

**Zweig, M. (2007). Six points on class. In M. Yates (ed.), *More unequal: Aspects of class in the United States*. New York: Monthly Review Press.**

**1. We need to change the understanding of class in the United States, going from the division of "rich and poor" to the division of "worker and capitalist."**

When we popularize this more accurate and useful terminology, we will convey a better grasp of class dynamics and make it easier to address the continuing operation of racism and sexism in American society. We will also contribute to the construction of political movements capable of reversing the decades-old trend toward ever more consolidated corporate power at the expense of working people, regardless of race and gender.

We should identify the class divisions as between the working class, 62 percent of the U.S. labor force—a substantial majority of the American people—and the corporate elite (or capitalist class), who make up only 2 percent. In between these classes is the middle class (36 percent of the U.S. labor force).<sup>1</sup>

The "Two Americas" John Edwards identified in 2004 and the "Two New Yorks" Fernando Ferrer identified in his 2005 mayoral bid refer to crucial realities that should be front and center in our political conversations and social policy. But these divisions are not best understood as simply the difference between "rich and poor."

"Class" must be understood in terms of power rather than income, wealth, or lifestyle, although these do vary by class. Using power as the starting point allows us to see class as a dynamic relationship rather than as a static set of characteristics. Investigating class as a question of power also makes it possible to find the organic links among class, race, and gender. Looking at class in terms of income, wealth, lifestyle, or education separates it from race and gender, which are best understood as power relationships rather than inherent characteristics individuals possess.

**The working class** are those people with relatively little power at work—white-collar banktellers, call-center workers, and cashiers; blue-collar machinists, construction workers, and assembly-line workers; pink-collar secretaries, nurses, and home-health care workers—skilled and unskilled, men and women of all races, nationalities, and sexual preferences. The working class are those with little personal control over the pace or content of their work and without supervisory control over the work lives of others. There are nearly 90 million working-class people in the U.S. labor force today. The United States has a substantial working-class majority.

**The capitalist class** are the corporate elite, senior executives, and directors of large corporations, whose job it is to give strategic direction to the company, who interact with government agencies and other corporate executives while leaving the day-to-day operation of their company to intermediate levels of management and the workforce. In this they are different from small business owners, who tend to work beside their relatively few employees and manage them directly. These small business owners, while literally capitalists in that they employ wage labor, are better understood to be in the middle class, as will be discussed below.

**The ruling class** is considerably smaller than the full capitalist class and includes non-capitalists as well. If we think of the ruling class as those who give strategic direction to the country as a whole, extending beyond their own business or institution, we can identify those corporate directors who sit on multiple boards, thus having an opportunity to coordinate capitalist activity across enterprises, and add to them the political elites of the three branches of national government and cultural and educational leaders who contribute to the furtherance of corporate interests. The entire U.S. ruling class could fit into the seats at Yankee Stadium (capacity: 54,000).

**The middle class** are professionals, small business owners, and managerial and supervisory employees. They are best understood not as the middle of an income distribution but as living in the middle of the two polar classes in capitalist society. Their experiences have some aspects shared with the working class and some associated with the corporate elite.

Small business owners, for example, share with capitalists an interest in private property in business assets, defeated unions, and weak labor regulations. But they share with workers the work itself, great vulnerability to the capitalist market and government power, and difficulty securing adequate health insurance and retirement security.

Professionals are also caught in the middle of the crossfire in the principal class conflict between labor and capital. If we look at the experience over the last thirty years of professionals whose lives are closely intertwined with the working class—community college teachers, lawyers, in public defender offices or with small general practices, doctors practicing in working-class neighborhoods, and public school teachers—their economic and social standing have deteriorated, along with the class they serve. But if we look at those whose lives are more fully involved in serving the capitalist class—corporate lawyers, financial service professionals, Big Four CPAs, and doctors who practice beyond the reach of HMDs' and insurance companies' oversight—these professionals have risen in fortune with the class they serve, albeit to a lesser extent, absolutely and proportionately.

