



DAVE GETZSCHMAN

FALLING BEHIND

RUTH MILKMAN ON THE GROWING JOB
INSECURITY IN AMERICA

STACI KLEINMAIER

Not that long ago it was possible, even typical, for someone to support a family on a single income. Most jobs paid the bills, offered health insurance, funded retirement, and gave employees a sense of stability. But many households now depend on multiple incomes — sometimes from three jobs or more — and some people over sixty-five are forced to pick up second careers or gig-economy work instead of retiring. Meanwhile the inequality between top and bottom wage earners is growing. Fewer people can afford to buy homes, and millions are either behind on rent or being forced out of their living spaces due to the pandemic. Student debt is crippling younger generations, and health-care expenses threaten the financial stability of many. These changes have happened so quickly that many Americans are struggling to understand how we got here.

Author and sociologist Ruth Milkman traces the root of Americans' financial problems to the 1970s and 1980s, when the U.S. government took an unapologetic antilabor stance, undoing labor protections put in place by New Deal legislation in the 1930s. One of Milkman's earliest memories is of a shopping trip with her mother in New York City, where members of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union were picketing in front of Macy's with shopping bags that read, "Don't Buy Judy Bond Blouses." The Judy Bond company had shifted most of its manufacturing operations from the New York area to the South, where labor was cheaper. Milkman remembers her mother saying, "We're not going in there!" Milkman credits her mother's cultural and political worldview — and her parents' dinner-table debates about the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, and labor unions — with shaping her own political outlook and her academic interests. She grew up hearing her parents' stories of the Depression, she says. And her mother was "always waiting for the next one. She didn't live to see [the financial collapse of] 2008, but she predicted it."

Throughout her career Milkman has studied and written about labor, gender, unionism, and class. Her most recent books include *Immigration Matters* (coedited with Deepak Bhargava and Penny Lewis), *Immigrant Labor and the New Precariat*, and *On Gender, Labor, and Inequality*. She spent twenty-one years as a sociology professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, and for several

of those years she was director of the Institute for Research on Labor and Employment. In 2010 Milkman moved back to New York City. She is currently Distinguished Professor of Sociology and History at the City University of New York Graduate Center and chairs the labor-studies department at the CUNY School of Labor and Urban Studies. She also served as the 2016 president of the American Sociological Association.

We spoke over a video call, and Milkman gestured to shelves of books behind her when referencing another author's work. Our conversation ranged from the impact on workers from the COVID-19 pandemic, to women's entrance into the workforce, to the American dream. We always seemed to circle back to the notion of security, something so many are lacking today, and Milkman reminded me that the passage of time doesn't necessarily bring progress. "It's like we're moving backward," she says. "The achievements of the New Deal era have basically unraveled."

Kleinmaier: How is class defined in the United States — especially the middle class? Have definitions changed over time?

Milkman: When I was younger, most families would describe themselves as "middle-class" almost regardless of what their actual situation was. We hear the term "working class" or "working people" much more today, which is probably a reflection of widening inequality.

As a student, I started out with a rather crude Marxist definition of class. There were just two: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. I still remember a socialist-feminist meeting in 1975 where somebody joked, "How could it be there are two classes in this country, when we all say we're middle-class?" Since then, we've seen enormous widening of inequality, but it's still not obvious how to define middle-class. Occupy Wall Street had a slogan, "We are the 99 percent," but that's not the only class division either. Within the 99 percent there are enormous inequalities. The biggest single divide is probably between the college-educated and those who have less education, but even that boundary is blurry. There are non-college-educated folks who do just fine, and you can even find a few who are quite wealthy. So there's no one axis on which you can divide

Americans into classes. Education is a factor. Income is a factor. Status is a factor. Neighborhood is a factor. Family stability kicks in as well. Race is another obvious complicating factor.

Inequality has grown in the same period that more women have entered the workforce, and marriage patterns have amplified the divide. College-educated folks tend to marry other college-educated folks, which means many families now have two high-income earners. And family stability is higher among the affluent — partly for economic reasons, but also because they tend to marry later and stay together longer than couples who marry right out of high school. You end up with more single-parent families in the working class, and more two-parent families at the top.

