

# Change and Continuity in *The Working Class Majority*

by Michael Zweig

A dozen years ago, my book *The Working Class Majority* was published. In preparing the second edition, I am struck by two apparently contradictory realities. In one way, the world is a very different place compared with 1999, when I wrote the original book. In another way, the same forces are at work in shaping the underlying class dynamics that have given rise to the changing conditions we see. Detailing this combination of change and continuity was the basic task involved in creating the second edition. Here I will begin with a brief review of the most important changes and come later to the continuities, and implications for working people and working class studies.

## Changes

Compare 2011 with 1999. Then, the Glass-Steagall Act – passed in 1933 to prohibit commercial banks and investment banks from merging their activities, and so prohibit the sorts of financial manipulations that led to the Great Depression – had just been repealed with promises of a bright future in the midst of widespread U.S. prosperity and annual federal budget surpluses in the hundreds of billions of dollars. The Internet was relatively new, with no Google, let alone social media. The Euro hadn't yet replaced the French franc, the German mark, the Greek drachma, and other European currencies. September 11 hadn't happened, there was no war on terror, no wars in Iraq or Afghanistan, no Department of Homeland Security. China was only on the horizon as an economic challenge to the United States. There was no G20. The AFL-CIO had not yet renounced its historic anti-immigrant stance. Teamsters and Turtles met in Seattle to challenge the World Trade Organization for the first time only after the last copyedits were complete in the first edition of *The Working Class Majority*. There was no World Social Forum. No Child Left Behind was still years away. Teachers had respect and there were lots of independent bookstores. In just twelve years, how different and unforeseen are the lives we lead in all these aspects.

Changes occurred in the class composition of the labor force as well, the subject of Chapter 1 of WCM. In the first edition, I calculated the size of the working class and the middle class on the basis of occupation as a proxy for power (or not) on the job, using data from the Department of Labor for 1996. Preparing the second edition I calculated class composition from 1983 to 2010 to see if there were changes. I found changes.

In particular, using the same distribution of occupations into classes that I used for 1996, I initially found that the working class had been shrinking while the middle class had been growing. This was because some heavily working class occupations lost employment

relative to the entire labor force over the period (except for the relative growth of service jobs, dominated by low-paying working class jobs), while some predominantly middle class occupations had expanded. With no change in the class composition of the various specific occupations, it appeared that the working class had fallen from 62 percent of the labor force in 1996, as reported in the first edition, to 59 percent in 2009. And, going back to 1983, it appeared to have fallen from 66 percent in that year to the 62 percent level I originally reported for 1996.

A shrinking working class would make a striking and important finding. But during the period countervailing processes had been at play that altered the class composition of some large occupational categories. In particular, I found that K-12 teachers, nurses, and university faculty had all been subject to newly onerous working conditions that stripped many of them of the autonomy characteristic of the professional middle class. Whereas several million had been in the middle class in 1996, they are now essentially skilled workers, subject to the strict discipline and management control characteristic of other skilled workers.

In the case of K-12 teachers, for example, the imposition of No Child Left Behind policies has subjected teachers to direct school management control of their curricular content and teaching methods, especially in schools that serve working class kids. Based on the understanding, already articulated in the first edition, that the fate of any portion of the middle class is closely tied to the fate of the class it serves (those associated with the working class doing generally badly; those associated with the capitalist class doing generally well), and based upon further reading and interviews about school reform, I concluded that 60 percent of K-12 teachers are now skilled workers, no longer middle class professionals as I had counted them in 1996. In a similar process, I found that ¾ of all nurses are working class (compared with an earlier 50%), and 5% of higher education faculty (who were all middle class professionals in 1996).

Once I made these and other adjustments to the class composition of specific occupational titles, I recalculated the class composition of the labor force. For 2010, I find that the working class was 63 percent of the labor force. The middle class (still small-business owners, managers/supervisors, and professionals) was 37 percent, and the capitalist class remains about 2 percent of the total. The ruling class, those who sit on multiple boards of directors of major corporations, and the political, cultural, and media elites who serve them, can still fit into Yankee Stadium. (Since the first edition appeared a new Yankee Stadium has replaced the House the Ruth

Built in a slightly smaller size – another surface change that does not change a key underlying relationship.)

Just looking at the totals, it appears that there has been little change in the class composition of the labor force – 62 percent working class in 1996, 63 percent now. But this apparent stability contains two opposing dynamic trends, each significantly detrimental to working people. First, traditional working class jobs have been disappearing or transformed into lower paying service jobs. But the working class as a whole has remained about the same fraction of the labor force because, second, traditionally middle class professionals are now skilled workers.