Professionals in most parts of the academic community (especially in colleges closely linked to working-class constituencies) are experiencing the pain of corporate pressure as working-class people do. In the process many academic jobs have been degraded. They are no longer relatively secure tenure-track middle-class positions, but adjunct and visitor positions staffed by a growing second tier of people working at will with virtually no professional standing, a new academic working class.<sup>2</sup>

"Working class" is best understood differently from the Department of Labor (DOL) category "production and non-supervisory" employee. This DOL category includes every employee who is not a supervisor, like most professors and other middle-class professionals working for a salary. However, lumping all employees who have no supervisory power over others into the working class masks the real differences in social position that professional people enjoy, beleaguered as they may be. Appreciating the contradictory class location of professional and other middle-class employees helps to understand the political vicissitudes characteristic of this section of the population and suggests ways of approaching them as allies to working-class politics.

## **2. The usual talk of a mass middle class with some rich and poor at the fringes is deeply misleading and contributes to two central problems in American politics.**

**A. We get trapped in confusions about race and lose sight of class.** In the popular imagination and in political campaign speeches "the poor" usually stands for "black and Hispanic" or "minority." But in the United States two-thirds of all poor people are white and three-quarters of all black people are not poor.<sup>3</sup> Racism continues to operate and accounts for the fact that poverty is experienced *disproportionately* among blacks and Hispanics (and among women because of sexism). But we should not allow their comparatively heavy burden to blind us to the full realities of poverty in America.

Poverty is something that happens to the working class. Most poor people in the United States are in families where the adults experience periodic spells of unemployment or work only part-time or at low wages. A family with two wage earners, one year-round full-time and one year-round half-time, each earning minimum wage, does not make enough to bring a family of three out of poverty. To address and reverse poverty we need to improve the conditions working-class people experience. The "underclass"—people entirely marginalized from the legal economy—is only a small fraction of the poor and does not characterize most poor people. The

"underclass" has special needs which must be understood and addressed, but a majority of the poor are not in this "underclass"—they are working-class people experiencing hard times.

**B. The political target gets confused** between the false choices of "blame the poor, fix their character, and give them job skills" and "take down the rich a notch or two."

It is a mistake to identify "the rich" as the source of America's political misdirection and the target of our political organizing. When Al Gore challenged George W. Bush in the 2000 campaign by dismissing Bush's plan for tax cuts as a benefit for the richest 1 percent only, polls showed, astonishingly, that 19 percent of Americans believed themselves to be in that top 1 percent, and another 21 percent believed they would be there in the next ten years. When we attack "the rich" *too many people think we are attacking them and their future.*

The real source of the political and economic misdirection in this country is the increasingly unbridled power of the capitalist class and their arrogant pursuit of profit for the few at the expense of the vast majority of Americans and peoples of the world. This should be the target of our politics. Being rich is not the key point—winning \$380 million in the Powerball lottery makes a person rich but not part of the corporate elite. The people Dick Cheney met with in early 2001 to set energy policy were rich, but much more to the point they were captains of industry, senior executives of U.S. energy corporations.

Conservatives have convinced too many Americans that their problems stem from government coddling the poor. We need to redirect this anger, not toward "the rich" but toward the corporate elite. Such an approach could not be twisted into "threats to rob working people of their future."

Targeting "the rich" may, however, have some legitimate role in the environmental movement, not in the usual sense but in the sense that the people of industrial countries, especially the rich, need to limit their consumption. Unrestricted consumption is more a question of income than it is of class power, although one can be sure that the capitalist class, eager for expanding markets, will resist any challenges to unlimited consumption.

### **3. The reality of race and class in the Katrina-devastated Gulf Coast is dramatically different from the "lessons of race and class" the media touted immediately after the catastrophe.**

Headlines and news analysis across the country following Katrina announced the "rediscovery of race and class in America." But even as the U.S. media and an attentive public reawakened to the reality of hard lives long quietly and privately endured by millions of people, old confusions continued to obscure the facts of race and class in America. In typical media coverage *race* meant "black" and *class* meant "poverty," both joining in the common identity of the African Americans trapped at the New Orleans Superdome and Convention Center.