There has also been a widening of class divisions *among* women. That was much less true for my mother's generation, when women were more dependent on their husbands.

Kleinmaier: It seems like class is a taboo topic in America. Why is it off-limits?

Milkman: I think it's less off-limits today than it was forty years ago. There's a powerful appeal to the so-called American dream, which promises that anyone who's willing to work hard can make it, even though the reality has always been that the vast majority of people stay within the social class they're born into. That's actually even more likely now than it was forty years ago. Social mobility for poor or working-class families has declined. But people continue to believe, on the evidence of exceptional cases, that this is the land of opportunity. American culture celebrates upward mobility and stories of "rags to riches." In other wealthy countries there are labor parties and left-wing socialist parties that try to represent the interests of the working class. We've never really had that in the U.S. There's a kind of silence on class, but I think it's changing now.

Kleinmaier: What do you think has prompted that?

Milkman: Occupy Wall Street in 2011 was a turning point. Inequality was growing long before 2011, but Occupy put it in the public conversation in a big way following the financial crisis of 2008. The minimum-wage increases around the country date from Occupy. There's a straight line from Occupy to the demand for a fifteen-dollar-an-hour minimum wage. A lot of blue areas of the country have raised their minimum wage to the point where people now are talking about twenty dollars in some places. So that's a huge success story. It's probably made more of a difference than any other labor campaign in the last decade.

The pandemic has further intensified class awareness.



RUTH MILKMAN

It's highlighted and made visible the divisions that people weren't paying much attention to, like who could work from home or afford to have things delivered or take time off.

Kleinmaier: I grew up in a working-class family and community, but we always referred to ourselves as middle-class.

Milkman: Right. And in the period when unions were strong, from the mid-1930s to the early 1970s, a lot of non-college-educated workers did have middle-class incomes; they had health insurance, pensions, all those things, which contributed to the impression that we were all middle-class. Nearly a third of the labor force was unionized in the 1950s. The standard of living improved for a

lot of working people in that period. That stopped in the 1970s, when the real incomes of non-college-educated folks went flat and, in some cases, declined. Maybe you've seen the graphs that show how, from World War II to the 1970s, productivity and real incomes of workers both rose. And then, starting in the seventies, the two lines diverge: productivity continues to go up while incomes stay flat. That mid-century sense that everyone's income was rising, even if inequality was still there — that's when the "we are all middle class" narrative had some factual basis, even though it was never 100 percent true. But that era has been over for more than forty years now. Good, unionized jobs with benefits and stability for people without a lot of education are an endangered species. Employer loyalty to workers is basically gone. There was a sense in the old days that if you hired someone and they performed reasonably well, they would stay until retirement. How many employers offer that now? Very few.

Kleinmaier: Does that have anything to do with the workforce becoming more global, so there is no longer a limited pool of employees?

Milkman: There's a global factor for some occupations, like auto- and steelworkers, because many of those jobs left the U.S. I think a bigger factor is the economy switching from producing things and offering services, to companies profiting from financial manipulations. Private-equity firms will buy a company, load it up with debt, and milk it of all its productive power to squeeze out quick profits. Toys "R" Us, which filed for bankruptcy in 2017, is a notorious example.

I sometimes summarize the changes since the 1970s as the "three Ds": deunionization, deregulation, and deindustrialization. But I would add financialization to that list. It has pulled the rug out from under the economy. The 2008

crisis is a story of financialization, and deregulation, too, because there was a time when the government put some limits on how much financial speculating investors could do. Those limits were removed in the eighties and nineties, which is one reason why we had the Great Recession.

Kleinmaier: The work-life balance feels impossible these days. Why do you think that is?

Milkman: I think there's a class story there, too. For managerial and professional college-educated workers, the work-life-balance problem is mostly one of employers demanding long hours. You're supposed to be on call all the time, 24-7. You might have a fair amount of flexibility. You can do your job at three in the morning, for example, while your kids are asleep. But you're overwhelmed all the time because of your long hours.

