

Substantial Disruption



Twilight of the Tradesman

By Mike Tully

The most tragic and sympathetic victims of the United States' deficient Medical-Political complex might be the American blue-collar workers. We silently honor them every day, simply by going about our daily life activities. We awaken from sleep on a mattress assembled by American factory workers and shipped to us by truck drivers or railroad personnel. We reach up for a light switch installed by a tradesman and turn on a light attached to wires and components installed by an electrician. We walk to the restroom over a floor poured by concrete workers and likely covered by materials installed by carpet layers or tilers. The restroom is attached to a network of pipes carefully laid by plumbers after being manufactured in factories and shipped by truckers or railroad workers. We enjoy clean water thanks to plumbers, water plant workers and chemists and dispose of our waste into a vast network of pipes and wastewater facilities built by tradesmen and maintained by plant operators, chemists, pipe-fitters, welders, plumbers, equipment operators and drivers. We steer vehicles built by auto workers over roads dug, shaped, and paved by highway contractors that are lined by curbs formed by concrete workers and painted and maintained by road crews. Every path we tread, every building we enter, every life activity we take for granted is the product of somebody else's sweat, busted knuckles, pulled muscles and weary body. They are the sinew of the populace.

Most of the men and women who work in the blue-collar trades don't have college degrees, although some may have attended a trade school or taken part in employer or union sponsored vocational training. Some attend junior college. Many did passably well in high school and some of them participated in sports. Some served in the military. Most married, had kids, settled down and tried to earn enough to buy a decent house and car or two, maybe put something away for their retirement. Some go to church, some don't; some drink and/or smoke, some don't; some cheat on their spouses and some don't. Most try to be good parents and most succeed to some degree. Nearly all want their kids to do better, maybe even obtain that college degree that was not in their own life plan. And, it seems, nearly every blue collar worker entered into the trades feeling young and invincible and expecting to stay that way.

But the work exacts a toll. Backs, legs, shoulders and feet wear down over the years. Lungs suffer from too much dust, too many chemicals, maybe too much tobacco. Hearts, livers and blood vessels have warranties. Years of lifting, climbing, walking, straining, pulling, pushing, bending and squatting turn young, supple bodies into frayed twine. The bill eventually comes due and, when it does, the payer may not be eligible for Medicare or Social Security. The older blue collar worker is generally between 45 and 65, probably does not have adequate health insurance or disability benefits, and can no longer perform like a younger man or woman with the illusion of invincibility. Life is not what he or she expected. They tried to do everything right, work hard, play by the rules, be a good citizen and neighbor. They've earned their dignity and the right to keep it.

But it's hard to do that when your health is [worse than that of non-blue collar workers](#). A [study in 2010](#) showed that more than a third of the population had physically demanding jobs and, as a result, several left the workplace prematurely. For many of them, that meant leaving before they were eligible for Social Security. Others stay longer than they had planned, and frequently longer than they should and longer than they prefer. [Research](#) shows that the general economic climate, the need to retain health insurance, and changes in retirement plans motivate many older workers to remain in the workforce. For blue collar workers, that means they [work longer and are in worse health](#) than the white-collar Congressional Representatives, Senators, and bean-counting actuaries who decide their fate. This has led to a palpable fatalism among blue-collar workers, many of whom believe it's more likely that they will [work until they die](#) than enjoy retirement.

There are many issues relating to health care and the fate of older blue-collar workers is only one of them. But it's an important issue that should be resolved, perhaps with a lower age for Medicare eligibility. Whatever the solution, one thing is certain. Those who build this nation should not be precluded from building a secure retirement to enjoy the grandeur and benefit of what they helped create.

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