My theoretical presentation of class as a question of power has not changed. But in this edition I consider more than occupation in the formulation of class. I add to this basic economic consideration a more nuanced treatment of class as a dynamic process of reproduction over time (as in E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*). I also call attention to the social networks that integrate classes into coherent social forces (as in Domhoff's *Who Rules America?*).

The revised edition updates the presentation of intersections between class and race and class and gender, showing that the working class continues to be composed disproportionately of women and people of color. The new edition distinguishes white and non-Hispanic white members of the labor force, and adds Asians to the races explicitly counted. No race or ethnic group has fewer than half its members in the working class (ranging from 53 percent of Asians to 77 percent of Hispanics).

The first edition described the intersections of race and class through numerical counts of people in the different combinations. The second edition goes beyond these arithmetic considerations to present the historic origins of race as an instrument of social control of labor, along the lines of work done by Theodore W. Allen. The discussion of working class politics in Chapter 6 takes into account the election of the first African-American president and the successive terms of three women and two African-American secretaries of state, and the work inside the labor movement undertaken by the AFL-CIO to address racial issues in its support of Barack Obama in 2008.

Another major area of change appears in Chapter 4, "Looking at the 'Underclass.'" When I first wrote it, the 1996 welfare reform was recent policy and poverty was still an issue. By now, poor people have disappeared from public discussion (but of course not from society), and the poor and people on welfare no longer play the same role as scapegoat for political demagoguery. In the place of the poor, we have immigrants.

Chapter 4 in the new edition continues the discussion of poverty, but addresses three prominent anti-immigrant claims that are central to the current use of immigrants as scapegoats. I address and refute the claim that immigrants cause crime, and that they are

a net burden on public finances. I also address the claim that immigrants take the jobs of native-born workers. Here it gets complicated. The best understanding seems to be that on balance immigrants create jobs for native-born workers. But immigrants also compete for jobs, especially with native-born workers with less than a high school education. But even in this labor pool, the evidence supports the finding that new immigrant workers mainly compete with previously-arrived immigrant workers, not with the native-born.

Chapter 9 now contains an extended discussion of the development of class war against working people since the Lewis Powell memo of 1971. Powell sent a detailed analysis to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce in which he outlined a presented a program and set of actions that the business community should undertake to counter the widespread hostility he saw to business interests that percolated through the media, political and intellectual circles, academic work, and the popular culture of the time. Forty years later, we are living with the consequences of that corporate onslaught.

I present developments since the last edition, including the 2008 economic crisis and the differential treatment of Wall Street and Main Street (as popular media representations of the class divide) and the Tea Party phenomenon. I propose that the main front in the class war following the economic crisis has become the attacks on the public sector and public sector workers and their unions. I evaluate in this context developments in Wisconsin and other states in 2011, where collective bargaining itself is under direct challenge, and warn of the threat to democracy these trends involve. It isn't at all clear if the Tea Party as such will survive for long, but the economic forces behind it will surely not fade without a major counter-offensive by working people and their allies.

Chapter 9 also reports the demise of the Labor Party, whose founding in 1996 was presented in the first edition as a new development with some promise of independent labor politics. The revised chapter notes the more recent flowering of worker centers and organizations such as Domestic Workers United, National Day Laborers Organizing Network, Taxi Workers Alliance, Restaurant Opportunities Centers, and the Excluded Workers Congress. The Chapter also addresses the experience of the Working Families Party in New York State, and the prospects for third party politics in the United States.

## Continuities

Beneath these many changes in lived experience, the class structure has not changed, nor has the significance of class dynamics in driving social outcomes. Class remains best understood in terms of power rather than income, wealth, or life style. The intersections of race, class, and gender continue as before. Privatization continues as before. The decline of unions so apparent today was already clearly in focus in the first edition. Inequalities of income and wealth and limits to economic mobility continue as before, all indicators of the continuing importance of class dynamics.

The values discussion in Chapter 5 is largely unchanged. But in response to some who asked for more concreteness, I have introduced into Chapter 6 what I call social “norms” that follow from working class values of mutual aid and mutual responsibility. These norms are bridges between abstract values and specific policy proposals.

“A society that gave priority to the values and interests of working people would assert the central importance of a job for all who want one. It would share the wealth created by labor with those who do the work, by providing its people with the resources they need for adequate food, shelter, health care, and education, either through wages paid or available social programs. It would provide dignity at work, and in retirement. It would protect the right of working people to unions and collective bargaining, and guarantee a democratic political process not dominated by the corrupting influences of corporate money. It would defend itself without dominating other countries and peoples.”

