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Class Dismissed

Defining Equity in our Workforce Field

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Driving the dirt roads of rural Virginia in 1973, from one African-American family's home to the next, was an education for this white boy from New Hampshire. There on the wall of every living room hung three pictures: Martin Luther King, John F. Kennedy, and Jesus Christ. That did not surprise me.

What did surprise me was the strict class hierarchy I witnessed within the black communities that I was so presumptuously "organizing." The preacher was the pinnacle, followed by a few business men and women (the obligatory funeral home director, barber and hairdresser), followed by teachers and a few craftsmen, followed by everyone else.

The same class hierarchy proved true in the South Bronx and inner-city Philadelphia, where I spent decades working with Latina and African-American women to improve frontline healthcare jobs. Class distinctions—reinforced by healthcare's rigid clinical hierarchy—were deeply embedded throughout those urban communities of color.

And of course, as I organized worker buy-outs in aging mill towns across de-industrialized New England, I found the same class hierarchy within white, working-class communities. Class cuts across, and within, all our communities—black, brown and white.

TODAY, OUR WORKFORCE is engaged in a renewed examination of equity within our field. Philanthropy is hosting "equity in workforce" webinars, workforce organizations are arranging equity trainings for their staffs, and workforce conferences are mounting panels to reassess our field through an equity lens. Nearly without exception, this examination of equity is defined primarily in racial, and sometimes gender, terms.

Which is, without argument, essential. But what is missing? The very core of workforce development is economic disparity, yet the essence of economic division—class—is rarely acknowledged within this re-examination. Worse yet, there is no discussion of how our own professional middle-class biases—as funders, practitioners and policymakers—implicitly shape our strategies for the workforce field.

Picture a workforce development conference, hosted in some very nice hotel, where a few hundred workforce

professionals are discussing equity bias within their field. The *only* working-class people in that room are the waitstaff who, as Bob Dylan once wrote,

*...carried the dishes and took out the garbage
And didn't even talk to the people at the table
Who just cleaned up all the food from the table
And emptied the ashtrays ...on a whole other level.*¹

On a whole other level. It is no coincidence that the majority of those waitstaff are typically women of color, which is why it is essential that we examine the workforce field explicitly through the lens of institutionalized and structural racial and gender discrimination. While class cuts across and within all our communities, it does so differently for different races and genders.

Still, we must not forget that all the rest of us in that room are professionals, living professional, middle-class lives. Just as it is essential to examine systemic racial and gender oppression, it is equally important to examine our own class presumptions. If we fail to acknowledge that we are all professionals in that room whatever our race or gender; that our constituents are nowhere to be seen in that room; that our constituents have no direct voice in that room; then we will remain blind to how our own class perceptions distort our strategic perspective.

It is the prejudice of class, not race or gender, that has shaped several strategic choices in our field:

- ▶ **Elevating mobility over stability.** We are constantly seduced by the narrative arc of the single mom on welfare earning a college degree, landing a professional job as a bookkeeper or nurse, and moving out of the projects. Yet that mobility story is exceptional—literally exceptional, since it is accessible to only a small fraction of low-income people. As the *U.S. Financial Diaries* has documented, the vast majority of low-income families are struggling to gain not career mobility, but simply a modicum of economic stability.ⁱⁱ

Contrary to the political mythologies our progressive politicians constantly sell us, a middle-class life will *always* be beyond the reach of the majority of today's low-income families. That is hard truth. Yet those families can still live lives of dignity and self-worth—if afforded a degree of economic stability by improving the quality of their frontline jobs. In addition to helping a relative few achieve *our* long-term definition of middle-class success, we should also help a far larger number of low-income families achieve *their* immediate definition of success—moving from instability to financial stability. Political mythology should not dictate practical strategy.

- ▶ **Emphasizing doing good over righting wrongs.** Our workforce field focuses primarily on strategies that are positive and “clean”: college access; enterprise development; training and job coaching. We are loath to engage in strategies that confront bad actors.

Just one example: \$15 billion are lost annually across the U.S. due to the underpayment of minimum wage to low-wage workers.ⁱⁱⁱ Yet were our field to address head-on this dark underbelly of wage-theft, we would directly confront employers—whom we are constantly exhorted to “engage.” As Anand Giridharadas has lamented, “The winners of our age must be challenged to do more good—but never, ever tell them to do less harm.”^{iv}

- ▶ **Focusing on tomorrow's challenges instead of today's crises.** Nearly every workforce policy organization, philanthropy and university has launched a “Future of Work” task force—competing to determine just how many jobs will one day be eliminated by technology, and attempting to predict just how the occupations that remain might be re-structured.

In contrast, there are very few, if any, “Current Labor Shortage” task forces that focus on the more immediate challenge: How our field can take full advantage of today's historically tight labor market on behalf of low-income jobseekers. The absence of that debate reveals a troubling lack of urgency—one that occurs when a chasm exists between the class of people who are in distress, and the class of people dedicated to assist them.

There is no hard either/or here. Career-ladder mobility initiatives, training/education, and divining the future of work are all important, necessary endeavors. The problem is what's missing: Low-income and working-class people—our constituents—are experiencing immediate, destabilizing challenges that our own professional, middle-class perspectives find convenient to ignore. Those challenges cut across race and gender, and across all low-income communities within our workforce field.

My argument is “Yes, and...” Yes, we must re-examine equity in our workforce field through the lenses of race and gender—separately and explicitly—for racism and misogyny are institutionally embedded throughout our society, our field, and ourselves. And at the same time, we as workforce policymakers, funders and practitioners must also examine the biases to which we ourselves are blind: our own professional, middle-class presumptions.

We cannot have a full and honest conversation about equity without confronting the *intersection* of race, gender and class. Our field serves all low-income communities, and we must never forget that within each of those communities, workforce development is fundamentally an issue of economic disparity. Class simply cannot be dismissed.



About the author:

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This editorial serves as an epilogue to a series on frontline job-quality issues for *The Pinkerton Papers*. For reactions, disagreements, questions and competing strategies, go to http://www.thepinkertonfoundation.org/paper_type/job-quality-series or directly to the author at: StevenLDawson@outlook.com.

- i Dylan, Bob, *The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll*, The Times They Are a-Changin', Columbia Records, New York, New York, 1964.
- ii See: <http://www.usfinancialdiaries.org/issue>. Accessed 10 November 2018.
- iii Cooper, David and Kroeger, Teresa, *Employers Steal Billions from Workers' Paychecks Each Year*, Economic Policy Institute, Washington, D.C, 10 May 2017.
- iv Giridharadas, Anand, speech at the Aspen Institute's Action Forum, Aspen, Colorado, 29 July 2015.