

Sleeping Giant: Deception and lies about the “new” working class

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Tamara Draut’s new book *Sleeping Giant*, subtitled *How the New Working Class Will Transform America*, begins audaciously. “Today’s working class is a sleeping giant. And... it is just now waking up to its untapped political power. *Sleeping Giant* is the first major examination of the new working class and the role it will play in our economic and political future,” proclaims the dust jacket.

This would have been an important objective. In examining the “new working class,” for example, the volume could have looked at the tremendous growth of the international working class. Since 1980 the international working class has grown by more than 1.2 billion, including over 500 million more in China and India alone. Within the advanced capitalist countries, many professional occupations have been increasingly proletarianized. Many workers have been impoverished, with the creation of multi-tier pay schemes, and temporary and part-time work.

An even more critical subject that the volume purports to address is the future role of the working class. *Sleeping Giant* could have probed the development of the world economic crisis, its impact and trajectory and, above all, the historical task of the working class as the “gravedigger of capitalism,” as Karl Marx famously put it.

The author examines none of this. Instead Draut defines the “new” working class as a collection of nationally-based racial, gender and ethnic identities working in service industries. *Sleeping Giant* divides the working class into “blacks,” “Hispanics,” “immigrants,” “females,” etc., and advances the reactionary conception that it is impossible to address social inequality without first dealing with the “legacy of racism.”

The book’s innovation, what distinguishes it from the standard fare of identity politics, is its claim to recognize the social centrality of the working class—indeed, its power to “transform America.” Portentous words aside, however, Draut is entirely hostile to a *politically independent* working class. Instead she aims to tie the working class to capitalist politics through the vehicle of the thoroughly corrupt and discredited trade unions.

Draut is vice president of Policy and Research at Demos, a liberal think tank that has published important material on social inequality, the fate of young people and student loan debt and the Detroit bankruptcy. Among those who originally set up Demos in 2000 or served on its initial Board of Directors were Stephen Heintz, Vice-President of the East-West Institute, an imperialist “think and do” tank set up for Cold War strategizing (now advising American authorities on Russia, the Middle East, Southwest Asia and China), Democratic Congressman David Skaggs, and then-Illinois State Senator Barack Obama.

Draut is enthusiastically endorsing Hillary Clinton, with the author predictably reveling in her hope for the “first female president.”

The author’s choice of the term “working class,” however, and its description as a sleeping giant are significant. It indicates the mounting concerns within ruling circles at the growth of the class struggle internationally and especially in the United States. The past year witnessed the rebellion of autoworkers against their UAW-imposed

contracts, wildcat sickouts by teachers in defiance of the teachers’ unions and government, and the determined struggle of Verizon workers, who struck for nearly two months despite picket line assaults and backstabbing by the Communications Workers union.

This rising tide of social discontent is beginning to take an openly working-class form, breaching the wall of union control after decades in which the AFL-CIO and other unions sought to suppress the class struggle. Confounding all the pollsters, millions of young people and workers threw their support behind self-proclaimed socialist Bernie Sanders, and even after his ringing endorsement of Clinton they continue to oppose the candidates of the two main parties.

Under these conditions, Draut and Demos are intervening to provide a facelift to the union bureaucracy and the capitalist system in general. Like Lilliputians, the author and her co-thinkers want the working class—if it must “awaken”—to find itself bound hand-and-foot by a thousand threads to the bourgeoisie. She seeks to reinforce these ideological threads in the form of all manner of racial, gender and identity politics.

The author makes much of her working-class origins and her “respect” for home health care workers and others barely scraping by, yet her politics unequivocally speak for the well-heeled niche of trade union bureaucrats and Democratic Party functionaries who have a vested interest in keeping the entire system going. In fact, the issue of workers receiving “respect” on the job seems to take precedence, in her view, to actual pay increases and decent working conditions—an indication of the real social distance between the writer and her subject.

Draut’s appeal is to the powers that be for a “Better Deal” to dampen the class struggle by providing a modest increase for workers. And by “modest” we do mean modest, as is apparent by her positive enthusiasm for “Fight for \$15.”