For low-wage workers it's the opposite. Many can't get as many hours of work as they would like, and the situation is much more rigid. Retail is a good example. Long before the pandemic, brick-and-mortar retail employers were increasingly calibrating the hours they offered workers to match consumer demand. This created a problem both of unpredictable schedules and of employers offering fewer hours than workers wanted. To keep a job in retail, you have to be available all the time. Your employer might tell you your schedule a couple of weeks ahead of time, if you're lucky, or it could be at the last minute. And if you turn down hours, you might lose the job. You want more hours, because you're desperate for the income, but you don't know when those hours are going to be. How are you going to figure out your childcare arrangements in that situation? It's a nightmare.

Kleinmaier: Does college debt factor into this? Because someone with hundreds of thousands of dollars in student loans can't just throw up their hands and walk away from a job.

Milkman: The problem is certainly intensified by debt. For the younger generation especially, student debt has ballooned out of control. My generation had very little student debt. People who never went to college might have other debt, too: medical debt or credit-card debt. Many were trapped into subprime mortgages. That's another product of financialization: the housing market being manipulated by financial firms.

Kleinmaier: As a child of the 1980s I was frequently told, "Do what you love, and you'll never work a day in your life," or, "Find your passion." How do younger generations view work?

Milkman: It depends. College-educated workers mostly still get the message that you got. For people who either never go to college or don't even finish high school, it's more like "Get a good job, maximize your income, minimize the unpleasantness and the pain and the degradation."

I used to teach a course at UCLA called Work, Labor, and Social Justice in the U.S. I would start out by asking

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my two hundred students, "What's your dream job?" and the majority would say something like "CEO." Because this was in LA, a few had Hollywood dreams. What was interesting to me is that their ideal jobs weren't about personal fulfillment; they were about having money and power. I find that depressing, but I don't think it's unusual. People are often taught that work is about making a good living and avoiding some of the more horrendous job experiences, like physical danger or a terrible boss.

Kleinmaier: Many workers of retirement age have had to pick up a second job, or an "encore career." Is it getting harder to fund retirement?

Milkman: Yes. What's happened in the last forty years or so is that more and more employers have abandoned pension plans and instead offer 401(k)s, where you have the option of saving for retirement via a tax-deferred investment account, and sometimes your employer will match your contributions to it. As recently as the 1970s, many private-sector workers were promised a specific monthly payment in retirement, often with a cost-of-living adjustment built in to control for inflation. So if you worked for thirty years and were sixty or sixty-five years old, you knew you would get x amount of money a month for the rest of your life. That's very rare in the private sector today. Some public-sector employees, especially if they're unionized, still have pension plans like that. But many more employers provided that not so long ago.

We've had a period of less and less consideration for the well-being of working people and more and more consideration for corporate owners. This means a large majority

of people who are at or approaching retirement age are not going to have enough income to survive on and will be forced to continue working. Unfortunately it is going to get worse before it gets better. We still have a lot of retirement-age folks left over from the era when defined-benefit plans were widespread. As time goes by, there will be fewer and fewer safety nets, and more and more older people will really struggle to make ends meet. Social Security payments are not enough to live on in most parts of the country. The 401(k) turned out to be a substitute for defined-benefit pensions. Participation is voluntary, but many people can't afford to contribute, because their pay is inadequate. Then they're left with very little to live on when they stop working. Put that together with the reality that it's hard to get a decent job once you're over a certain age — well before retirement age, by the way — and it paints a bleak picture. Some older people end up in the gig economy, or in other marginal jobs at very low pay.

Kleinmaier: What brought about this change?

Milkman: It's part of the broader restructuring of the economy and the labor market that's been occurring since the 1970s. That's when employers went on the offensive against organized labor, undoing a lot of the progress on workers' rights that had been made during the New Deal era. That was when we got things like the minimum wage and the forty-hour workweek and the right to unionize. By the eighties we were seeing a dramatic decline in unionization and the loss of a lot of protections that workers had fought for. The minimum wage had stopped keeping up with inflation even before that, in the 1960s. The bed-rock labor laws passed in the 1930s are still on the books, but the staff and resources available to enforce them have eroded dramatically.

