

# A Voice Heard in the Land. Diana Johnstone

"The Planned Obsolescence of the Working Class"

By [Diana Johnstone](#)

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*The song "Rich Men North of Richmond" is a personal lament, a cry of pain and despair over the state of the "new world".*

The fact that Oliver Anthony's powerful voice and frank lyrics immediately resonated with millions of listeners tells each of us something about the rest of us. On the simple but deep level of sensibility, millions of very different people found they shared something in common.

Exactly what this might be and where it might lead is a mystery, but there is potential political meaning in the subjective unity aroused by this song.

No, not unity but division! – promptly decreed liberal establishment opinion-makers. It's the "right wing" that loves it, ruled *The Guardian* and the rest. Scrutinizing the lyrics for rightwing extremist stigmata, critics jumped on just these lines.

Lord, we got folks in the street  
Ain't got nothin' to eat  
And the obese milkin' welfare

But God if you're five foot three  
And you're three hundred pounds  
Taxes ought not to pay  
For your bags of fudge rounds

North of Richmond, where lobbyists and legislators play, this may seem to be all about welfare payments, good on the left, bad on the right. But in its way, this is a poem, and as such it calls for a more poetic interpretation.

[After 40 million views on YouTube, Edward Snowden [tweets](#) that Oliver likely already has an

FBI file.]

Here the author is pointing to a paradox, the coexistence of having nothing to eat and suffering from obesity. This contrast is observed and experienced with growing frequency in the working class.

Anxiety, despair, substance abuse and binge eating, homelessness and bad nutrition, not to mention poor health and lowered life expectancy come together in these apparently opposing phenomena. All, including welfare itself, reflect the misery of the contemporary working class.

And if we stand back and look for causes and effects, we can drop the minor matter of too many fudge rounds and get to the great big root causes of the whole picture behind Oliver Anthony's rapid sketch.

## **The Planned Obsolescence of the Working Class**



Teamsters Local 804 rally in New York outside a UPS customer center. (Teamsters for a Democratic Union)

The plight of the contemporary Western ruling class goes back roughly forty years, to the political takeover of public policy by financial capital. Financial capital makes the investment decisions that shape society, and governments, to lure those precious investments, began to cede more and more freedom to those decision-makers. The social impact was enormous.

Capitalist rulers not only chose measures to increase the share of stockholder profits over remuneration to employees for their productive work, but began to plan the obsolescence of the Western working class altogether. Automation and outsourcing diminished the political influence of labor, further weakened by uncontrolled immigration of potential substitute job fillers.

The plain truth is that planned obsolescence has been the dominant policy of the Western elite toward the working class since the neoliberal power seizure of the 1980s.

And what about the political left in all this, the political thinkers and activists who under

Marxist influence once championed the working class as both the agents and the beneficiaries of historic progress?

To a significant extent, the American intellectual left settled into the ivory tower of academia, where it thrived following a trajectory in harmony with the obsolescence of the working class. Enconced in humanities departments, the intellectual left more or less forgot about class as they theorized society in terms of a new array of human categories, racial and sexual. As befits a left, it actively promotes progress, championing oppressed identity categories as it once championed theoretically oppressed wage earners.

Now, when a working class stiff, who suffered a bad accident working in a paper mill, comes along with his complaint, representatives of this contemporary left don't get it. What is he complaining about? Is he racist?

It is not just the present that causes suffering. Somehow the Western working class can feel that at more than one level, its future has been taken away from it.

Today's official left doesn't capture this discontent because it has essentially abandoned the working class and is no longer interested in ownership of the means of production, or even production, which may be bad for the planet.

The academic left see the whole world as classrooms and conference halls. It asserts its values by championing diversity, equity and inclusion in math classes and corporate board rooms. It wants fair distribution within its own elite and other elites as well.

It doesn't care about the identity distribution of workers in a paper mill, which probably should be shut down anyway, for the sake of the environment. Yes, society is bitterly divided, but it sure ain't the fault of Oliver Anthony.

"I've been sellin' my soul, workin' all day / Overtime hours for bullshit pay / So I can sit out here and waste my life away / Drag back home and drown my troubles away.

It's a damn shame what the world's gotten to / For people like me and people like you / Wish I could just wake up and it not be true / But it is, oh, it is.

Livin' in the new world / With an old soul / These rich men north of Richmond / Lord knows they all just wanna have total control / Wanna know what you think, wanna know what you do / And they don't think you know, but I know that you do / 'Cause your dollar ain't shit and it's taxed to no end / 'Cause of rich men north of Richmond.

I wish politicians would look out for miners / And not just minors on an island somewhere / Lord, we got folks in the street, ain't got nothin' to eat / And the obese milkin' welfare.

Well, God, if you're 5-foot-3 and you're 300 pounds / Taxes ought not to pay for your bags of fudge rounds / Young men are puttin' themselves six feet in the ground / 'Cause all this damn country does is keep on kickin' them down."

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**Diana Johnstone** was press secretary of the Green Group in the European Parliament from 1989 to 1996. In her latest book, *Circle in the Darkness: Memoirs of a World Watcher* (Clarity Press, 2020), she recounts key episodes in the transformation of the German Green Party from a peace to a war party. Her other books include *Fools' Crusade: Yugoslavia, NATO and Western Delusions* (Pluto/Monthly Review) and in co-authorship with her father, Paul H. Johnstone, *From MAD to Madness: Inside Pentagon Nuclear War Planning* (Clarity Press).

*She is a Research Associate of the Centre for Research on Globalization*

She can be reached at [diana.johnstone@wanadoo.fr](mailto:diana.johnstone@wanadoo.fr)

Featured image: Dec. 14, 2018: Amazon workers in Shakopee, Minnesota, protesting a variety of working conditions. (Fibonacci Blue, Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

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