

Organizing Working-Class Academics: A Collective History

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Abstract

In 2008, the Association of Working-Class Academics was founded in upstate New York by three former members of the Working-Class/Poverty-Class Academics Listserv. The Association had three goals: advocate for WCAs, build organizations on campuses that would support both working-class college students and WCAs, and support scholarship on issues relevant to class and higher education. The Association grew from a small handful to more than 200 members located in the US, UK, Australia, Canada, and Germany. In 2015, it was formally merged with the Working-Class Studies Association, and continues there as a special section for WCSA members. This is our collective account of the organization, told through responses to four key questions. We hope this history will provide insight and lessons for anyone interested in building similar organizations.

Keywords

Working-class academics, Working-Class Studies Association, organizing, campus collectives

Q1: How did you come to be one of the organizers of AWCA?

ALH: In the spring of 2005, I was finishing up my dissertation, what would eventually become *The Burden of Academic Success*. I was looking for people, anyone, who would understand what I was trying to do, and why I thought it was a good idea to ask working-class college students about their experiences. Plenty of people I ran up against in the academy just didn't understand that class could be relevant in the context of college (as an aside, I think we have come a *very* long way since then, in just one short decade). I had read everything I could possibly find on the subject of working-class academics, starting with Jake Ryan and Charles Sackrey, of course, and I also knew there was an online group that identified as academics from working-class and poverty-class backgrounds. This was originally started by Barbara Peters, and the group had been meeting at an informal conference every year since 1995.

AV: I first heard of the WCA listserv while living in Philadelphia in the early 2000s, as an article appeared about it in a local newspaper. At that point, I was squarely situated in the ‘middle skills ghetto’ – being a high school dropout having only attended some college after getting my GED. I knew I was working class – though given my background I identified more realistically as poor – but knew very little about academia. I had been enrolled at Brooklyn College in the late 1980s, where I managed three years but couldn’t handle the stress of working full time on top of college (which would characterize my entire college career). I found the email address and reached out to the listserv host, Barbara Peters, and was allowed to join. I can’t remember precisely when I joined the listserv, but it was probably around 2002. At that point, I had gone back to school to finish my bachelor’s degree at the University of Rochester. The listserv discussions helped me understand some of my experience – naïve, poor, and attending a private university while working two jobs and parenting my toddler daughter – and it helped me to take on the identity of a working-class academic. While I was in my undergraduate studies at UR, I met a fellow working-class academic who was working in academic services. Although he was from the UK, and not academic faculty, he encouraged me in my studies and to consider a future as a working-class academic. And when I graduated in 2004, it was my intention to head to graduate school to eventually become faculty somewhere (my field was religious studies – particularly, contemporary and new religious movements). I recall when I spoke to my faculty advisor about my intention to go into academia, he looked me straight in the eye and asked, very seriously, ‘Do you really want to do this?’ And while my advisor was someone I greatly respected, he had also come from privilege (admitting in a class once that the only job he had before academia was delivering pizza one summer) and because by then I’d identified as a working-class academic, I found his question to be something of an insult. Or, at least, a challenge. Looking at the question today, years after I’ve obtained a PhD, I see his question as being one of genuine concern, and kindness – he was really asking me if I wanted to suffer through an academic life, not asking if I was capable of being an academic. Perhaps he even knew that, given my background, my chances in academia were slim and the road ahead would be treacherous and costly.

TG: I don’t remember how I heard about the WCS email list, but the list is what got me to the conference where I met Allison and Alfred. The discussions on the list sounded much more like my life and my experiences than anything else I had run across in academe. I wanted to meet the people on the list in person. By that time, I had a tenure-track job and had learned the art of making everything I did count in some way toward promotion and tenure. I was in a Communication Department so designed a project where I would interview working-class academics at the conference and create a short documentary. That also allowed me to get some funding from the school to support going to the conference. By the way, that is always a problem working class academics have - the difficulty of affording to go to the necessary conferences. It runs through graduate school and well into their tenure track jobs.