There was also a big move toward deregulation. For example, in 1980 under Jimmy Carter — this is before the Reagan administration, I want to point out, so it was not a partisan thing — Congress passed a law called the Motor Carrier Act that removed most regulations in the trucking industry. Almost overnight the industry was transformed from one that was highly unionized, with high wages, defined-benefit pensions, and good health-care benefits, to one with many more owner-operators, who were left on their own to try to save for retirement, pay for health care, and take home a living wage. The trucking industry today consists of "sweatshops on wheels," as one writer put it. Deregulation was introduced in a lot of other industries as well, and it tended to remove labor protections. There were promises that consumers would benefit, but in the end deregulation mostly increased profits, not consumer well-being.

Ronald Reagan famously said that government is not here to help: it's the enemy. Some call this "market fundamentalism" — the idea that the best regulator is the marketplace, and the government should refrain from interfering.

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The consequences of that way of thinking were devastating for working people. Among other things, it contributed to a huge expansion in income inequality, which is now as bad as it was during the so-called Gilded Age, from 1870 to 1900, a period of massive concentration of wealth. Many people say we are now in the second Gilded Age. Just 6 percent of workers in the private sector are union members today. The percentage is higher in the public sector, where the profit motive isn't there.

There is still a privileged part of the workforce, maybe the top 20 percent: people who have a lot of education and tend to hold professional and managerial jobs. They have been much less hurt by all of these changes than the 80 percent below them. But there has been some "trickle up." Corporations, for example, have increasingly cut their white-collar workers to "get rid of the fat." Downsizing started with blue-collar workers and later spread upward. In higher education we've also seen a transformation. I'm part of the last generation of academics who were mostly able to get tenure-track jobs. The vast majority of new academic jobs are part-time adjuncts and other non-tenure-track positions. So there, too, we see a dramatic degradation of work. Professions like law and medicine have also been affected. The most-privileged workers are still better off than those lower on the income ladder, but in terms of security and a sense that you can count on a certain career

path in life if you do your part — that's over for most people. You're on your own.

Kleinmaier: When I was growing up, I was close with a family that had six kids. The father worked in a steel mill, and the mother worked at home raising the children. This scenario — eight people living on one income — now seems unimaginable.

Milkman: Mothers working at home today, for love rather than for pay, are likely to be either in the top 20 percent or at the very bottom of the income ladder, subsisting on government assistance. For the majority in the middle, a one-income household isn't an option anymore. In the "before times," until the pandemic disrupted everything, all adults in the family were likely to be in the labor force.

Prior to the mid-1970s the majority of women in paid jobs either were not yet married or their kids were out of the house. But as inequality and deunionization began to take off, wages began to stagnate, especially for non-college-educated men. The way families coped with that was to have women join the labor force. And for a while they were able to sustain their standard of living on two incomes instead of one. Eventually that wasn't enough either. Now it's hard to make ends meet even with multiple wage earners in a household. And we haven't even talked about housing inflation. In many parts of the country the cost of housing has gone up much faster than earnings. The lack of job security adds to the pressure. Age discrimination is rampant, too. Employers get rid of the most-senior workers because they earn more. They'd rather hire somebody just starting out who they can pay less. In the private sector only unionized workers have any protections against arbitrary firings.

Kleinmaier: How did women entering the paid workforce change families?

Milkman: I think it's been a good thing for women in many ways. They have better options if they need to leave a bad marriage, for example. My own mother had a rotten marriage, and economic dependency was what kept her in it. She was born in 1916, and that was a common story for women of her generation.

What didn't change when more married women and mothers went to work, though, was the gender division of labor in the household. Arlie Hochschild calls this the "second shift," where women who have a job outside the home come home to another job. So there are benefits for women, but you definitely pay a price, especially if you have young kids. The increase in working mothers began in the seventies, first among women with school-age children, but pretty soon mothers of preschool kids also joined the labor force in large numbers. And then they had to add the cost of childcare to the family budget.