The author marks the ultimate demise of the “old” working class with the bankruptcy of the city of Detroit. She contrasts the decline of manufacturing, which employed 30 percent of Americans in 1970 at proportionally higher wages, with the “new working class” employed in service jobs paying poverty-level wages and with very few benefits. The fastest growing sectors, she points out, are food and retail (11.7 percent of all US jobs), blue-collar jobs (7.8 percent, not manufacturing but laborers, material handlers, truck drivers, janitors, landscapers, maids), cubicle jobs (6.4 percent, customer service, general office), and caring jobs (3.4 percent, home health, nursing assistant, child care).

Remarking on the stunning growth of social inequality during this transformation of the labor force, Draut states, “[T]he United States has the highest percentage of workers earning low pay [internationally], defined as earning less than two-thirds of the median wage... one in four workers.”

Such exposures, however, are accompanied by a studious cover-up of the role of the Democrats and the unions in facilitating the increasing exploitation of workers. Draut avoids Obama’s infamous demand that all new autoworkers take a 50 percent cut in wages as a condition of the

federal bailout of General Motors and Chrysler, his blank check to Wall Street amounting to trillions of dollars, and his cuts to education and other social programs. Such inconvenient truths cut across the racial thesis of *Sleeping Giant*.

The author's interviews with workers are the highlight of the book. In contrast to the author's identity politics, they give a glimpse of the social devastation that has been inflicted on the working class of all skin colors.

Damon, a former Coca-Cola warehouseman, was interviewed when he was 32 years old and already out on disability. Damon worked as a "puller," an order builder, manually hoisting cases of beverages and stacking them on pallets.

Coke pays "pullers" by piece-rate, at 8.4 cents per case. Draut details, "At the start of each shift, the pullers are issued their 'pull quota,' the number of cases they must move before leaving the warehouse. 'I'm the number-one order builder, hands down,' Damon explained. 'Because we get paid based on commission, I go out hard. I put my body on the line. In order to make a good living pulling cases, you got to be fast.'" Last year, he said, a coworker died of a heart attack while pulling cases.

"Pullers are literally running across the warehouse to complete their quota in as few hours as humanly possible, because the longer it takes to meet their quota, the less their hourly rate works out to be," the author continued. "They cannot leave until they make their quota, no matter how long that is. Damon said he could finish his quota in 6-7 hours, whereas most of his coworkers need 11 or 12. They get two 15-minute breaks and one 30-minute lunch, but these are unpaid. Damon explained that one coworker lives in an extended-stay hotel in one of the worst areas of town and another in the car-wash area of an abandoned gas station."

Another worker, Rhonda, a 36-year-old port-driver out of Savannah, is, like most heavy-truck drivers, an "independent contractor." This category exempts companies from paying benefits or payroll taxes, and complying with state and federal labor laws, including overtime provisions.

Rhonda is "leased" to C&K Trucking. She moves giant shipping containers from the port to a warehouse or distribution center. She owns the truck but not the chassis or other necessary equipment that is leased by C&K. As an independent contractor she is responsible for fuel, insurance, tires and the cost of repairs and parts, including those owned by C&K.

"They basically treat us like sharecroppers on wheels, because we can't stop them and we can't fight them," said Rhonda. "We show up every day and are given assignments... It's hard when you work all week, and after a week you can't afford to pay your bills, let alone take care of the truck."

Port truckers are paid by the container. Rhoda receives about \$40 each, taking home \$60,000 last year, but after the costs of maintaining the truck, she had just \$19,000 in taxable income. She also doesn't qualify for health insurance because she is not an "employee."

These vignettes stand as an indictment of the ever-increasing brutality of the capitalist system. Draut, however, doesn't see it that way. She chalks up this state of affairs to institutional racism, "white privilege," and the "privilege of visibility."

