

# Six Points on Class

---

MR [monthlyreview.org/2006/07/01/six-points-on-class/](http://monthlyreview.org/2006/07/01/six-points-on-class/)

By Michael Zweig

July 1, 2006

Michael Zweig ([michael.zweig \[at\] stonybrook.edu](mailto:michael.zweig@stonybrook.edu)) teaches economics and is director of the Center for Study of Working Class Life at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. He is the author of *The Working Class Majority: America's Best Kept Secret* (Cornell University Press, 2000) and editor of *What's Class Got to Do with It? American Society in the Twenty-first Century* (Cornell University Press, 2004). Thanks to Denis Da Puzzo for research assistance.

---

## 1. We need to change the understanding of class in the United States, going from the division of “rich and poor” to the division of “worker and capitalist.”

---

When we popularize this more accurate and useful terminology, we will convey a better grasp of class dynamics and make it easier to address the continuing operation of racism and sexism in American society. We will also contribute to the construction of political movements capable of reversing the decades-old trend towards ever-more-consolidated corporate power at the expense of working people, regardless of race and gender.

We should identify the class divisions as between the *working class*, 62 percent of the U.S. labor force—a substantial majority of the American people—and the *corporate elite (or capitalist class)*, who make up only 2 percent. In between these classes is the *middle class* (36 percent of the U.S. labor force).<sup>1</sup>

The “Two Americas” John Edwards identified in 2004 and the “Two New Yorks” Fernando Ferrer identified in his 2005 mayoral bid refer to crucial realities that should be front and center in our political conversations and social policy. But these divisions are not best understood as simply the difference between “rich and poor.”

“Class” must be understood in terms of power rather than income, wealth, or life style, although these do vary by class. Using power as the starting point allows us to see class as a dynamic relationship rather than as a static set of characteristics. Investigating class as a question of power also makes it possible to find the organic links among class, race, and gender. Looking at class in terms of income, wealth, life style, or education separates it from race and gender, which are best understood as power relationships rather than inherent characteristics individuals possess.

The working class are those people with relatively little power at work—white-collar bank tellers, call-center workers, and cashiers; blue-collar machinists, construction workers, and assembly-line workers; pink-collar secretaries, nurses, and home-health-care workers—skilled and unskilled, men and women of all races, nationalities, and sexual preferences. The working

class are those with little personal control over the pace or content of their work and without supervisory control over the work lives of others. There are nearly 90 million working-class people in the U.S. labor force today. The United States has a substantial working-class majority.

The capitalist class are the corporate elite, senior executives, and directors of large corporations, whose job it is to give strategic direction to the company, who interact with government agencies and other corporate executives while leaving the day-to-day operation of their company to intermediate levels of management and the workforce. In this they are different from small business owners, who tend to work beside their relatively few employees and manage them directly. These small business owners, while literally capitalists in that they employ wage labor, are better understood to be in the middle class, as will be discussed below.

The ruling class is considerably smaller than the full capitalist class and includes non-capitalists as well. If we think of the ruling class as those who give strategic direction to the country as a whole, extending beyond their own business or institution, we can identify those corporate directors who sit on multiple boards, thus having an opportunity to coordinate capitalist activity across enterprises, and add to them the political elites of the three branches of national government and cultural and educational leaders who contribute to the furtherance of corporate interests. The entire U.S. ruling class could fit into the seats at Yankee Stadium (capacity: 54,000).

The middle class are professionals, small-business owners, and managerial and supervisory employees. They are best understood not as the middle of an income distribution but as living in the middle of the two polar classes in capitalist society. Their experiences have some aspects shared with the working class and some associated with the corporate elite.

Small business owners, for example, share with capitalists an interest in private property in business assets, defeated unions, and weak labor regulations. But they share with workers the work itself, great vulnerability to the capitalist market and government power, and difficulty securing adequate health insurance and retirement security.

Professionals are also caught in the middle of the cross fire in the principal class conflict between labor and capital. If we look at the experience over the last thirty years of professionals whose lives are closely intertwined with the working class—community college teachers, lawyers in public defender offices or with small general practices, doctors practicing in working-class neighborhoods, and public school teachers—their economic and social standing have deteriorated, along with the class they serve. But if we look at those whose lives are more fully involved in serving the capitalist class—corporate lawyers, financial service professionals, Big-Four CPAs, and doctors who practice beyond the reach of HMOs and insurance company oversight—these professionals have risen in fortune with the class they serve, albeit to a lesser extent, absolutely and proportionately.