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They, Too, Sing America

By CHARLES M. BLOW

Last week I spent a few days in the Deep South — a thousand miles from the moneyed canyons of Manhattan and the prattle of Washington politics — talking to everyday people, blue-collar workers, people not trying to win the future so much as survive the present.

They do hard jobs and odd jobs — any work they can find to keep the lights on and the children fed.

No one mentioned the asinine argument about the debt ceiling. No one. Life is pressing down on them so hard that they can barely breathe. They just want Washington to work, the way they do.

They are honest people who do honest work — crack-the-bones work; lift-it, chop-it, empty-it, glide-it-in-smooth work; feel-the-flames-up-close work; crawl-down-in-there work — things that no one wants to do but that someone must.

They are women whose skin glistens from steam and sweat, whose hands stay damp from being dipped in buckets and dried on aprons. They are men who work in boots with steel toes, the kind that don't take shining, the kind that lean over and tell stories when you take them off.

They are people whose bodies melt every night in a hot bath, then stiffen by sunrise, so much so that it takes pills for them to get out of bed without pain.

They, too, sing America. But they're the ones less talked about — either not glamorous enough or rancorous enough. They are the ones without champions, waiting for Democrats to gather the gumption to defend the working poor with the same ferocity with which Republicans protect the filthy rich, waiting for a tomorrow that never comes.

People think of them as somehow part of America's past. But not so. No, most aren't STEM workers (science, technology, engineering and mathematics workers), who grow up high where all can see. But they are the root, underfoot and out of sight, growing just the same.

The Economics and Statistics Administration of the Department of Commerce [issued a report](#) this week that touted STEM jobs as “driving our nation's innovation and competitiveness,” having higher wages, and projected to grow “by 17 percent from 2008 to 2018, compared to 9.8 percent growth for non-STEM occupations.”

But there's another side to that story.

As the Bureau of Labor Statistics points out, half of the top 30 occupations expected to see the largest job growth over the same period, and seven of the top 10, are low-wage or very low-wage jobs. Only eight even require a degree. Most simply require on-the-job training.

The people who work these jobs are the backbone of this country, and will continue to be. In fact, Washington could learn a lot about backbone from listening to them. We would all be better served by politicians who work as they do — willing to do the things that no one wants to do but that someone must.

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