On the international front (Chapter 7), the basic point remains the same: there is no fundamental difference between the domestic and international economy, no clear dividing line between the “domestic economy here” and “globalization out there.” The revised chapter treats more fully the driving forces underlying immigration, in parallel with the new discussion of immigrants in Chapter 4, and updates some data, but otherwise remains much the same.

### Implications

Since the first edition appeared, the condition and near-term prospects of working people have deteriorated. Nothing guarantees a happy ending to this trajectory. Now as before, reversing these conditions will require the assertion of working class interests and power in every aspect of society – economy, politics, and culture.

The Powell Memo and other documents of the 1970s lay the foundation of a long-term, deliberate, strategic assault on working people for the explicit benefit of corporate interests. That agenda is still playing out. UAW president Doug Fraser resigned from a joint labor-management committee in 1978 with explicit recognition of the “one-sided class war” then already clearly underway which made “co-operation” an empty exercise. Yet the working class still has nothing of its own to match the Powell agenda – no strategic conception, no leadership engaged in developing one, no organizational vehicles committed to its formulation, elaboration, and implementation. Yet without a clear class-based strategy for the assertion of working class values, interests and power, the circumstances for working people are sure to deteriorate still further.

One part of the overall project needs to be a change in the frame for public discussion of the economic and social problems facing the U.S. today. Rather than continuing with the familiar distinctions between liberal and conservative, Republican and Democrat, red

and blue, native and immigrant, it will be important to popularize the frame of one-sided class war, following Doug Fraser’s lead from 1978. Deep political realignment, of the sort we now need to advance working class values and interests, requires new ways of understanding the issues and forces involved. We need a frame that restores working people to active instruments of social change, within a political process and economic institutions that enlarge their personal freedom and organizational capacity.

The field of working class studies has a clear and important role to play in promoting the intellectual and artistic work required to create this new frame and reverse the set of circumstances working people now face. The Working Class Studies Association is not a political party, but the people in it have an orientation that seeks to understand the world from the point of view of working people.

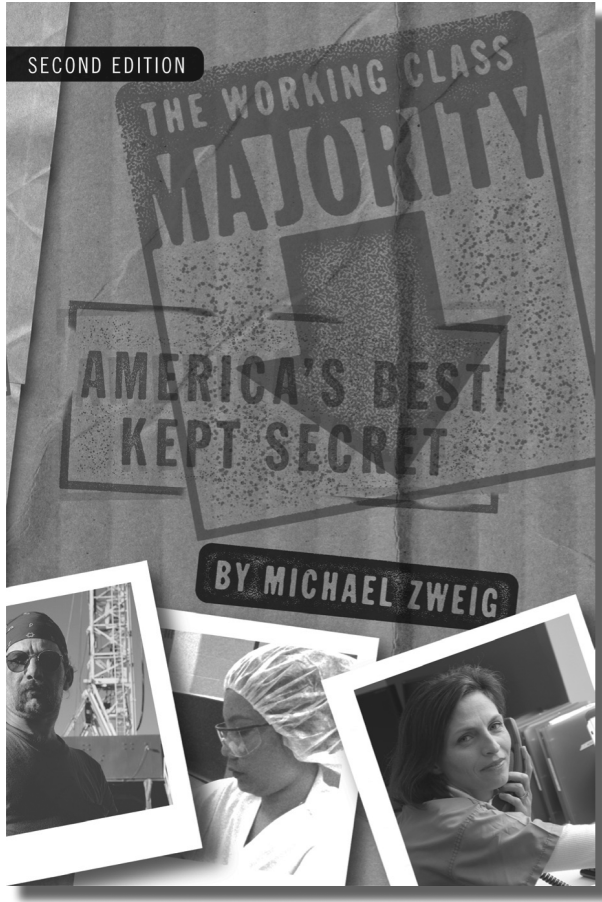
In preparing the second edition of *The Working Class Majority*, it became clear to me that its contents are subject to continual revision, as the world around us constantly changes, and as our understanding of the many complex aspects of class develops. As we describe and explore these continuous changes, we can also deepen our understanding of the underlying, largely unchanging, class structures that drive so much of our lived experience. I hope that discussions and debates about the many issues involved will help generate a rich, grounded and rigorous literature. I hope that faculty using the book in classes will ask their students to update one or another aspect of it as part of their course work. We should encourage a learning process that engages our students with primary sources and expands the numbers of people who are actively engaged with the material, updating and revising the text as it will appear in frozen form as a book.

I hope that the Website for the book on the site of Center for Study of Working Class Life will become a place where revisions and updates can find an outlet. And, more broadly, I hope that the Working Class Studies Association can develop publications that contain and stimulate the serious intellectual and artistic work still needed to carry us into a better future.

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