

# From Militant Class-Consciousness to Conservative Bastion

by Alan Singer

Between 1920 and 1950, Central Pennsylvania bituminous coal miners were among the most militant and class-conscious workers in the United States. They led radical movements within the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) and were instrumental in the organization of the United Steel Workers Union and the Congress of Industrial Organizations. They received national attention during World War II when they periodically launched work stoppages in violation of federal wartime no-strike policies and against the official union leadership. In 1943, *Life* magazine featured interviews with Nanty-glo, Pennsylvania mine workers during one of their work stoppages.

I am currently completing a book, *Class-Conscious Coal Miners: The Emergence of a Working-Class Movement in Central Pennsylvania*, scheduled for publication by SUNY Press. As the United States and Long Island prepare for the 2024 Presidential and Congressional elections, one of my questions in writing the book was “Why did a region that produced such a militant working-class movement become a bastion of rightwing conservatism in the 2016 and 2020 elections?” If we can understand what happened in Central Pennsylvania, it may help us understand voting patterns in Nassau and Suffolk Counties that elected conservative Republican candidates to the House of Representatives in 2022, helping the Republican Party gain control over that branch of Congress.

In the second half of the 20th century and into the first decades of the 21st century, Central Pennsylvania miners and their families suffered a series of economic and social catastrophes including renewed anti-union activities by coal companies, mine closings, exodus of young people, debilitating medical issues, and the opioid epidemic. Institutions that contributed to the militant working-class consciousness in the 1920s and sustained families through dark times in earlier decades, work, union, and community, diminished or disappeared.

For Central Pennsylvania bituminous coal miners, as it was for other working-class Americans, work was central to their identity. Until the 1970s, union membership was another major component. However, in the United States since the 1970s, union membership and the availability and permanence of blue-collar work have declined, first impacting on African American males and then contributing to what economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton (2020) describe as an epidemic of “deaths of despair” among displaced white male workers. Case and Deaton documented how

declines in economic growth rates in the United States since the 1960s and deepening income inequality led to opioid abuse, alcoholism, and higher suicide rates in white working-class communities, a growing epidemic that emerged in public view starting in the 1990s. Their loss fed a sense of malaise in those who remained in blue-collar communities that led to anger at betrayal and a profound shift in political allegiance.

In 1920 there were probably about 300,000 members of the United Mine Workers union and over a half a million workers in bituminous coal production. During World War II, an estimated 500,000 UMWA members walked off the job protesting frozen wages in violation of labor’s no-strike pledge. By 2000, there were fewer than 70,000 coal production workers in the United States and about 30,000 coalminers who were UMWA members. In 1950, Central Pennsylvania bituminous coalmines employed 21,300 workers. By 2000, only 1,280 miners were still employed in local coal production. The Johnstown area’s steel factories were also closing at the same time. The city had the highest rate of unemployment in the state, ending the era of blue-collar industrial work in Central Pennsylvania (Lester, 2004; Rottenberg, 2003; Brown, 2017; Case and Deaton, 2020: 150-156).

Meanwhile Central Pennsylvania coalminers and retirees were plagued by Black Lung disease caused by a lifetime of inhaling coal dust. In 1976, Paul Bichko, President of the Pennsylvania Black Lung Association, testified at a United States Senate hearing on the Black Lung Benefits Reform Act. In his testimony, Bichko described his work as a coal dumper, his exposure to coal dust, and reported on a number of local miners who died from Black lung related conditions, including his brother.

In 2000, the population of Nanty-glo, Pennsylvania, formerly a coal mining town, was 3,054. By 2010 it had fallen to 2,734 people, a decline of over 10%. In 2010, it was an aging population; the median age was 42 years old, five years older than the median age in the United States overall. It was also an increasingly female and poorer population. For every 100 females over the age of 18, there were only 84 males. Per capita income was \$14,184 in Nanty-glo, compared to over \$26,000 for the United States as a whole. Almost 15% of the population and almost a quarter of the borough’s children lived in households below the official poverty line (Wikipedia; Nanty-glo Population History; BestPlaces.net; DEA, 2016).

