

School for Workers

Education for a
Democratic Workplace

International Association of Fire Fighters

What's Class Got to Do with It?

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DIVERSITY AND CLASS

There are numerous forms of “diversity;” for example, race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, able-bodiedness, politics, religion, regionality, and learning styles. Diversity isn’t about “us” and “them”. It is an awareness and respect for all of our differences, nested in a comprehension of our similarities.

EXERCISE: CLASS OF ORIGIN AND MOBILITY

Determine your class of origin, according to the posted charts.

With a partner from your class or origin, find something you have *in common* and *something different* related to class.

Class: one dimension of diversity

When combined, class, race, and gender form a large part of our identity. We are learning to talk about race and gender, but we are led to believe that we have a “classless” society.

Questions to ponder:

- **Why are we pressured to think we live in a classless society? Do we?**



In America, class refers to socio-economic status. We all know what it looks like on the margins, but, for most of us, we fit somewhere in the middle where class is more difficult to

define.




As we have seen, there are three key categories that determine class: *housing, education, & income*. Your *class of origin* refers to the class of your childhood, basically, your parents' class(es). For many of us, we do not fall clearly into any one class. Our class of origin (and our current class) may be a mixture across the key categories, which is part of the reason we have no clear definition/understanding of class. In America, we are particularly proud of the potential to “climb the ladder” of success or move “up” the social scale.

UNDERSTANDING CLASS

In addition to the three main determinants of class (income, housing, and education), a fourth indicator is wealth. There is mobility between classes – up as well as down – and most of us move in our lifetimes from one class to another. In the current recession, unfortunately, we are seeing many people lose ground, sliding from a comfortable middle class to poverty class or working poor.

Class of Origin

One way to determine how we “fit” into the American class structure is to assess our class of origin. We can then compare those indicators with our current status. Most of us who are fortunate to still be employed will probably have gained ground.

CLASS OF ORIGIN				
<p>Housing Growing up, my family</p> 	had unstable or substandard housing, or were homeless	rented our home	owned our home	owned 2 or more houses
<p>Income My parents' income came primarily from ...</p> 	public assistance	hourly wages	salary or professional fees	investment income
<p>Education My parents</p> 	had less than 12 years of school	graduated from high school	graduated from college	went to graduate or professional school

The categories in the previous table suggest four classes. Others identify six classes in American society:

- *poverty class*



- *working class*



- *lower middle class*



- *professional middle class*



- *upper middle class*



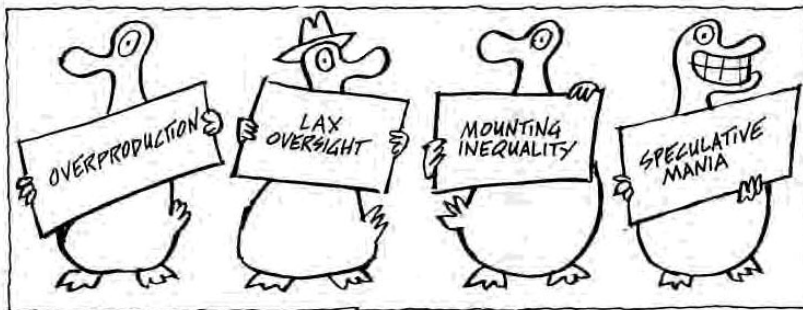
- *owning class*



Did your “class” change if you thought about yourself now, rather than in your childhood? Is this a function primarily of education? Income?

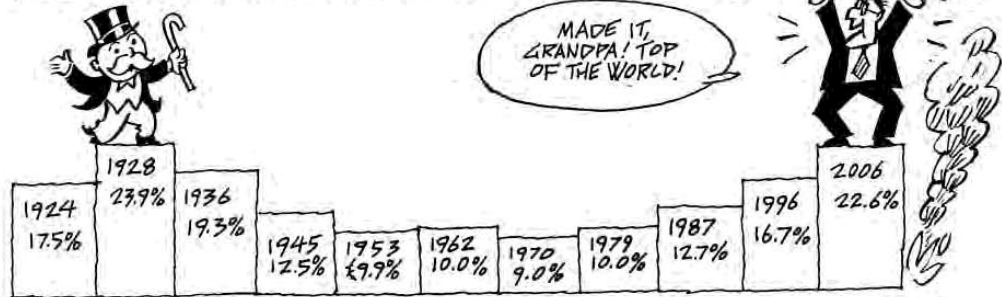
➤ **What is the connection between class and union wages?**

