

Introduction to “The Theory of a Working Class: A Re-appreciation of Ralf Dahrendorf”

Victor G. Devinatz¹

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Competing definitions of the “working class” still animate debate as we head into the twenty-first century’s third decade. Well into the latter part of the twentieth century, the working class was often considered to be those employees who labored at skilled and unskilled manual and industrial jobs. However, with technological changes and the transformation of the economy from predominantly manufacturing jobs to service jobs, the working class is no longer considered to be composed solely of industrial workers. With the numerical growth of precarious workers (the precariat) in the twenty-first century, discussion has arisen whether this group of workers is a new class in and of itself or part of the working class as a whole.

In this well-written and stimulating “Perspectives” Section article, Jonathan Lepie compares various social theories which attempt to define “the working class” in the context of analyzing trade union membership. Having worked as a union organizer, business agent and negotiator for several unions including the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 535, the Union of American Physicians and Dentists and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Local 800 for more than three decades, Lepie retired as SEIU Local 535’s organizing director in 2005. Lepie argues that Ralf Dahrendorf’s theory is quite useful in understanding the working class and trade union membership. Dahrendorf bases his ideas on Marx and Weber who understood that economic need compels individuals to work while recognizing that these employees worked in jobs in which they were required to take orders from those above them in the work organization but were unable to give orders themselves because there was no one below them in the workplace hierarchy. Lepie contends that this definition can be utilized in understanding various working class behaviors besides union formation which includes workers unwilling to fight for revolutionary change and a classless society although they remain supporters of social justice issues. Moreover, Lepie claims that union members defend underdogs because membership in labor organizations forces workers to recognize their own underdog status.

✉ Victor G. Devinatz
vgdevin@ilstu.edu

¹ Department of Management & Quantitative Methods, Illinois State University, Normal, IL 61790-5580, USA

If any of the journal's readers are interested in responding to any essays published in the "Perspectives" Section or would like to write articles on any topics in the field of employee relations, please do not hesitate to contact me with your proposal. I welcome both practitioner-based and scholarly-based articles written from any one of a variety of theoretical perspectives. I hope that you enjoy this article and find it most illuminating.