

class and

social change!

an activist's perspective

BY



WORKING CLASS STRATEGY SUPPORT COLLECTIVE

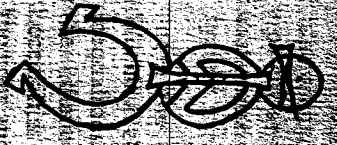
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MOVEMENT FOR A NEW SOCIETY



About the Authors...

We are two working class women who have been active in social change for over four years with Movement for a New Society (MNS).*



As founding members of the Working Class Strategy Support Collective, we have continually brought class issues to the fore in MNS. We have worked to raise consciousness, support each other in our political and personal growth, challenge classism in the movement, push activists to have a class perspective in their social change work, and build alliances among people of all class backgrounds.

This paper is a culmination of some of the thinking we have done during the past few years. We wanted to write a piece to follow up our collective's first published work on class issues: the MNS Dandelion newsletter on 'Classism.'** We thought it was important for MNS to have a clear statement on class in its literature. We hope it will stimulate discussion and action among other social change activists and groups.

We welcome feedback and responses. Please address them to the authors or to the Collective at the address below.

We'd like to thank former Collective members Mary McCaffrey and Paul Roden for their help in working on this paper and the many others who helped or gave feedback.

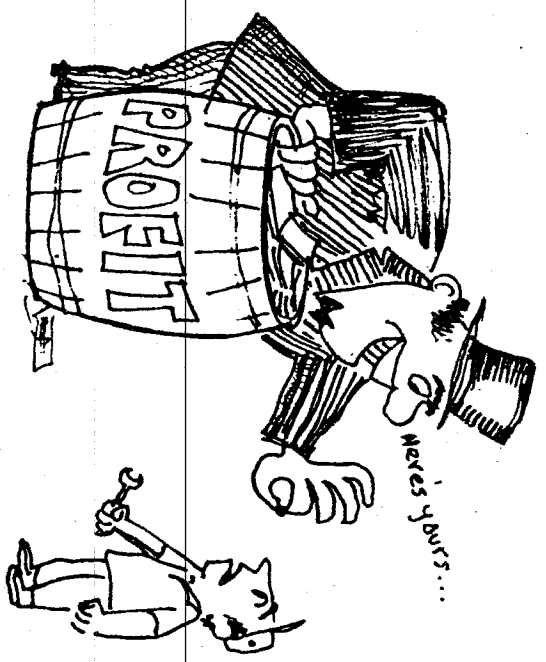
*See inside back cover for description of MNS

**Available for 75 cents from the Working Class Strategy Support Collective at 4722 Baltimore Ave., Philadelphia, PA, 19143.

The class structure in the United States is complex and less clearly defined than in many other societies. There is some mobility within and among various classes; there are also many attitudes, confusions and myths that make class oppression invisible. Especially prevalent is one that says, "If you work hard enough you can get ahead; if you are poor it's your own fault." Because of individual successes, upward and downward mobility, and the mixture of classes that occur in families, schools and communities, the class system is not always obvious.

Yet the evidence of class oppression is all around us. Working class and poor people bear the brunt of the inequalities of our economic system. They suffer most from the inflation that leads to higher prices for the basic necessities of food, clothing, shelter and medical care. It is the poor and working class people who have the least say in their job situations. It is they who are the most likely to be exposed to dangerous or unhealthy working conditions, resulting in large numbers of accidents, disabling illnesses and death. They are often financially limited to living in unsafe neighborhoods with high crime levels, and areas that are less desirable because of noise, pollution, crowdedness and even nuclear power plants. Many working class people are presently faced with additional hardships due to sudden factory closings and plant relocations to the South and abroad, a problem which is rapidly reaching crisis proportions.

