What the “Working Class” Is, and How It’s Politicized

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Despite her new title, U.S. Representative-elect Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) is a pretty typical working-class New Yorker. She was born to Puerto Rican parents in the Bronx, has a few grand tucked away in her savings account, cares deeply about her local community, and up until very recently, made rent by waiting tables and bartending. But with her election to Congress on November 6, one of those things changed in a big way: her income. Now, she'll be making $174,000 per year.

Pew defines the middle class as those whose annual household income is two-thirds to double the national median, which was $57,617 as of 2016; Ocasio-Cortez's new salary is far from that (and is a lot more than most people in her prior industry take home). Despite the pay bump, the 29-year-old politician has given strong signals that she'll continue to identify with and uphold her working-class values — something that sets Ocasio-Cortez apart from the vast majority of her new coworkers on the Hill.

The Republican Party and conservative media have tried to shame Ocasio-Cortez for her pre-election financial status, also implying that her class identity is a sham because she wears nice (rented) clothes to work. Behavior like this is not surprising coming from those who support a Republican Party that's currently pushing policies that actively harm poor and working-class people, especially those who are women of color — even though many pander to the working class during election campaigns. Ocasio-Cortez's honesty about her financial situation and refusal to be cowed by right-wing attacks has given working-class Americans some hope that a new class of representatives might be a bit more like them, and actually start looking out for their interests.

But what values are we talking about here? Even though we hear so much about the "working class" in the United States, many still don't understand who is being discussed and what the term means. We're here to explain.

What is class?

Class is a way of describing the economic, political, and cultural divisions in our societal hierarchy. Your social class depends on the work you do, the money you earn, and how much control you ultimately have over your own — and other people's — labor. Class distinctions aren't limited to the United States; societies around the world impose these social hierarchies and have for thousands of years (the English word "class" comes from the Latin *classis*, which was a word used by Roman census takers to classify citizens based on wealth). Those at the top who control the means of production and the resulting capital they generate are considered upper class, while the workers whose labor actually produces goods and services are generally considered middle or working class.

Class also breaks down into further designations like the upper middle class, the lower middle class, the working poor. At the top of the top is the capitalist class — that eye-poppingly rich 1% of the population who controls over 38% of the country's wealth, and seem intent on keeping it all to themselves.

So who is considered to be a member of the working class, and what makes it different from middle class?

The definition of working class is fairly straightforward, but the actual application of the term gets dicey, fast.

The terms "middle class" and "working class" are often used interchangeably, but the latter has increasingly become understood as a political identity. The concrete difference between the two often comes down to education. Working class individuals are generally non-college educated, while those in the middle class are more likely to be college graduates. Members of the working class also typically work for an hourly wage instead of a salary and have less overall job security than middle- or upper-class folk. In the U.S., they're concentrated heavily in the Midwest, more than half of them live in rural areas, and a significant percentage of them identify as Republicans (though the working class also has a strong radical and leftist tradition).

Auto mechanics, firefighters, retail workers, home care aides, landscapers, and food service workers are examples of working-class — or "blue-collar" — jobs. Middle-class (sometimes called professional-class or "white-collar") jobs can include bank tellers, teachers, managers, legal assistants, and office workers. Oftentimes the only common ground between middle- and working-class people is that they both labor at the behest of their bosses and others further up the class hierarchy.

These class differences can be cultural, too. In the U.S. race, social class, and gender all overlap, particularly when it comes to educational access and overall income.

A unionized construction worker — like my dad, for example — and a middle manager at a corporate office may bring home a similar paycheck, but they probably view the world and their place within it quite differently. That fact became a central focus of the many media reports post-2016 election that harped on the "white working class" and its role in President Donald Trump's ascent, usually without taking the realities of the broader working class into account. Pundits blamed white working-class voters and their alleged "economic anxiety" for Trump's win, seemingly because it was more enticing to focus on poor folks and raucous rally attendees than engage with the prevalence of racism, sexism, and xenophobia in America. In actuality, a significant amount of Trump voters were affluent — and the vast majority of Trump voters were not working class at all.

Is this group changing?

The most common stereotype attached to the term is of a white guy in a hard hat — someone who looks like my dad or my factory-worker grandpa, the blue-collar bruisers who engage in manual or industrial labor and take pride in what they build with their hands. Those demographics have been changing for a long time, and as a recent study by the Center for American Progress found, 76% of the U.S. working class holds service jobs in industries like retail and health care.

White workers' overall representation in the working class is shrinking — so much as down to 59% as of 2015 according to one estimate, and set to become majority-minority as of 2032. At least 46% of the U.S. working class is made up of women. Far from that outdated stereotype, a black nursing aide or Latinx cashier is now as accurate an example of a working-class individual as a white truck driver. The recent case of the striking Marriott hotel workers — a diverse group

of workers who were predominantly women and people of color — was a perfect microcosm of the U.S. working class in 2018.

Ocasio-Cortez's class-focused message comes after a 2016 presidential election that saw media pundits and politicians bring the idea of the "white working class" and its perceived allegiance to Trump to the fore, and Democratic primary candidate Bernie Sanders make working-class concerns a central focus of his primary campaign (which some argue left him two steps behind on racial-justice issues, despite the fact that social class and race are closely intertwined). On top of that, millennials are now more critical of capitalism than ever, and the end result of these shifts is that the U.S. is becoming increasingly class conscious. In a country as riven with economic inequality as this one, that can only be a good thing.

Simply put: Class matters. As it evolves to reflect the realities of who really makes this country run, the working class, in particular, will continue to play an increasingly pivotal role in our society, and its members deserve support and respect, just like any other class of workers.

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