Looking at the situation through the lens of class brings important new information into focus. Of the total labor force in the New Orleans Metropolitan Area (including seven parishes in southeast Louisiana) 70 percent are in working-class occupations.<sup>4</sup> Taking the entire metropolitan area before Katrina, 37 percent of the labor force is minority, almost all of that black, a fraction that varies widely across the three largest parishes (which together account for 85 percent of the total metropolitan area): Jefferson Parish (the largest), 26 percent minority; Orleans Parish, 66 percent minority; and St. Tammany Parish, 11 percent minority.<sup>5</sup>

One white worker in four is employed in a job that pays at or near official poverty wages. This is equally true in both predominantly black Orleans Parish and predominantly white Jefferson Parish. They are in low-paid working-class jobs (health-support occupations, food preparation, building maintenance, personal care, and sales), occupations that pay from \$12,000 to around \$18,000 a year—at best not enough to bring a family of four out of poverty. Eighty-five thousand whites are among the working poor in the New Orleans-area labor force.

By contrast, there are about 65,000 minority members (almost all black) in this situation (30 percent of minority employment in the area).

Looking at the other end of the employment picture, managerial and professional employment, blacks are by no means absent even though they are proportionately underrepresented. Minorities held over 47,000 (26 percent) of all such jobs in the New Orleans metropolitan area in 2004 (but were 37 percent of the labor force), and in die city of New Orleans (Orleans Parish) minorities held 45 percent of managerial and professional jobs (compared with their 66 percent share of the overall labor force).

In the construction trades, blacks and whites hold jobs in just about equal proportion to their numbers in the area, minorities holding 11,000 out of a total 29,000 such relatively well-paying jobs. President Bush's suspension of the Davis-Bacon Act—which requires federally financed construction projects to pay union-scale wages—for Gulf-area reconstruction hit equally hard at black and white communities of construction workers. Similarly, federal Section 8 housing programs are designed for the families of the working poor. The refusal by the Bush administration to use this program in the aftermath of Katrina has affected white as well as black working-class families.

Katrina's impact on blacks and whites in metropolitan New Orleans continued long after the storm itself passed. One year later, Orleans Parish had, suffered a 27 percent drop in employment. Over the same period, overwhelmingly white St. Bernard Parish had lost 38 percent of its jobs, Jefferson Parish 24.5 percent.<sup>6</sup>

If we look at Katrina and see and speak of black victims only we make a terrible mistake. Without neglecting or underplaying the disproportionate suffering of the African American community, it is essential—for moral as well as political reasons—to recognize the devastation that hit tens of thousands of white families, almost all in the working class, along with their African American neighbors. Neglecting white suffering only contributes to racial resentment and undermines the development of political unity that both black and white, working- and middle-class residents will need to rescue the reconstruction for the common good.

#### **4. Identifying class forces accurately is an essential starting point for more effective politics to turn back the right-wing tide that has swept across the United States with growing power for nearly forty years.**

We need to reevaluate the constituent base of progressive politics and reformulate our work with class as an important component. A *New York Times* news story evaluating the 2005 New York City mayoral race reported: "[Bloomberg's] wide support among minority voters is a sign that the strategy of the Democrat, Fernando Ferrer, to build a dependable base of black and Hispanic voters fell victim to emerging political realities: that blacks and Hispanics no longer vote reflexively as a bloc, and that a middle-class coalition can trump traditional ethnic-based appeals."<sup>7</sup>

Class differences now divide ethnic and racial populations in ever more important ways. Although blacks and Hispanics are disproportionately found more often in the working class and less often in the middle and capitalist classes, compared with their shares of the labor force (and in lower-paying jobs in all classes compared with whites), there are nevertheless millions of black and Hispanic professionals, managers, and small business owners, and growing numbers in the corporate elite as well. Each class is divided by race and ethnicity; each race and ethnic group is divided by class.

Recombining forces within this mosaic of class and race in a progressive coalition requires a direct appeal to class interests and identity while continuing to address the problems of racism and sexism that remain important sources of suffering across class lines. Only a class-based politics that is attuned to issues of race and gender can produce the social force necessary to turn back and limit the corporate power that has gotten so destructively out of control in recent decades.

The closest recent experience in this direction was Jesse Jackson's presidential races in 1984 and 1988, in which he got significant numbers of white male working-class votes by tirelessly championing working people's aspirations, unions, strikes, and other worker campaigns while never neglecting the continuing significance of race and gender.

