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Class Content/Class Stand

There is often an unfortunate confusion around the concept and term "class" particularly among some of those who are supposedly trying to work for the interests of the people. Sometimes "class" is even used to discredit working class movements.

One form it can take is to tell an organizer "You are not really working class - what do you think you are doing claiming you are working for the interests of the working class? You're not working class yourself!" Such a critic may even go so far as to say, "You're just as middle class as I am!"

Sometimes there is simply confusion about what "working class" means, particularly in a country where we are told we live in a classless society. But even if we can get some clarity on what is working class, there is another confusion we need to avoid: the confusion between our **class origin** and our **class stand**.

Those of us who have worked together for many years had to work to understand the difference. Take the example of Cynthia whose father was raised on a poor family farm but then by working his way for many years graduated from a major university and became first a school teacher and then a social worker. Her mother, from a small Midwestern town where her banker father lost virtually everything in the depression, also became a teacher, spending most of her job years as a substitute teacher so she could manage better her time to raise her two children.

Consider Cynthia's consternation at learning from a critic of the work for the people she was engaged in that somehow she was not worthy to take a stand on behalf of the working class since she was no less "middle class" than her critic.

Perhaps Cynthia had a so-called middle class background since her parents had managed to become a teachers and a social worker. But even that assessment is a stretch especially once you look more closely at her actual conditions and those of her parents, economically and socially.

But beyond that, and much more importantly, Cynthia came to see both through her study and through her practice in people's movements that she had taken a big step in her life by aligning herself with the working class by working for their interests. She had taken a **class stand** when the **class content** of her work for the people was for the interests of the working class.

Caroline is another case, learning through practice what a class stand means.

She worked as a volunteer in a community food store and was learning the difference between running a business for one's own interest and running a store for working people. The store was supposed to be a coop, serving the interests of the people in the neighborhood who needed healthy but affordable food. John, a community organizer, had joined the coop and was trying to get the coop members to stock the food the people in that neighborhood needed. This angered the group that seemed to consider the door their personal property even though it was set up as a coop. They wanted to stock only their choice of foods as though they were running a private gourmet store, not a coop.

Carolyn attended the meeting where matters were coming to a head to the point where the gang that wanted a store to fit their desires, not the needs of the working people of the neighborhood, were on the verge of kicking John the organizer out of the coop.

Carolyn didn't have much of a political history at this time but by working as a volunteer at the store and following the struggle within the coop about whom the store was to serve, she came to understand the issue: the coop store had a class content, serving the working class of the neighborhood, while the pseudo "owners" wanted to hold on to it for themselves.

Some might have called Carolyn middle class and call into question her right to support the aims of the organizer. But even as the daughter of college professors living in a rich suburb, she had come to understand in her own life what it means to be at the bottom of where you are.

Somewhat to her surprise she spoke up at the meeting on the side of the issues raised by John the organizer. "Yes, the coop is meant to serve the interest of the working people in the neighbor. I support and think you should support the plans to provide the food that the people need and can afford."

Over time she came to see that she had in fact taken a **class stand** based on the **class content** of what the store was intended to be and what the organizer was working to achieve. Even at the time the pseudo "owners" seemed to be taken back by her simple and unexpected action, of speaking up for the working people in the neighborhood. They dropped their attempt to kick the organizer out of the coop.

To focus on class origin is to lose sight of the need to take a principled stand in support of the working class, that is, to take a class stand based on the class content of the issue.