LESSONS FROM THE GREAT DEPRESSION

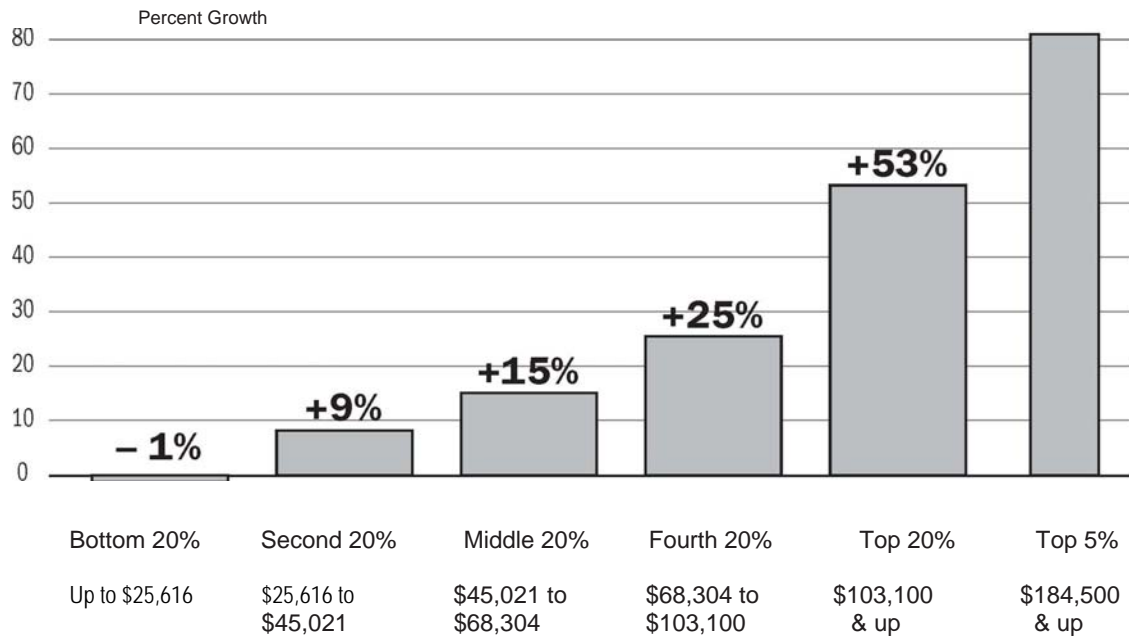


THEN AS NOW: THE GAP BETWEEN THE RICH AND THE REST WAS BEYOND BELIEF.

THIS GRAPH SHOWS THE SHARE OF INCOME, INCLUDING CAPITAL GAINS, ENJOYED BY THE TOP 1% AT VARIOUS TIMES IN THE LAST 80 YEARS.



Family Income Growth by Quintile & Top 5%: 1979 - 2005



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Historical Income Tables, Table F-1. Income ranges in 2005 dollars.

“There’s class warfare, all right, but it’s my class, the rich class, that’s making war, and we’re winning.”

Warren Buffett, Reported in *New York Times*, Nov. 26, 2006

The “isms” we have in our society cause us all sorts of problems. Often, we can examine “classism” without the extreme emotion that accompanies “racism” or “sexism”. The examples below give us an understanding of why this might be so.

Examples of classism¹:

1. NOW (the National Organization of Women) failed to join the coalition against welfare “reform” because they had already chosen their campaign of the year: a department store that charged more to hem women’s pants than men’s.
2. African-American activists may dress up (even if they are in the “poverty class”) for meetings; middle class activists may dress casually to not “show up” their working class allies.
3. In a lead abatement project in Minneapolis, the university (middle/professional class) got funding for a study for educating people about lead poisoning. The working class allies for the project wanted the lead removed from their homes.



4. The Committee for Boston Public Housing met regularly around the increase of asthma among children. Neighborhoods of color were dumping grounds for toxic waste and buildings were not being inspected for mold and dust mites. They formed a coalition with the Boston Medical Center (resources: lawyers, money), and the Boston Public Health Commission (universities). Federal money became available. As the groups jockeyed for control, they learned that the grant application had already been submitted. A grant for “Healthy Homes” got changed to the professional/middle class agenda to reduce the cost of emergency room visits. The focus changed from the issue of toxic waste and childhood asthma and the pressure for action got quieted down.



5. The environmental movement, until recently, has not had allies among the working class. In 1995, an article summarized the split with the title, “Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?” People from the working class may be more practical because their needs are more immediate. The dispute among loggers and environmentalists over the spotted owl, for example, is legendary. Middle class/professionals have the luxury of being engaged in visionary environmentalism, often future-focused, because their environment is not dealing with the immediate effects of poor environmental management and their jobs are not on the line.

