

# Understanding Cultural Differences of Working Class and Professional Americans

By Kate Swarengen

In the wake of the 2016 Presidential election, the role of social class in American political life can no longer be ignored. While much of the media coverage of the topic has left something to be desired—think reporters descending on diners in Middle America and cornering white men in baseball caps—it cannot be denied that Americans are now learning to openly discuss the issue of class in the same way they have learned to openly discuss the issues of race and sex.

Professor Joan C. Williams, the Director of the Center for WorkLife Law at UC-Hastings College of Law and the author of *White Working Class: Overcoming Class Cluelessness in America*, spoke at the 12th Annual Labor and Employment Law Conference about social class and the need for greater understanding of the cultural divide between urban professionals and non-urban working people. The topic is of special importance to labor and employment lawyers, whose professions bring them into daily contact with workers from all class backgrounds.

Williams' premise is as follows: the relevant conflict in American political life is the clash between the working class (the middle 53% of the population often called "middle class," whose median income falls around \$75,000) and the predominantly urban, predominantly coastal professional-managerial elite (the 17% of the population with a median income of around \$173,000 and whose households include at least one college graduate). The conflict between the working class and the PME has driven American politics since 1970, when the longstanding connection between greater productivity and rising wages began to erode and the middle class' share of the national income began to

fall in tandem with the decline in union density. At the same time, "social honor for working class men plummeted."

The decline can be seen by contrasting the portrayal of working class men in the San Francisco Art Institute's Diego Rivera Mural, *The Making of a Fresco Showing the Building of a City*, which celebrates blue collar workers, with less flattering representations in the characters of Archie Bunker, Homer Simpson (stupid, fat) and Pennsatucky (bad teeth) from the series *Orange Is the New Black*. In other words, the working class has gotten poorer and the PME, rather than doing something to fix it or sympathizing with them, sees them as objects of ridicule. Or, as Williams put it, PMEs act on "liberal feeling rules that mandate intense empathy to immigrants and intense condescension to middle class whites."

Ultimately, the working class feels condescended to by teachers, doctors and lawyers. Accordingly, they "resent professionals, yet admire the rich." Williams attributed this to a case of "order-takers dreaming of being order-givers"—as she put it, to "be exactly as they are, just with Donald Trump's money." But because the working class tends to have little contact with the truly wealthy, PMEs end up "catching their class anger."

The class conflict is exacerbated by opposing value systems, which produce what Williams described as a "class culture gap." Williams theorized that the working class prizes self-discipline and hard work—"the kind that gets you up early in the morning to work at an unfulfilling job." Accordingly, they value institutions that aid self-discipline, such as church and the military. They place a higher value on community and family (from which they derive



respect and a sense of identity they might not find at work) than on individual achievements. PMEs, on the other hand, place lower value on community and a higher value on self-development. They cultivate a taste for "artisanal coffee, spiritualities and sexualities," which they display as evidence of their sophistication. They root their identity in their work and subscribe to an ethic of work devotion whose unhappy result is that their idea of small talk at a party is bragging about how important their jobs are.

PMEs may ask of the working class, "Why don't they go to college? Why don't they push their kids harder to succeed? Why don't they just move?" But, as Williams explained, "Many of our 'truths' just don't make sense in the context of their lives." College is financially risky, and universities transmit class structure—fewer than 3% of the middle three quintiles of income go to elite universities, and Harvard has as many students from the top 1% as the bottom 60%. With respect to PMEs' view that their job as parents is "to

discover their children's micro-talents and develop them—yesterday," the working class "thinks we're kind of nuts in the same way that Europeans and South Americans do." To fault the working class for not moving to an urban area where there are better jobs ignores the reality of housing prices and that for the working class, whose social standing and access to scarce jobs is dependent on clique networks composed of family and neighbors, "social honor is not portable."

According to Williams, part of social honor for the working class is being part of a "high status" group—hence their pride in identifying as American and opposition to immigration policies they fear will degrade that status. ■

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