Kleinmaier: I have a friend who refers to their daycare as their "second mortgage."

Milkman: It's true. I have just one kid, and after he started elementary school, my bills went down dramatically.

If you have several kids, it's even harder. And the cost of college is another factor driving the need for multiple incomes.

Kleinmaier: In your article "Women's Work and Economic Crisis: Some Lessons of the Great Depression," you write that in the 1930s women were condemned for going to work.

Milkman: Married women especially.

Kleinmaier: You mention that schoolteachers, if they got married, had to quit their job.

Milkman: Yes. It was like that in the private sector, too. Some women would take their wedding rings off before they entered the factory gates.

Kleinmaier: Did most work because they needed the money, or because they found the job fulfilling?

Milkman: Mostly the first. That's true for men, too. Most people work because of economic need. When I did the research for that piece on women in the Depression, I did not find what I'd expected. At the time, I identified as a "socialist feminist." As one theorist put it, we asked feminist questions and looked for Marxist answers. So I expected to find that women were what Marxists call a "reserve army of labor," pulled into the labor force in times of high demand and pushed out in times of depression or recession. But I soon discovered that was wrong. Men's unemployment was higher than women's in the 1930s, so it was often easier for a woman to find a job. Even though many women bought into the idea that it was bad for them to be gainfully employed, if the man of the household was out of work and the woman could get a job, she would take it. The family needed to eat.

During World War II there was a big increase in married women's labor-force participation. But it wasn't until the 1970s that it became normal for mothers to work. By the late twentieth century the typical adult woman had been in the workforce most of her life.

Kleinmaier: Cultural attitudes toward wage-earning women have changed, too.

Milkman: Yes! I would credit the second wave of feminism for that. The problem is that, although attitudes have changed, we still have a lot of job segregation by sex, especially among non-college-educated workers. The decline in gender segregation has overwhelmingly been among college-educated women in elite professions and management positions. In working-class jobs there's just as much segregation as there ever was. Nurses, for example, are still around 90 percent women, and construction workers are around 90 percent men. There are now a lot of women lawyers, but they're still not half, and certain kinds of lawyers are more likely to be women than others.

Kleinmaier: Why does that segregation persist?

Milkman: That's a question I've been studying for decades. One big part of it is cultural. The gender labels attached to many jobs are so deeply embedded in our consciousness that most people don't question them. It's just

taken for granted. You think of a truck driver, and you picture a man. Think of a nurse, and you picture a woman. Those stereotypes are very hard to change.

But there is an economic dimension, too. Logically you would think that, as long as women earn less than men — which we still do — employers would prioritize hiring women to save money. But that's not how it works, because employers have those same mental stereotypes. In elite jobs, especially professions where the ticket to entry is a law or medical degree, things have changed much more, but in most jobs, employers have all kinds of justifications for segregation. For example, some will say nurses are mostly female because women are more caring and patient. In the manufacturing world you'll hear that women have more-nimble fingers, and that's why they work in electronics assembly. Men are stronger, so they work in steel mills — even though machines do most of the heavy lifting nowadays. Whatever the job, there's an unquestioned understanding on the part of employers, as well as workers and unions, as to which gender should do it. It's made to appear natural, even though it's often arbitrary.

During World War II women did jobs that had previously been monopolized by men, in manufacturing especially. Suddenly new justifications were offered. One of the propaganda films of that era compared cutting the parts of an airplane to cutting the parts of a dress. The gender division of labor can change during times of disruption, like a war, or with major technological innovation you might see a shift in which gender does what.

Job segregation is key not just because women and men do different work, but because the jobs dominated by women tend to pay quite a bit less than the ones dominated by men. That's part of why we haven't been able to eliminate gender inequality, even though feminists have fought so hard over the years to do so.

Kleinmaier: The stereotypical image of the working mom is someone who is frazzled and stretched too thin to be a reliable employee. Is this the reality?