Asserting the interests of working people can be the basis of political alliances that benefit large sections of the middle class as well. As noted above, over the past thirty years, as working-class lives have become more difficult, millions of professionals, lower-level supervisors, and small business owners—those in the middle class whose lives are most closely linked to working people—have also suffered setbacks. At the same time, those in the middle class most closely associated with serving the corporate elite have done very well. Class-based politics can link working- and middle-class people in their common interest to limit the power of the corporate elite. A politics for the vast majority of Americans is hard to dismiss as "special interest business as usual."

Class should play an important part in the evaluation of Supreme Court and other federal court nominees, a point the corporate community already well understands. When John Roberts was nominated in July 2005, the *Wall Street Journal* reported his corporate *bona fides* as a successful and effective corporate lawyer, notably defending Toyota against a worker's compensation claim.<sup>8</sup>

The *New York Times* reported that the Bush administration had worked behind the scenes for a year preparing the religious right to accept the Roberts nomination. This was accompanied by an organized corporate lobbying effort on federal court appointments, to ensure that nominees backed by the religious right would also be sensitive to business interests. Similar reports followed the nomination of Samuel Alito, who, in one story, in the midst of many about his views on abortion, was said to have "sided with employers over employees."<sup>9</sup>

The protection of reproductive rights for women is an integral part of a progressive political agenda, but it should not be pursued without close attention to the working-class dimensions of the agenda as well. For instance, access to abortions will be much more severely restricted for working-class women than for middle- and capitalist-class women should abortion become illegal. Highlighting the anti-labor stand of anti-abortion judges and their political backers will help expose the contours of power at play in the country and broaden the coalition opposed to right-wing court nominees and committed to progressive policies for women and working people alike.

The conventional wisdom has it that most Americans identify themselves as members of the middle class so political appeals to the middle class are appropriate for building winning messages. It is true that large majorities say they are in the middle class when the choices given are "upper, middle, lower" or "rich, middle, poor." But when "working class" is given as a choice, 45 to 55 percent of Americans put themselves in the working class.<sup>10</sup>

We do not yet know just what people mean when they identify themselves as working class. We do not know who else they think is in that class with them, and who is not. Nor do we know the strength of that identity in comparison with other identities, whether racial or in terms of particular interests such as being a hunter, a volunteer firefighter, a Little League coach, or a "pink lady" hospital volunteer. But it may well be that Americans are ready to hear and identify with class talk when it illuminates the realities of their lives and points to political practice that will improve theirs and their children's lives.

Eight or ten years ago it seemed that class categories expressed in terms of power, a working class, a capitalist class, were so far out of polite conversation that they were useless for constructive political debate. But today even mainstream commentators are increasingly referring to the working class, class warfare, and in general framing their writing in class terms. The *New York Times* series on class in America, published as a book in 2005, is a prominent example.<sup>11</sup> Jeff Faux's book *The Global Class War* is another.<sup>12</sup> Serious class talk is again possible and should be pursued with rigor, subtlety, and confidence.

Back in 1981, after the first destructive round of concession bargaining in the auto industry, UAW president Douglas Fraser characterized the process as "one-sided class warfare," in which labor was unprepared. The corporate elite—with a thorough understanding of *its* class interests—has continued these attacks on labor ever since. It is past time for progressive people to call this class warfare out for what it is and create a political vision and policies squarely in the interests of working people and all whose interests are turned aside by corporate power.

### **5. Class operates on a global scale.**

The global economy is not separate from the domestic. The common view that globalization refers to what is "out there" while the domestic economy is "here"—with the "out there" threatening the "here" with job loss, cheap labor, and capital flight—fails to see how capital accumulation operates in all of its dynamics, both nationally and globally.<sup>13</sup>

The global accumulation process under the neoliberal regime of the past thirty years has generated robust capitalist classes in many developing countries (Brazil, China, and India are principal examples) and has also begun to integrate these into a coherent international capitalist class operating on a global scale.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, the global reach of the accumulation process is bringing into existence a global working class which already has implications for cross-border labor organizing and within-country responses to immigration.<sup>15</sup>

The introduction of class analysis based on power rather than income reorients our view of WTO and IMF dynamics. Rather than seeing the conflict as one between the poor Global South and the rich Global North, we can see that class divisions divide both North and South and recombine the people of each into international, as well as national, groupings. While national interests certainly continue to operate, as long as the national aspirations of the South are articulated by capitalists there, who lead the political representation of those interests, working people will be disadvantaged in both the South and the North. Broad acceptance of the idea that the South is progressive while the North is oppressive empties the global playing field of the working class in the North as a progressive force and turns a blind eye to murderous Southern elites.

