

New wave of workers.

Blue collar blokes won't bring labor back to power, says Barbara Pocock, *The Australian*, 17th February 2005

Recent months have seen some discussion about the shifting blue-collar vote and its implications for politics, especially the ALP. Are working battlers lost to Labor and increasingly voting about values and cultural issues, disinterested in economics and work?

The same debate is underway in George W. Bush's America where some of the poorest counties in the US are amongst the strongest Republican voters, flummoxing the Democrats and wedging them on non-economics issues like abortion.

Some of this talk, at least in the Australian context, would benefit from an occasional reference to the evidence, for the picture is different here. Work matters. While 'values' issues like abortion are being flogged hard by some, the social science evidence is against them. For example most Australians (and an increasing proportion over recent decades) are in favour of women's right to choose.

On the other hand, participation in paid work is rising steadily, and work matters more, not less, to politics. However, the worker and their concerns are changing and catching public policy flat footed.

Far from finding paid work irrelevant, more and more Australians are doing it. But as George Megalogenis reminds us (*The Australian*, 12/2/05), the gender of the new worker has changed. Male participation in paid work has fallen steeply from its 1960s zenith to a predicted low of 66 per cent in a decade or so. Meanwhile women's has risen steeply on the back of massive expansion in services sector, white collar and part-time employment, and expanding household hunger for funds to meet the mortgage and the rising private costs of health, education and retirement.

Australian women have joined men in their work 'fetish', but they haven't given up their other day jobs: cooking, cleaning and caring. They are often time-poor and care-rich.

Unlike many of their mothers and grandmothers, their voting preferences cannot be read off from their blue-collar husbands'. They are increasingly independently attached to their identity as workers, and this shapes their vote.

Many workers enjoy the social life of work, and a sense of accomplishment and contribution. Over half of Australia's cleaners, labourers and shop assistants say they would enjoy having a job even if they didn't need to work – and two-thirds of professionals agree.

Labor's traditional voters – in forestry, construction, and manufacturing jobs - now make up less than one in five employees. They have been swamped by growth in the retail, property and business services, health, education, and community sectors. Most of these workers are not self-employed 'portfolio' workers who happily map their careers in easy negotiation with a great boss. Some are so lucky, but most are traditional employees, the majority in full-time jobs that are increasingly demanding. Many have lived a couple of

decades of their working lives with the language of 'flexibility' ringing in their ears. For some, this flexibility meets their needs, not just those of their boss. But not everyone is so lucky. Over a quarter of Australian employees cannot now take a paid holiday or paid sick day and many feel a lack of control over their working time, with big implications for households.

The decline of the male breadwinner, and the rise of the single working mother and the dual earner household, mean that work politics have changed. Households rely on women's earnings. A rapid increase in debt means households are very sensitive to economic variables like interest rates. A worker without debt has quite different political sensitivities than one who owes a great deal. This does not necessarily mean that Australians are more materialistic or individualistic, but that their level of personal vulnerability is higher and their unstable vote reflects it.

The ALP is watching the wrong bellwether if it thinks blue-collar workers hold the key to electoral recovery. This worker is increasingly scant in the labour market. Re-wedding him to the ALP is fiddling while Rome burns - and the ballot box swells with the votes of women, service sector, casual, part-time and professional workers, who live in every electorate. These voters are interested in policies that make their jobs better by giving them more control over working time and its organisation, and provide a fair workplace with decent pay, including for women's jobs.

On the Coalition side, policy that makes the modest earnings of ordinary wage earners an excuse for a further round of employer-friendly 'flexibility' may well wear thin in a workforce that knows about excessive executive pay, faces high levels of insecurity and experiences many pockets of low pay. For this workforce, the union bogie and strikes are lost in history, while the daily struggle to work reasonable hours, with fair pay that covers debt, and a decent household life is front and centre. The re-made worker is no longer an assured vote and a standard kind of guy - instead diverse and politically unattached, but someone for who work continues to matter a great deal.

This is an extract from an address made to the Association of Industrial Relations Academics of Australia and New Zealand on 10/2/05. Barbara Pocock is a Research Fellow at the University of Adelaide.