¹ Source: Betsy Leondar-Wright, *Class Matters: cross-class alliance building for middle-class activists* and Richard White, “Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?”

6. A planning meeting to protest cuts in bus service was held. Middle class activists advocated civil disobedience, but the Bus Riders Union, made up primarily of black activists, simply wanted a march. The Bus Riders Union pulled out of the alliance because the middle class activists did not understand that “civil disobedience” makes people of color far more vulnerable to arrest and police brutality than white people. The Bus Riders Union did not feel safe to be engaged in protests with the middle class activists.



7. Alternately, working class people may have a *larger* vision of what can be done because they haven't experienced the defeats of long-time middle class (read “union”) activists.



The key is to become sensitive to issues of class, understand how we alienate each other, and look for ways that we can forge coalitions that last and that build power.



DIVERSITY AND CHANGE

CHANGE FOR DIVERSITY: ADVANTAGES OF INCLUSIVITY²

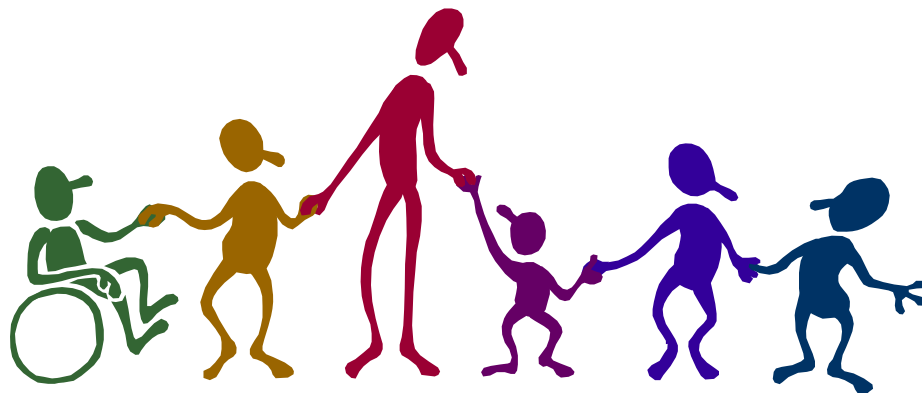
Assimilation → *Access* → *Inclusion*

Assimilation: We recognize that certain groups are under-represented in our ranks, so to be fair, we create opportunities. But in order for you to be successful, you need to adapt and be like us.

Access: We recognize that we need to reflect all citizens to be fair, just, and/or to serve our population. We want you to join us and work with “your people”.

Inclusion: We recognize that diversity is a strength and contributes to the overall effectiveness of the organization. We know that we are enriched by all of us, that we all gain by challenging our assumptions, confronting our limiting beliefs, and genuinely honoring our differences as we build our union/brotherhood.

Inclusivity acknowledges and celebrates our unique contributions, and includes our vast array of talents. Leadership for inclusivity looks for and cultivates those talents for the benefit of everyone and because it builds the union.



² Adapted from material of Kathy Germann.

BENEFITS OF AN INCLUSIVE ORGANIZATION

For leaders:

- Better decision making because people have access to more ideas and information
- Less interpersonal conflict as authoritarianism is diminished
- More pride in the organization as it functions more effectively
- Leaders can focus more on "growing" effective members and unleashing their potential
- Instances of high quality teamwork become more frequent
- Supervision is much easier when everyone on the team works together



For workers:

- Increased opportunities for learning how to work effectively with diverse types of people
- Exposure to different perspectives and worldviews
- Ability to "be one's self" and to use one's full creativity instead of using energy to assimilate to the dominant norm or to deal daily with prejudice
- Increased commitment to the organization
- Flexibility accommodates everyone's unique needs
- Individuals don't have to "know it all" because multiple perspectives/skills are present

For the organization:

- Increased productivity and increased revenues and/or ability to provide services
- Lower costs due to decreases in absenteeism and turnover
- Stronger problem-solving capacity due to multiple perspectives
- Organization is perceived as a desirable place to work, therefore it attracts the best and brightest workforce applicants
- People who use our services provide positive word-of-mouth marketing and serve as an informal recruitment network
- People who use our services provide support, i.e., political, financial, etc.

For those who use our services:

- Feeling of being welcomed, respected and "represented"
- Services and products meet diverse needs, therefore are relevant and effective

Straddlers

For those of us who changed class, or for those who do not fit neatly into a single class, there is a certain discomfort, a “not belonging”. We are actually called “straddlers”. While we may be acutely aware of not quite belonging in a particular class, we also have great potential for bridging the divides between classes.