Milkman: It can be. If you have young kids, and they get sick, you need to take them to the doctor, and you miss a day of work. Employers don't love that. If child-care duties were evenly distributed between mothers and fathers, then it wouldn't be a gender issue, but women are still overwhelmingly the ones who take time off to take their kids to the doctor. And that's reinforced by wage inequality: because the man usually earns more, it makes more sense for the woman to be the one to take the time off. Even women who don't have kids are affected by those stereotypes. Employers think, Maybe you don't have a kid now, but you will later.

For a few years I directed a research institute with a large staff at UCLA, so I understand the employers' perspective. It's a drag when somebody doesn't show up and you need something from them. It would help a lot if this

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country had paid leave for new parents and for parents of kids with serious illnesses, the way other wealthy countries do.

Kleinmaier: Why are we still seeing a gender pay gap today?

Milkman: It is directly tied to job segregation. Of course there are many cases where women get paid less than men who do the same job, but the bigger problem is that female-dominated jobs are the ones that pay less. Until that changes, we're not going to get rid of the pay gap. Interestingly, although job segregation has declined more for elite women, the gender gap in pay is actually greater there, because men at the top often have such huge salaries.

In the 1970s we used to wear buttons that said, FIFTY-NINE CENTS, because at that time women earned fifty-nine cents for every dollar men earned. Now it's eighty-four cents. So that's progress. But what about that other sixteen cents?

Kleinmaier: During the pandemic we've heard talk about the "Great Resignation" and the labor shortage.

Milkman: There is a labor shortage in some sectors, in part because people are fed up with the working conditions, but there are a lot of other things going on. Some people quit one job and take a better one. There are many parents who are reluctant to go back into the workforce during the pandemic, because their kids can be sent home



NELLY HIGGINBOTHAM

from school or day care. There are people who decided to retire early because they have compromised health and worry about going back to a job where they might be exposed to COVID. Many factors have combined to create the labor shortage. I'm not convinced it will last, though. I think ten years from now we might remember this as a short-lived interval.

Kleinmaier: Do you think work conditions will end up back where they were?

Milkman: I have a bad track record with predictions, but I do think there will be some instinctive reversion to the "good old days" before COVID. Many managers and employers want to see workers in the office. Even in white-collar settings, where people have successfully done their jobs remotely, some employers are going to want them back.

I recently reviewed a book called *Overload*, by Erin L. Kelly and Phyllis Moen. They documented an experiment, prepandemic, with corporate IT and managerial workers, who are famously overworked, up at all hours of the night talking to colleagues in India at three in the morning. The management team decided to try letting employees set their own schedules. They came into the office when they felt they needed to and didn't come in when they didn't need to. And this experiment was extremely successful. It

was great for morale, and all the work got done. But then a new management team came in and said, "We're not going to do this anymore; forget it." Everything went back to how it had been.

I think something like that will happen in many workplaces after the pandemic. There might be some resistance from workers who really like working from home, but most need to make a living and will have to go along with whatever the employer demands. The question is: How widespread will this return to "normalcy" be? A lot of workers would prefer things to stay the way they currently are. They don't want to have to spend time and money commuting and dressing up for work. But it's not up to them.

Another part of the balance sheet for employers is rent and real estate. Will their desire to control employees triumph over the raw economics of maintaining office space?

Kleinmaier: Is the current labor shortage in part due to mothers who have dropped out of the workforce?

Milkman: Absolutely. If you can't count on childcare or schools staying open without kids being sent home every time someone tests positive, you think twice about taking a new job.

Another factor is that a lot of people saved money during the pandemic. Maybe they had fewer expenses during

the lockdowns, or they put aside the stimulus money they received. So they might not need to have a second income, and it's easier just to stay home with the kids.

Immigration — or, rather, the lack thereof — is contributing to the labor shortage, too, especially in low-wage jobs: restaurant work, meatpacking, truck driving. Immigration, especially for low-wage earners, slowed down after the 2008 crash. And soon after that, we got Donald Trump and all his anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies.