ALH: That’s certainly true, Tery. It makes it very difficult to organize around class when those who are most primed to organize around it can’t afford to meet. So, it was the listserv for all three of us. Thank you, Barbara Peters! I decided to go to the next meeting of the listserv, in June of 2005, which, incidentally, turned out to be the 10th conference and the largest one yet. It was held at Ithaca College. I think this was only the second conference I ever attended, and it was so different from the first (regional sociology) conference. Even thinking about this more than a decade later and I get goosebumps. It was like coming home, to a home I didn’t even

know existed. Everyone was smart, very smart, but they also seemed to share the same habits of mind, customs, values, struggles I had, as the weirdo smart kid in class. I know now there were and are lots of differences within the WCA community, but at that first meeting, none of those mattered as much as the similarities. The conference was only two or three days long, but it was one of those experiences in your life that change everything. On the first night, those of us who were new to the organization, or those of us who were graduate students, were paired up with a mentor who paid for our dinner. About 20 of us, mentor and mentees, went to Moosewood (an experience in itself), and had a wide-ranging conversation about, well, everything. One of the running jokes about WCAs is that we don't know how to filter. Everything came out. My mentor was Ken Oldfield, who remains, to this day, a person I go to for advice. Later, I spent a lot of time hanging out with him and a person who had been with the group since the very beginning. As I didn't have a car (or drive), these two very kindly schlepped me all over town. But that is also the way the 'conference' operated – we were all there to support each other. It was an amazing experience. It might have been the second night that I met Alfred Vitale, over another dinner attended by almost everyone (40 people? I know we took over the restaurant). By now I was picking up subtle differences, who was there only for camaraderie, who was there to push for change, things like that. Alfred struck me as someone who pushed for change, and I loved that. We may have begun talking about organizing the group in a more political fashion at that dinner, I can't recall. But the idea was in the air. This was the tenth meeting, and many people wanted the group to evolve into a formal organization, with a website and real presence in the world. By the way, I met Tery Griffin because I was one of the attendees she interviewed. I thought that was a very cool thing to be doing!

I wonder where those videotape recordings are now? Tery, whatever happened to those tapes?

TG: I had forgotten about the recordings! I returned from the conference and instead of working on digitizing the tapes, I had to jump back into preparations for the next semester. With a 4/4 teaching load, plus the expectation of taking on overloads, and the advising, committee work, everything else that comes with an academic life, the tapes remained on my to-do shelf for a very long time. It's entirely possible that they are still in a box in my study.

ALH: Some day we will have to find them! Alfred, am I right you were thinking politically before that conference?

AV: Yes, and the WCA list opened my eyes to the value of our perspective. I had realized how valuable it would have been for me to see other WCAs during my academic career. So sometime around late 2003 or early 2004, I started to think bigger. I'd always been an organizer of some sort or another, quite far to the left in my political proclivities and involved with the underground literary movement in NYC (my hometown). While the listserv continued, I had thought very hard about proposing that the group become something more than just a listserv. It was all well and good to provide a space for camaraderie, but I wanted to see us start to collectivize to amplify our voice. Others on the list had started to speak about the potential to grow this group into something more deliberate and strategic; ideas were starting to formulate. Soon, Signe M. Kastberg (who turned out to live near me), Ken Oldfield, Julie Charlip, and some names that escape me, began to discuss this on the WCA list. But it was the conference at Ithaca College that moved us from chatting about AWCA, to building it.

Allison, were you involved in those early on-line discussions, too?

