Over the last few decades, the conservative opponents of organized labor in the United States have accused unions of comprising a “special interest” group greedily seeking gains at the expense of the general welfare. In the anti-labor imagination, unions unfairly seek to win benefits and privileges for a dwindling band of “blue-collar” workers while imposing the costs, in the form of higher consumer prices, on the majority of individuals, who are employed in expanding occupations that are deemed to be intrinsically resistant to organization. The proponents of unionism have had little difficulty demonstrating how the relatively low rate of unionization among poorly paid retail and service workers can be attributed primarily to employer repression. Yet progressives have had more trouble refuting common assumptions about the supposed antipathy of “middle-class” clerical, technical, and professional workers, at least in the private sector, to unionization. Many efforts to formulate a new pro-labor politics have largely conceded this ideological point to the Right by taking for granted a high degree of apathy or hostility to unions by the middle class that, in turn, needs to be either neutralized or in some manner accommodated.

This paper will explore the historical basis for the real or perceived antipathy towards unions among clerical, technical, and professional workers by examining the ways in which private employers actively stymied white-collar organizing in the two decades following the Second World War. By the middle of the 1940s, militant white-collar unions, including the left-led United Office and Professional Workers of the CIO, had established promising organizational beachheads in a wide range of fields, while groups like the National Citizens Political Action Committee promoted the class-conscious politics of the Popular Front among middle-class Americans. In the years following the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947, employers reacted by waging a concerted ideological and managerial counter-offensive in hundreds of offices, drafting rooms, laboratories, and other white-collar workplaces across America. The campaign proved to be largely successful. As white-collar employment surged, rates of unionization in most clerical, technical, and professional occupations declined after 1950. By the late 1950s and early 1960s, the majority of certification elections among white-collar workers resulted in defeat for the union. The destruction or marginalization of white-collar unions in the private sector between the end of the war and the middle of the 1960s effectively resulted in the containment of class, quarantining it to describe a set of occupational sectors—such as manufacturing, mining, transportation, and wholesale distribution—that represented a declining proportion of the total American workforce. As clerical, technical, and professional workers in the private sector became less and less likely to belong to unions, this paper concludes, they tended to become more and more receptive to anti-labor politics in general.