The term "people who work for a living" encompasses a large segment of society, and includes people in almost all occupations: those who support themselves solely with their earnings from gainful employment. The term "working class," however, refers to people who share a particular position on the economic and social scale, and includes a broad range of blue collar and pink collar (e.g. secretaries, waitresses, etc.) workers: those who actually produce and deliver the goods and services we use. The poor are people on welfare or social security, unemployed or underemployed (people trying to feed a family on minimum wage jobs): those unable or barely able to maintain the necessities of life.



There is a significant number of people who are not able to function in society. The majority of those who are institutionalized, especially prisoners and mental patients, are poor. Deprived of basic human and civil rights, they comprise an "underclass" that is rejected, forgotten, and in many cases, despised.

In contrast, a tiny minority of people own and control most of the wealth and resources, making huge profits off these resources by using the labor of the majority. These wealthy people are isolated from and out of touch with the needs and struggles of the vast majority of people. They are largely unaware of how their decisions and actions affect the lives of so many people.

People who work for a living, therefore, have access only to the wages they receive, and not to the actual wealth of the country. Workers' salaries do not represent a fair portion of the true monetary value received by their employers for the goods and services they produce. Working people with high earnings may be able to increase their total assets and possessions over a period of years, but for the most part it is the wealthy who are able to build on their vast economic resources -- without having to engage in productive work. An integral part of our economic system is the maintenance of a pool of unemployed labor that can be put to work when the

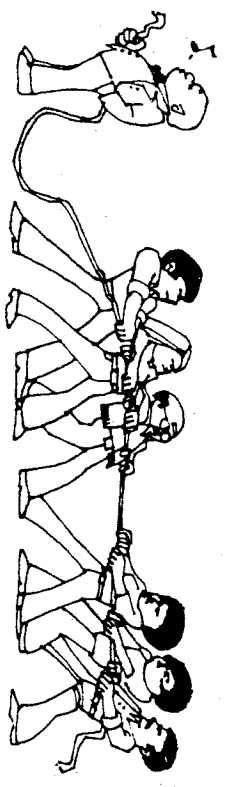
economy expands and laid off when conditions get rough. Thus, poor and working class people, and increasingly all people who work for a living, are forced to compete with each other for the limited number of jobs.

There are significant interconnections between race and class. People of color face discrimination simply because of their race; this is an oppression they are confronted with daily. In addition, racism is a major tool in the creation and maintenance of the class system. For many people of color, their class position is determined by their race. It is not accidental that so many of the poor in the world are non-white: it fits in with an intentional strategy to keep the economic system functioning in its present form.

There are, similarly, interconnections between sex and class. A woman's social position is usually tied to a man, be it her father or husband. The status of women in every social class is lower than that of men in that class. Sexism serves to hold the class structure in place. Women are seen as an auxiliary labor force -- to be hired when more workers are needed and laid off when demand decreases. They are considered a "cheap" source of labor -- women earn only 59 cents for every dollar that men earn, and this is a decrease from twenty years ago. Part of the oppression of sexism is that women's work is often unseen, uncounted or undervalued; this is certainly true in a monetary sense. Most of the work women do as mothers, nurturers and caretakers is never paid.

Class differences exist between members of any one oppressed group, whether it be women or racial minorities. The resulting inequalities divide members of the group from each other and lead to competition, inter-group conflicts, separation and superiority/inferiority dynamics. Thus, the group is hindered in building unity and struggling together to end their oppression.

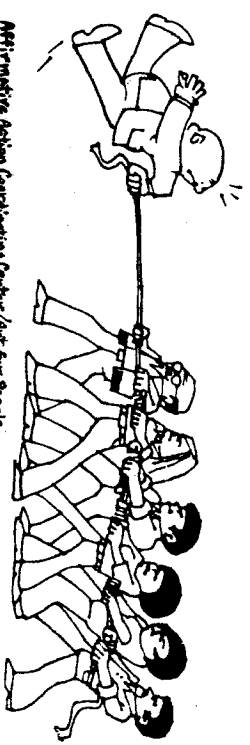
People who are in various places on the social and economic scale -- from jobless to blue collar workers to professional workers -- have significant status and income differences which separate them, but these differences often prevent them from acknowledging their commonalities as



workers and potential allies. Divisions between ethnic and racial groups, men and women, and old and young are damaging in themselves; in addition, they serve to keep workers from joining together to fight for their common interests. These divisions are perpetuated by those in power because it benefits them.

