, as well as liberals and progressives -- are fed up, aren't buying the narrative the Chamber of Commerce is selling and are ripe for the picking. But they're not being given a real choice in terms of economic models -- there's only one that's acceptable to Big Business, and it has unflagging bipartisan support within the Beltway. As long as people have no alternatives to choose from, they'll make their decisions based on which candidates look better or worship at the same church or hate the same people they do or would be fun to share a beer with.

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