Conditions in Nanty-glo and Cambria County transformed an area once noted for working-class consciousness and militancy into conservative political strongholds. While the United Mine Workers of America did not support any Presidential candidate in either 2016 or 2020, in both Presidential elections, Cambria County, Pennsylvania and Nanty-glo voters cast their ballots heavily for the Republican Party candidate Donald Trump. In 2016, Donald Trump, the first Republican Presidential candidate to win Pennsylvania since 1988, took Cambria County by 66% (42,258) to 30% (18,867). In the two Nanty-glo election districts, Donald Trump led Hilary Clinton 62% to 35% and 69% to 26%. In 2020, Cambria County, Pennsylvania and Nanty-glo voters went even more heavily for President Trump. In Cambria County, Donald Trump received 48,085 votes (68%) to Joe Biden's 21,730 (30.7%) In Nanty-glo, Donald Trump led Joseph Biden 68% to 32% and 75% to 25%. (Pesto, 2020; Bloch, Buchanan, Katz, and Quealy, 2018; Park, Smart, Taylor and Watkins, 2021; WBOY 12, 2020; Cambria County, n.d.).

In the lead-up to the 2020 Presidential election, Reuters interviewed Pennsylvania coal miners about their views on the candidates. Twenty-five out of the 26 interviewees said that they supported Donald Trump's reelection bid. Most expressed fear that Biden's commitment to clean energy meant that his election would be the final deathblow to the bituminous coal industry. Coalminers remained loyal to Donald Trump despite his failed promise to revive the coal industry. During the first three years of the Trump Administration, the number of bituminous coalminers in the United States fell by more than 6,000, including a decline in Pennsylvania from 4,559 in 2017 to 3,979 in 2019. This was despite the appointment of a former coal industry lobbyist as the head of the Environmental Protection Agency and the relaxation of Obama-era environmental rules that limited power-plant emissions and protected local land and water from coal waste (Rhys and Garner, 2020; Nark, 2020).

After the 2020 election, many of Cambria County's Republican voters supported Donald Trump's claim that the election was stolen. A New York Times article quoted a retired truck driver from Nanty-glo who called Joseph Biden a "total fool," Kamala Harris a "very scary woman," and argued that a Biden Presidency would be illegitimate and disastrous. Other people from the region had similar attitudes (Gabriel, 2020: 10).

While it is both impossible and illegitimate to condense an entire community's experience into the persona of one individual, an individual's life can serve as a metaphor for the impact of the changes affecting the people of Nanty-glo in the decades after World War II. A November 2017 article in the online magazine Politico declared that Pam Schilling of Johnstown, Pennsylvania is the reason Donald Trump was elected President of the United States. Pam Schilling grew up in Nanty-glo, "the daughter and granddaughter of coal miners. She once had a union job packing meat at a grocery store, and then had to settle for less money at

Walmart. Now she's 60 and retired, and last year, in April, as Trump's shocking political ascent became impossible to ignore, Schilling's 32-year-old son died of a heroin overdose. She found needles in the pockets of the clothes he wore to work in the mines before he got laid off." Donald Trump held a campaign rally at the Cambria County War Memorial arena in Johnstown on a rainy night on October 21, 2016, before a crowd of 5,000. Desperate for change, people like Schilling, once reliable Democrats, "responded enthusiastically to what Trump was saying — building a wall on the Mexican border, repealing and replacing the Affordable Care Act, bringing back jobs in steel and coal." A year after Trump's election, in an interview for the Politico article, Schilling declared, "I think he's doing a great job, and I just wish the hell they'd leave him alone and let him do it. He shouldn't have to take any shit from anybody" (Kruse, 2017; Gilliland, 2016).

Commentators across the political spectrum offered explanations for Donald Trump's election as President in 2016 and continued support from his political base after his defeat in 2020. White working-class voters, particularly voters without a college degree, and especially white men from rural areas, turned against traditional Republican candidates and a Democratic Party they once supported because they felt abandoned by changes sweeping through the country and especially in their communities. Class consciousness based on work, union, and community that had once sustained radical resistance to coal operators dissolved with the diminution of these institutions over the course of decades leaving ethnic identification and anger producing a swing to a very different kind of political behavior (Montanaro, 2016; Lempien, 2020; Page and Elbeshbishi, 2021).

While we don't mine bituminous coal on Long Island, a similar sense of being left behind in a changing world may explain voting patterns in the 2016, 2020, and 2022 elections. It is something the Democratic Party will have to address if it wants to reclaim some of the area's Congressional seats and a majority in the House of Representatives.

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