Although the common interests of all people who work for a living are much greater than their differences, the economic differences that do exist between people determine their social status and their access to jobs, education, and resources. This affects their attitudes about the world and their expectations of themselves and others. In many situations working class and poor people do not feel "intelligent" or in control or able to speak up. These feelings prevent them from acting powerfully in their lives to make changes. Their daily struggles to meet their basic needs take most of their energy. There are also the realistic fears of losing their jobs and getting physically and emotionally hurt. They have been told for so long in so many different ways that they do not deserve better that they begin to resign themselves to their situations and accept less. To other people their behavior may look passive, unintelligent or unaring; it is not true -- this is the way classism affects many working class and poor people.

Classism also hurts people who are economically privileged. They grow up with a false or confused understanding of how the economic system operates, and many learn attitudes of dominance and superiority. When economically privileged people adopt oppressor roles and behavior, their human qualities of compassion and understanding diminish; they become less sensitive and aware. Those who develop a sense of empathy and identification with



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oppressed people often have to struggle with feelings of guilt and powerlessness.

In MNS we are working toward a society in which people's basic needs are met and everyone has satisfying and safe work. We envision a society where workers decide how they will divide up the work and people take turns doing the "less desirable" but necessary maintenance work. We believe that workers and consumers should decide what goods and services are produced and how; workers should have democratic control in their workplaces. All people will work and share the wealth created by their labors, as well as the land, property and resources; it will all be used for the common good. We will no longer have rich and poor. We envision a society where each person is respected for her or his unique contributions and creativity. We expect that the push to acquire more and more material possessions to satisfy needs for achievement and sense of worth will be replaced by stronger family and community-based relationships, providing people with the emotional support and nurturance they need.

As working class MNSers, we are aware that there is a long history of struggle against class oppression in the United States and that many victories have been won. We can be proud of this past and build upon it to create our visions of the future. We can also remind ourselves that economically oppressed people here and all over the world have used the strategies and tactics of non-violent direct action in countless social struggles. Because working class and poor people have rarely had access to the technologies and instruments of violence, they have relied greatly on their numbers, solidarity, endurance, creativity and capacities for unarmed resistance in fighting oppressive conditions.

As people committed to social change, we need to continue to learn more about U.S. labor history, as well as the revolutionary struggles of working people in other countries. We need to make the connections between multinational corporations and the oppression of workers abroad and respond to the just demands of Third World poor people for a fair share of world resources. We need to find more ways of supporting U.S. workers' current efforts to improve their job conditions, including joining struggles in our own workplaces that will demonstrate to our co-workers that they have the power to make real changes.

As activists involved in MNS, we have been dealing with class issues and classism for several years, both in our personal lives and in our political work. We have become more aware of classism and how it operates in people's lives and have raised the issue in our households, our collectives and our training programs. We have formed support groups of people from similar class backgrounds so that they can talk about their shared experiences and feelings. People have challenged each other on classist behavior and how they use their class privilege. We have developed and continue to experiment with concrete ways to share resources, such as income-sharing, where people living together in a household pool their incomes like a family; cost-sharing, a process of meeting the expenses of an event or conference in which participants pay varying amounts after thinking together about each person's resources and ability to pay; and a



mutual aid fund, a fund in which money donated by people with surplus resources is granted to people who need it.

We have experienced some conflict and controversy in these experiments because of the social conditioning which leads people to be fearful and distrustful of those different from themselves. But by struggling together we've been able to move through the pain and conflict to grow and to develop new understandings. Facilitating this process is our commitment to a vision of unity and trust among people no matter what their class background.

