

Class and Social Change: Becoming Aware & Strengthening Our Organizations

by Felice Yeskel

A movement strong enough to bring about a more just and sustainable world must inevitably be a cross-class movement—not just a multiracial movement and not just a movement led by women as well as men. But social change organizations are filled with folks who have grown up absorbing the lessons of a racist, sexist, heterosexist, and classist society. While social change organizations may have done some work on racism, sexism, or heterosexism, it is rare to find any that have done much work on classism.

Many of us grow up in complete class segregation, without being aware of it. We absorbed the cultural attributes of our class of origin—the language, the worldview, the expectations, the communication norms, and the work styles—and now we make assumptions or judgments about other people that reflect our class perspective. So many things that we believe are “the way things are done” are really just the way our class does things.

When we become activists, we bring our class cultures and conditioning into our organizations. The way our class has affected us is often invisible to us, but may be quite obvious to others from different class backgrounds.

Unlike coming to understand our gender socialization or becoming aware of the ways we’ve internalized racial superiority/dominance (if we’re white) or racial subordination (if we’re people of color), many of us have not had the opportunity to become self-aware about class. We do not recognize the internalized class privileges or internalized class oppression that we inadvertently carry. Like every other form of oppression, classism is not only present in the world at large, but is also alive and well within our organizations.

When I lead workshops, I usually ask people to raise their hands if they’ve graduated from a four-year college. I am no longer surprised when, in one group, the vast majority raises their hands, while in another group hardly anyone raises their hands. In 2005, only 28% of folks over the age of 25 graduated from a four-year college. I am rarely in groups with the same mix of graduates and non-graduates as the population at large, however. If we use “college-educated” as a marker of class, this means that most groups do not have much class diversity. Instead, there are predominantly middle-class (and above) groups and predominantly working-class groups.

I find that most progressive organizations are led by people who were raised in professional middle-class (PMC) families. (See page 6.) Even unions with working-class members and community groups in low-income neighborhoods often have staffs or boards that are mostly or entirely PMC. Chronically poor people are especially absent from leadership positions, but often so are working-class people. Owing-class people are under-represented on non-profit staffs as well (since they often hire middle-class professionals to manage organizations for them.)

There are some obvious reasons for this imbalance in the leadership of progressive non-profits. Working in these organizations can be very meaningful and satisfying, but their positions are not very well paid. Generally professional middle-class folks, who have reliable financial backup, are able and willing to make these financial sacrifices. For young people who have huge school loans, single moms/dads, or those who are helping younger siblings or caring for parents, meaningful work might have to take a back seat to cash.

The narrowing of the path to a progressive non-profit career starts early, even among those who’ve graduated from college. The candidates who are most attractive to a hiring committee are likely to be those who have gained relevant experience through internships and volunteer activities, both on campus and off. But only some students are able to take these unpaid internships.

PMC members of social change movements may be confused about their class status, because they

are earning below their potential. These may be folks from middle-class families who have relatively low incomes because they chose to work part-time and volunteer lots of time on social change efforts, or folks who have trouble making ends meet because of the low pay in movement organizations.

They may think that they are in the same boat as poor or working class people because they also shop at the Salvation Army or eat rice and beans every night. They may fail to recognize the various class privileges they still have, the extent to which their situations are the result of their choices, or the back-up they have from family or other social connections.

If we have a hard time even correctly identifying our class position, how do we negotiate the often-complex class dynamics that play out in our organizations? Even when our mission statements include working to eliminate inequality in the form of racism, sexism, and heterosexism, we may be replicating classism in our organizations and in our relationship with the communities that we work with or organize.

Working for social change in the world demands that we address classism in our organizations. We can start by assessing our organizations' class cultures. Formal workshops and trainings dealing with classism are helpful, as are regularly scheduled staff meetings where people talk honestly about their class backgrounds, the way class impacts their lives currently, and the complications of classism in social justice work. Initiating dialogue is an important first step in addressing class issues.

We can also identify and revise institutional policies and practices that may reinforce class inequality. While cognizant that we are operating in a larger economic context, we can begin to question certain assumptions and ways of doing business. We offer the questions on page 5 as a tool to get started.

Gaining greater awareness about how class affects what we do and how we do it is an ongoing process. The more contact we have with folks from across the class spectrum, the greater the opportunities for gaining awareness. As with every other form of oppression, those of us who are poor or working class have greater access to the "outsider" perspective, and a greater chance to see and understand classism.