

## Blue Jean Nation 'Work at the crossroads'

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***We can steer clear of the social, political and economic turmoil and upheaval this new economy has the capacity to create. If heads are buried in the sand, chaos will reign.***

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ALTOONA, WI - Those in power in Wisconsin's Capitol want everyone to notice that the state's unemployment rate has [come down some](#) . They are equally eager to have everyone to look past other troubling facts, such as [wage and job growth that is lagging behind the national average](#) , a [poverty rate that's higher](#) than it's been in 30 years, and a [middle class that's disappearing faster](#) than anywhere else in the country. They pay no attention to rising economic inequality and hope no one notices that [the income gap is growing faster in Wisconsin](#) than in other states.

As unwilling as they are to acknowledge much less do something about these politically inconvenient realities, they are even more reluctant to engage the public in any kind of discussion about even greater challenges that lie ahead.

There is a reason why [most Americans believe our kids will be worse off](#) than their parents. The U.S. is hurtling toward an increasingly jobless economy and everyone can see it coming. Even the politicians can see it but don't want to deal with what is plainly visible on the horizon. Instead they look for scapegoats, telling frightened workers that immigrants are stealing their jobs. Or they offer empty promises that closed factories can be reopened and lost assembly line jobs will somehow magically reappear. This is the cruelest kind of hoax.



Today's immigrants aren't replacing yesterday's factory workers on the assembly lines, robots are. Immigration is not the culprit, technology is. Even if new factories replace the old shuttered ones, how many people will work in those plants? Driverless vehicles are coming. When they arrive, what happens to the truck drivers and bus drivers and cab drivers?

Call this emerging American economy what you will. Some call it global, some call it high-tech. Others label it an information or knowledge economy. Still others see little left but a service economy. Probably the most accurate description is **post-human**. Workers have every reason to feel vulnerable, and those feelings are only going to intensify.

Fewer and fewer workers have union representation. There was a time when virtually every American household included at least one union member. Today, [less than 11% of all Americans and only 6% of private sector workers belong to a union](#). Labor unions were an outgrowth of the industrial revolution. That revolution came and went. In what came after, unions struggled to adapt and steadily lost membership. Workers lost bargaining power.

In the short term, [steps can be taken](#) to empower working people, from affordable and debt-free education and job training to universal access to everything from health care to high-speed Internet. But in the longer term, if our society is going to hold together in an

increasingly jobless economy, we are going to have to renegotiate the social contract. Totally new approaches to maintaining social cohesion are going to have to be considered. Maybe part of the answer is moving to the [30-hour workweek](#) that Amazon and other companies are trying out. That would make work available to more people. Maybe the time will soon come for a [universal basic income](#). That would require all of us to see the value in making sure no one is left behind. Maybe [making union representation a civil right](#) could be a piece to the puzzle. Perhaps some combination of these or other ideas will light the way.

If minds are open, we can steer clear of the social, political and economic turmoil and upheaval this new economy has the capacity to create. If heads are buried in the sand, chaos will reign.

— *Mike McCabe*

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