Kleinmaier: A common refrain from the Right is that immigrants are “taking our jobs.” How do immigration numbers affect the job market, especially for the non-college-educated U.S.-born worker?

Milkman: There are a lot of misconceptions about that topic, which I addressed in my last book. Non-college-educated workers have suffered greatly since the 1970s, especially in areas where factories closed and jobs moved overseas. But that's not because of immigration.

An interesting example is the meatpacking industry, which has mostly stayed in the U.S. and has been in the news a lot during COVID. By the mid-twentieth century, that industry was wall-to-wall unionized. Workers got pretty good wages. They got pension benefits and health care. The union won some control over the pace of the assembly line. And the workforce was mostly U.S.-born. But starting in the 1960s employers dramatically restructured the meatpacking industry and moved plants to areas where cattle are bred, like Iowa, Kansas, and Nebraska, which also happened to be “right-to-work” states where unions have very little traction. Sometimes the union was able to follow the jobs to those areas, but they were never able to restore the pay and working conditions, and the speedup of work was dramatic. That led more and more U.S.-born workers to reject meatpacking jobs, which had once been good jobs but had become lousy ones. Turnover was near 300 percent in some of the new plants. That's when the companies turned to hiring immigrants.

My point is that demand for low-wage immigrant labor follows the degradation of work. Immigration is not the cause of the reversal of fortune so many non-college-educated workers have experienced; it's the consequence. And I've documented that in numerous industries.

There's another variation on that theme involving paid domestic workers — maids, nannies, and house cleaners. In the mid-twentieth century they were mostly U.S.-born African Americans. Unlike meatpacking, these were never good jobs. They never had unions or decent pay, and they certainly didn't have great working conditions. People hated those jobs, in part because they brought back memories of slavery. But African American women had very few alternatives. Then came the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which banned employment discrimination. Shortly after that, more jobs began to open up for Black women — sales jobs, clerical jobs, and other positions that had been pretty

much closed to them before. That sparked a massive exodus of Black women from domestic work into those fields.

Meanwhile inequality was rising, and the growing wealth at the top increased demand for paid domestic work. So did the aging of the population, which created a huge demand for elder-care workers. More mothers working outside the home meant more nannies. All those factors were feeding demand for paid domestic workers just as the supply, previously provided by Black women, was dwindling. That's when immigrants began to enter those jobs.

So the narrative that immigrants take jobs away from American workers is a myth. And that myth is prevalent even in areas where there are fewer immigrants. In the deindustrialized landscapes of Ohio and Detroit you don't find too many immigrants, because they go where the jobs are. Yet in those regions many buy into the idea that immigration is the cause of economic distress. It's a convenient scapegoat.

Kleinmaier: Why do foreign-born workers take jobs that U.S.-born workers won't?

Milkman: Most often it's because they don't have better options. If you don't speak English very well, for example, a lot of jobs are closed to you, but you can wash dishes in a restaurant or make deliveries or work in meatpacking or as a domestic. If you're undocumented, you have even fewer employment possibilities. And being undocumented makes you vulnerable to employer abuse. With few exceptions, undocumented workers have the same workplace rights under the law as everybody else: they're entitled to minimum wage, overtime pay, and all the rest. But they may not know that, or they may be afraid to complain if those rights are violated, which they often are.

Many people don't realize that the vast majority of immigrants in the U.S. are either naturalized citizens or green-card holders. Only about a fifth are undocumented. Many immigrants come to the U.S. because opportunities to make a living in their country of origin are limited, and they believe, often correctly, that they can find better opportunities here. Others are fleeing violence and war and climate change, especially in recent years. But when immigration expanded in the seventies, eighties, and nineties, it was mostly driven by economic demand. Those who crossed the border without authorization or overstayed visas often did so because they knew there was a job available for them. Employers actively recruited immigrants and refugees during that period. Or maybe a cousin who lived in Los Angeles told them there were lots of jobs where he worked. The right wing calls this “chain migration,” which they depict as a new phenomenon, but it's always been around. It was as common for European immigrants a century ago as it is for Latino immigrants, Asian immigrants, and African immigrants today.