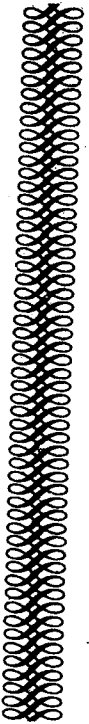
MNS people have confronted class issues in our organizations, workplaces and neighborhoods. Members of anti-nuclear power groups have insisted on the inclusion of working class issues and the participation of working class people in anti-nuke campaigns. Peace activists are putting a high priority on connecting their disarmament and anti-militarism work to class issues. MNS women have led workshops and consciousness-raising sessions on class issues in feminist organizations and conferences. MNSers have taken leadership in union organizing drives where they work or have been active in existing unions. Others have been involved in creating worker-managed enterprises and cooperatives. MNSers have been active in neighborhood safety campaigns and block groups. They have joined with black neighbors organizing around housing issues and worked with community groups to create alternative economic institutions like credit unions and coops.

We are dedicated to building a non-classist movement where people from all different backgrounds can share their skills, thinking and strengths. As activists, we need to become more aware of classism and class issues by reading, forming study groups and support groups, working in mixed class groups and, most importantly, joining or supporting the campaigns and struggles of workers fighting for economic justice. We must insist that we keep a class perspective in all our social change work, even when it doesn't directly involve working people. We also need to tackle the issue of racism, remembering that class and race oppression are often intertwined.

Here are some questions all activists can ask ourselves, our groups and organizations:

1. How can I understand my own class background better and share information and feelings with others who are similar to me?
2. What steps can I take to break down the barriers of isolation and distrust separating me from people of different class backgrounds?
3. How have I observed classism operate in my own personal life, in my political groups and in society?
4. How do the political issues I'm involved with relate to working class and poor people's struggles?
5. How can we better support the goals of working and poor people within our movement groups and in other organizations?
6. What steps can we take toward sharing economic resources and privileges in our movement communities?
7. How can we work toward building alliances among all people who work for a living, no matter what their income or status, race or sex?
8. What can we do to further the goal of developing a progressive, democratic and personally empowering labor movement?
9. What social change work will best move us toward control of the economy by the workers and consumers?

We have much to learn and much to offer. There are hard struggles ahead. We have most of the building blocks we need to construct a new society. Let's carry on the good work.



MNS is a nationwide network of activists and trainers working in small groups to bring about fundamental social change through nonviolent action. MNS people have been leaders and organizers in many areas, including the women's movement, anti-nuke and disarmament work, group process and conflict resolution, workplace organizing, gay liberation, movement building and networking, training in social change skills, community organizing, and others.



For further information on MNS, our training programs and literature, write to one of the MNS regional groups listed below:

- Northwest (AK, HI, ID, MT, OR, WA, WY) - MNS, Box 20471, Broadway Station, Seattle, WA 98102
- Southwest (AZ, CA, CO, NV, NM, UT) - MNS, c/o Metelides, P.O. Box 40183, Tucson, AZ 85717
- North Central (IA, KS, MN, MO, NE, ND, SD, WI) - North Country MNS, 2412 University Ave. SE, Minneapolis, MN 55414
- Southeast (AL, AR, FL, GA, KY, LA, MS, OK, NC, SC, TN, TX, VA, WV) - Atlanta MNS, P.O. Box 5434, Atlanta, GA 30307
- Mid-Atlantic & Midwest (DC, DE, MD, NJ, PA & IL, IN, MI, OH) - MNS, 4722 Baltimore Ave., Philadelphia, PA 19143
- Northeast (CT, ME, MA, VT, NH, NY, RI) - Northeast MNS, 21 Abbot St., Greenfield, MA 01301

This paper has been reviewed and approved by the North Country MNS Organizing Collective (NCOMNSOC) acting as representatives of the MNS Network. The opinions stated herein are those of the Working Class Strategy Support Collective and do not necessarily represent agreed-upon positions of NCOMNSOC or the MNS Network as a whole.

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