

Disdain for Workers

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By now everyone knows how Mitt Romney, speaking to donors in Boca Raton, washed his hands of almost half the country — the 47 percent who don't pay income taxes — declaring, "My job is not to worry about those people. I'll never convince them that they should take personal responsibility and care for their lives." By now, also, many people are aware that the great bulk of the 47 percent are hardly moochers; most are working families who pay payroll taxes, and elderly or disabled Americans make up a majority of the rest.

But here's the question: Should we imagine that Mr. Romney and his party would think better of the 47 percent on learning that the great majority of them actually are or were hard workers, who very much have taken personal responsibility for their lives? And the answer is no.

For the fact is that the modern Republican Party just doesn't have much respect for people who work for other people, no matter how faithfully and well they do their jobs. All the party's affection is reserved for "job creators," aka employers and investors. Leading figures in the party find it hard even to pretend to have any regard for ordinary working families — who, it goes without saying, make up the vast majority of Americans.

Am I exaggerating? Consider the Twitter message sent out by Eric Cantor, the Republican House majority leader, on Labor Day — a holiday that specifically celebrates America's workers. Here's what it said, in its entirety: "Today, we celebrate those who have taken a risk, worked hard, built a business and earned their own success." Yes, on a day set aside to honor workers, all Mr. Cantor could bring himself to do was praise their bosses.

Lest you think that this was just a personal slip, consider Mr. Romney's acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention. What did he have to say about American workers? Actually, nothing: the words "worker" or "workers" never passed his lips. This was in strong contrast to President Obama's convention speech a week later, which put a lot of emphasis on workers — especially, of course, but not only, workers who benefited from the auto bailout.

And when Mr. Romney waxed rhapsodic about the opportunities America offered to immigrants, he declared that they came in pursuit of "freedom to build a business." What about those who came here not to found businesses, but simply to make an honest living? Not worth mentioning.

Needless to say, the G.O.P.'s disdain for workers goes deeper than rhetoric. It's deeply embedded in the party's policy priorities. Mr. Romney's remarks spoke to a widespread belief on the right that taxes on working Americans are, if anything, too low. Indeed, The Wall Street Journal famously described low-income workers whose wages fall below the income-tax threshold as "lucky duckies."

What really needs cutting, the right believes, are taxes on corporate profits, capital gains, dividends, and very high salaries — that is, taxes that fall on investors and executives, not ordinary workers. This despite the fact that people who derive their income from investments, not wages — people like, say, Willard Mitt Romney — already pay remarkably little in taxes.

Where does this disdain for workers come from? Some of it, obviously, reflects the influence of money in politics: big-money donors, like the ones Mr. Romney was speaking to when he went off on half the nation, don't live paycheck to paycheck. But it also reflects the extent to which the G.O.P. has been taken over by

an Ayn Rand-type vision of society, in which a handful of heroic businessmen are responsible for all economic good, while the rest of us are just along for the ride.

In the eyes of those who share this vision, the wealthy deserve special treatment, and not just in the form of low taxes. They must also receive respect, indeed deference, at all times. That's why even the slightest hint from the president that the rich might not be all that — that, say, some bankers may have behaved badly, or that even “job creators” depend on government-built infrastructure — elicits frantic cries that Mr. Obama is a socialist.

Now, such sentiments aren't new; “Atlas Shrugged” was, after all, published in 1957. In the past, however, even Republican politicians who privately shared the elite's contempt for the masses knew enough to keep it to themselves and managed to fake some appreciation for ordinary workers. At this point, however, the party's contempt for the working class is apparently too complete, too pervasive to hide.

The point is that what people are now calling the Boca Moment wasn't some trivial gaffe. It was a window into the true attitudes of what has become a party of the wealthy, by the wealthy, and for the wealthy, a party that considers the rest of us unworthy of even a pretense of respect.