Integrating domestic and international aspects of the single economic system in which we live also makes it easier to build movements among working people for just foreign policy and against the Iraq war and occupation.<sup>16</sup> A class analysis allows us to see beyond the financial costs and lost public services resulting from the enormous military budget. It helps make clear that the war and U.S. foreign policy seek to empower globally the same corporate capitalist class that challenges working people on virtually every economic and social issue at home.

### **6. Class is an idea for a movement of ideas.**

If there is any hope of a progressive revival of the Democratic Party, or the rise of a third party that seeks to represent working people, it must become a party of broad vision, not just a party of interest-based policy proposals. The same is true of social movements that hope to influence public policy and political outcomes.

Policy is essential, but it must be placed in the context of the broadest understanding of how the world works, how our life prospects are shaped, and how we create and use our great capacity for wealth and community involvement. Introducing class into the national conversation can invigorate the political process and bring new energy and understanding to a broad range of questions, including the continued importance of race and gender as points of tension and needed progress.

Class talk allows us to recall the language of economic and social justice and to revive calls for economic democracy that have been the foundation of progressive social movements for over a hundred years. The corporate agenda has stripped all reference to morality from economic affairs. For the Right, unrestricted markets are all that is relevant in economic matters. This is a core question that progressives must address directly. Class understanding will help us

to illuminate and ground the ethical dimensions of our politics and help us imagine and create organizations, coalitions, and social forces capable of turning back the destructive power of capital and replacing it with values and policies that relieve human suffering and promote the social good.

## Notes

I thank Denis DaPuzzo for research assistance.

1. See Michael Zweig. *The Working Class Majority: America's Best Kept Secret* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000) for details.
2. Joe Berry, *Reclaiming the Ivory Tower* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2005).
3. For an exchange on the statistical and conceptual treatment of Hispanic poverty, see letters by David Roediger and Michael Zweig in *Monthly Review*, December 2006. Hispanics are not a "race" in U.S. data. Most Hispanics in the United States report themselves to be "white," although many report they are "black." Racial differences are significant in Latin America as well as in the United States. See, for example, Roy Levy Williams, "Venezuela's Black Vote," *Amsterdam News*, December 20, 2006.
4. U.S. Department of Labor, "May 2004 Metropolitan Area Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates: New Orleans, LA MSA," <http://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oessrcma.htm>.
5. Louisiana Department of Labor, "Louisiana Labor Force Diversity Data: 2004," <http://www.laworks.net/>.
6. Molly Garber, Linda Unger, James White, and Linda Wohlford, "Hurricane Katrina's Effects on Industry Employment and Wages," *Monthly Labor Review* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, August 2006), 32.
7. Sam Roberts, "Mayor Crossed Ethnic Barriers for Big Victory: Democrats Now Facing New Political Reality," *New York Times*, November 10, 2005.
8. Jess Blavin and Jeanne Cummings, "Bush Taps Roberts for Supreme Court: Conservative Nominee, 50, Is Viewed as Pro-Business; Doubts from Some Democrats," *Wall Street Journal*, July 20, 2005.
9. Stephen Labaton, "Court Nominee Has Paper Trail Businesses Like," *New York Times*, November 5, 2005.
10. Poll results reported in Zweig, *Working Class Majority*, 57-59.
11. Correspondents of the *New York Times*, *Glass Matters* (New York: Times Books, 2005).
12. Jeff Faux, *The Global Class War* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2006).
13. See, for example, William K. Tabb, *The Amoral Elephant* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001) and Faux, *Global Class War*.
14. Leslie Sklair, *The Transnational Capitalist Class* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2001).
15. Katie Quan, "Global Strategies for Workers: How Class Analysis Clarifies 'Us' and 'Them' and What We Need to Do," in *What's Class Got to Do with It? American Society in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Michael Zweig (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004).
16. Michael Zweig, "Labor and the War: The Remarkable Story of USLAW," *New Labor Forum* (Fall 2005).