So, while proclaiming the existence of a powerful new working class, she turns around and deliberately obscures it—"race has always been classed and class has always been raced." This pseudo-left gobbledygook takes the category of "class," a term scientifically derived from an analysis of the capitalist mode of production, and transforms it into an aspect of the "intersectional" notion of so-called privilege ordering. It seeks to render "class" into a minor subcategory of race and gender.

Draut blames white workers for social inequality, stating that they "fractured" the "New Deal consensus" by turning away from the Democratic Party, which she falsely claims represents their class interests.

Dating the loss of decent-paying jobs to the 1970s, Draut carefully conceals the fact that a social counterrevolution has been prosecuted by every Democratic and Republican administration since that time.

Democratic President Jimmy Carter initiated this onslaught through his 1979 appointment of Paul Volcker to head the Federal Reserve, followed by the decision to drive up interest rates and precipitate what was then the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression.

What followed was the destruction of whole industries deemed insufficiently profitable, the shifting of production to lower-wage countries, and the more and more dominant role of financial speculation in the US economy. During this period, the Democrats abandoned any of their former connection to the social reform policies of the New Deal and became the principal party of Wall Street.

In the face of this assault, which accelerated after Reagan's firing of the air traffic controllers in 1981, the AFL-CIO abandoned any resistance, integrated itself into the structure of corporate management, and in the name of making US companies "globally competitive" betrayed one struggle after another.

It was not "race" that divided the working class and led to these defeats; it was the pro-capitalist and nationalist agenda of the trade unions. Tied hand and foot to the Democratic Party, the AFL-CIO did everything possible to block any independent political struggle by workers against the attacks on their living standards being carried out by both big business parties.

But Draut seeks push a right-wing racial agenda, which requires historical falsification. "[I]n every presidential election since 1964," she states, "a majority of whites have voted for the GOP candidate... Something is clearly up. That something is race." She goes so far as to claim that the failure of white workers to "confront" racial bias is responsible for the lack of affordable college tuition, childcare, pensions, etc. in America.

What lies! Of the many possible refutations let us cite just one: 43 percent of white voters supported Obama in 2008—by larger margins than those received by John Kerry, Al Gore and Bill Clinton in previous elections.

Even more significant, in Michigan, Indiana, Wisconsin, West Virginia and other states with large numbers of white working-class voters, Bernie Sanders decisively defeated Hillary Clinton, demonstrating an overall shift to the left.

Draut's libel against the working class demonstrates the trajectory of a whole upper middle class layer now rallying to Clinton, a warmonger and shill of Wall Street. Their fixation with the politics of race, gender and sexual orientation is aimed at advancing their own careers in academia, business and politics.

A significant motivation is the author's alliance with the unions, whose leadership has cashed in by partnering with the employers and Democrats in impoverishing the working class. For example, Draut praises the "social justice unionism" of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), pointing to its organizing of home health care workers, its "Justice for Janitors" campaign and its financial sponsorship of the "Fight for \$15" campaign to raise the minimum wage.

In reality, the SEIU has promoted the minimum wage campaign to boost illusions in the Democrats and refurbish its own image after being implicated in backroom deals, poverty-wage contracts and huge payouts for the bureaucracy, including current SEIU president Mary Kay Henry, who is paid well over \$300,000 in annual salary, plus expenses.

The minimum wage initiative is another rotten scam, perpetrated against the most exploited layers of workers. With one hand, the SEIU and other unions market themselves with "Fight for \$15"; with the other, they negotiate sweetheart contracts containing "employer escape clauses." Such provisions allow businesses that sign union contracts to pay below the new minimum wage. The union collects new dues, and the employers are provided a "low-cost" alternative—only the workers lose!

While bringing to light some of the conditions facing millions of low-paid workers, this book offers no way forward. The American working

class—like its brothers and sisters throughout the world—is indeed a sleeping giant that is awakening. Explosive social upheavals are on the horizon, struggles against war, social inequality and the threat of dictatorship. Under these conditions workers and young people will increasingly look to the program of genuine socialism—which alone fights to unify all workers, regardless of race, nationality or any other artificial division promoted by the capitalists and their servants in the identity politics business.



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