Kleinmaier: Do you think there's a connection between the Great Recession in 2008 and the Great Resignation

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today? Is it a ripple effect?

Milkman: It depends which workers you're talking about. In the aftermath of the Great Recession young, college-educated people entering the labor market — after doing everything they were supposed to do — faced a daunting set of challenges. That led many to question what the labor market was all about and why it wasn't working. This was the generation who flocked to support Bernie Sanders for president. They have a different attitude not just about work but about how society and the economy should be set up. They were the generation who brought us the Occupy Wall Street movement and Black Lives Matter.

Now, a little over a decade later, here comes COVID. On top of falling victim to the recession, this same generation sees the devastation that the pandemic created, which deepened their critique.

Even before COVID, many workers of this generation were starting to get involved in the labor movement. It started off among the college-educated, who organized unions in fields like journalism, and among college adjuncts and graduate-student workers. The 2018 wave of teacher strikes was also led by young workers — they organized on Facebook. And now we're seeing something similar at Starbucks and Amazon.

Kleinmaier: How should we interpret the recent unionization of Amazon workers in Staten Island? If a powerful company like Amazon fails to stave off unionization efforts, does this signal a tidal change for labor?

Milkman: It's too soon to say, but right now we're in a moment when worker interest in unions, and public support for them, are greater than we've seen in many decades. The labor shortage makes it less risky for workers to unionize, and the outrage over the way so-called essential workers were put at risk while companies like Amazon enjoyed a huge profit bonanza is deep. In Staten Island it's also a case of the arrogance of power. Partly because there was no established union involved, the company figured unionization

would get nowhere — and they had just defeated the union drive in Bessemer, Alabama, where workers had voted two-to-one against it. But New York City is not Alabama — it's a union town, with double the national average level of unionization. And while in Alabama the minimum wage is \$7.25 an hour, it's \$15 in New York City. So there are plenty of jobs that pay wages like those at Amazon in New York, while in Alabama there are few.

The Great Recession was a turning point in terms of economic instability and uncertainty about the future, both of which have been deepened by the pandemic experience. The trend started even earlier, with the changes that took off in the 1970s. Another key moment was 9/11.

Kleinmaier: How so?

Milkman: A friend of mine who recently passed away, Richard Lachmann, wrote a book called *First-Class Passengers on a Sinking Ship*, about the decline of the U.S. as a great power and the effects on American society. When he first showed me the book, I thought, *What a weird title*, but now I think of it all the time. It's a perfect metaphor for the unraveling that the U.S. has experienced. In the immediate postwar period, when I grew up, there was a sense of stability and security. The turning point came before 9/11, but 9/11 is a symbolic moment. The U.S., the most powerful country in the world, was shown up by terrorists. In the 1970s many people talked about the Vietnam War in similar terms: the U.S. lost that war spectacularly. Around the same time, with the rise of OPEC, the price of oil quadrupled. That was the beginning of the end of U.S. hegemony.

But as with the deunionization, wage stagnation, and inflation that started in the 1970s, public awareness took a while to catch up. September 11 was the moment when no one could escape the fact that things had changed fundamentally. The terrorist attack was different from COVID or the 2008 recession, which were global phenomena. This was a U.S.-specific disaster that signaled a new uncertainty about the future.

In many ways this is the world my mother warned me about. When she was a teenager, her family lost everything in the 1929 stock-market crash, and then came the Depression. She never got over it. That sense of uncertainty and insecurity stayed with her for her entire life. My mother was radicalized by the crisis she lived through, but the experience of such a crisis doesn't necessarily lead in a progressive direction, as we saw with Trump's election in 2016.

Now we don't know if we will survive a disease. We don't know if our jobs are secure. Things are up for grabs in a way that they weren't for most Americans in the mid-twentieth century. Back then you had the sense that you knew what your life was going to be like. There was a feeling of security and predictability, though maybe it was an illusion. That was also the period when the U.S. was uncontested in the world. All of that is now utterly lost. ■