Usually, all the dimensions of diversity are combined in our awareness. Whether we see and experience unity or division depends on our training and experience and our awareness. And how we work together *across* classes often determines the success – or, too frequently, the failure – of our union solidarity or our coalition building.

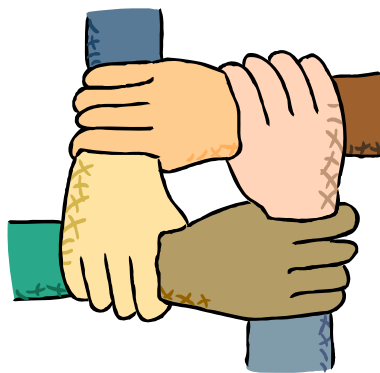
Working Assumptions and Guidelines for Alliance-Building

Since, under present world conditions, everyone either is now, or has been, or will be at some time a target of social oppression, and since everyone is now, or has been, or will be in a non-target group in relation to some other group's oppression, alliance-building is for everyone.

Everyone of us needs allies, and everyone of us can be an ally for someone else. The following guidelines are based on this premise. They should be equally applicable from the perspective of the target and the non-target group.

STRATEGIES FOR WINNING ALLIES

1. Assume that you and all members of your group deserve allies.
2. Assume that your liberation issues are justifiably of concern to all people outside your group.
3. Assume that people in other groups are your natural allies; assume that all people outside your group want to be allies for you and that it is in their interest for them to do so.
4. Assume that it is only other people's own oppression and internalized oppression that prevents them (temporarily) from being effective allies to you at all times.
5. Assume that your allies are doing the best they can at the present time, given their own oppression and internalized oppression. Assume that they can and will do better.
6. Assume that you are the expert on your own experience and that you have information which other people need to hear.
7. Speak from your own experience without comparing your oppression to theirs.
8. Assume that your experience is also an experience of victories; be sure to share these - as well as the stories of how things are hard.
9. Expect perfection from your allies; expect them to be able to deal with the "difficult issues" in your struggle. Assume that allies make mistakes; be prepared to be disappointed, and continue to expect the best from them.
10. Assume that you have a perfect right to assist your allies to become more effective for you. Assume that you can choose to do this at any time. Take full pride in your ability to do this.



STRATEGIES FOR BEING AN EFFECTIVE ALLY

1. Assume that all people in your own group including yourself want to be allies to people in other groups. Assume that you are good enough and smart enough to be an effective ally. (This does not mean that you have nothing more to learn - see # 6, below.)
2. Assume that you have a perfect right to be concerned with other people's liberation issues, and that it is in your own interest to do so and to be an ally.
3. Assume that all people in the target group want you and members of your group as allies. Assume that they recognize you as such - at least potentially.
4. Assume that any appearances to the contrary - (any apparent rejections of you as an ally) are the result of target group people's experience of oppression and internalized oppression.
5. Assume that people in the target group are already communicating to you in the best way they can at the present time. Assume that they can and will do better. Think about how to assist them in this without making your support dependent upon their "improving" in any way. (Hint: think about what has been helpful for you when you were in the target group position).
6. Assume that target group people are experts on their own experience, and that you have much to learn from them. Use your own intelligence and your own experience as a target group member to think about what the target group people might find useful.
7. Recognize that as a non-target person you are an expert on the experience of having been conditioned to take the oppressor role. This means that you know the content of the lies which target group people have internalized. Don't let timidity force you into pretended ignorance.
8. Assume that members of the target group are survivors and that they have a long history of resistance. Become an expert on this history and assist target group members to take full pride in their history.
9. Become an expert on all the issues which are of concern to people in the target group, especially the issues which are most closely tied in to their internalized oppression. Assume that making mistakes is part of the learning process of being an ever more effective ally. Be prepared for flare-ups of disappointment and criticism. Acknowledge and apologize for mistakes; learn from them, but don't retreat.



10. Recognize that people in the target group can spot "oppressor-role conditioning"; do not bother with trying to "convince" them that this conditioning did not happen to you. Don't attempt to convince target group people that you "are on their side"; just be there.
11. Do not expect "gratitude" from people in the target group; thoughtfully interrupt if it is offered to you. Remember, being an ally is a matter of your choice. It is not an obligation; it is something you get to do.
12. Be a 100% ally; no deals; no strings attached. "I'll oppose your oppression if you oppose mine." Everyone's oppression needs to be opposed unconditionally.

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"TREAT PEOPLE AS IF THEY WERE WHAT THEY OUGHT TO BE AND YOU HELP THEM BECOME WHAT THEY ARE CAPABLE OF BEING."

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