ALH: The idea of such an organization had never crossed my mind before attending the conference in Ithaca. Everything was new to me that year. On the last day of the conference, about twenty of us gathered in a circle to talk about creating a formal organization. I was not one of the leaders of this discussion, and only joined because I wasn't ready to walk away. Alfred talked a lot, but so did Signe M. Kastberg, a remarkably able organizer who has written a very useful book on the subject (Kastberg 2007), Julie Charlip, who has done so much for working-class students at Whitman College, and Ken Oldfield, prolific author and champion of the idea of including class in conversations about diversity (Oldfield 2007). Tery was there as well, but I think she took a back seat like I did. Jake Ryan and Charles Sackrey had been at the conference, but I think they had left before the meeting, as had David Greene, another well-known and liked attendee. There was some sense that many of us were of a younger generation, and were willing to put in the time and effort to push the group forward (particularly with things like creating a website). When the meeting broke up, it was decided that we would continue things via email. Days after I returned to Oregon, there were about fifteen of us who were in constant communication about creating what we decided to call, after much heated discussion, the Association of Working-Class Academics (shortened hereinafter to AWCA, pronounced 'aw-cah'). I remember some of us balked (Alfred, I am thinking of here), because our parents were never able to get into the working class – 'poverty class' might be a better name for us. As a sociologist, I didn't really like the concept of poverty as a class and argued, along with others, that working class was really inclusive of the working poor and the non-working poor alike. Still, we always kept the language of 'poverty class and working class' in our descriptions and calls for membership.

AV: While the concept for what to create was being batted around, it was clear that Barbara Peters was not really on-board. After the conference, I could tell that Allison and I had similar orientations to change and to what WCAs could do if they moved collectively. And soon we had numerous 'off list' conversations about what might be possible, perhaps because we were realizing that Barbara remained hesitant to support the idea. The WCA listserv was her baby, and here were these young upstarts (Allison and I are close in age, and younger than many on the list) trying to do something to ostensibly compete with the listserv. Yet that was not at all what we had intended, and I don't believe anyone in those early days actually considered anything like that. We all felt the listserv provided something valuable, and that it would be an important part of a formal organization. And it was the garden in which AWCA's seeds were planted

ALH: Remember that I said we WCAs have a tendency to not filter? We can over-share, and we can also be a little more direct and frank than is politic. The squabbles over the name drove out a few of us. A hardcore of a committed ten formed, and then splintered, over a series of petty and not-so-petty disagreements. We lost a few key people right away because there was word that Barbara Peters did not like the idea of formalizing the organization. With the heedlessness of youth, the rest of us pressed on. We lost Signe and almost lost Tery when Alfred said some impolitic remarks that were construed as being gender-insensitive. Insults were passed back and forth. Some of us tried to be moderators (myself included), but we couldn't keep everyone in the fold. Our final conflict came over the issue of whether we would formally incorporate as a non-profit. Alfred and I, with anarchistic tendencies, thought this was unnecessary (he probably will have choicer words for this than I). Some said they would refuse to go forward in any capacity

as an officer, without the protection of incorporation. Eventually, those concerned about officer liability won out and I offered to do the paperwork to file as a nonprofit, putting my law degree to some use. The irony is that in this final conflict we lost those who were pushing for incorporation, and those who remained didn't really care that much about the issue.

Alfred, what do you remember about the early conflicts in building the organization?

AV: By 2005, we had drafted our first Mission and Goals document. The mission managed to stay relatively intact for AWCAs entire history. But while the mission was clear, the organization's shape itself was a question mark. The nine or so members of this new conceptual organization, the steering committee, had differing views of what AWCA would do and what it would look like. As is often the case when a number of good intentions start to share the stage, heads begin to butt together. From my recollection, there were essentially two camps: some of us were convinced that AWCA should be something like a labor union – a collective structure to pressure academia to give us a voice, power and a seat at the table, and to be a force to advocate on behalf of WCAs being mistreated in the academic workplace. Others wanted AWCA to be primarily a professional networking organization – connecting WCAs together for various purposes, particularly career-oriented, to share professional opportunities, push for more hiring of WCAs and leveraging the membership to promote WCA work. There were variations on these, but the gist of it was simply that some wanted AWCA to be a force to push and prod academia, and some wanted AWCA to be a society to nurture the career development of WCAs. Looking back, it's obvious that both of these were necessary. However, early on, we could not quite reconcile these general orientations. And it was causing some consternation and ongoing, unresolved disagreements that bled into unseemly personal attacks (some of which were my fault). Increasingly, my frustration activated some of the skeletons from my past – the brutal language of the housing projects where I was raised would creep in, and an exchange with a very provocative and unpopular listserv member (not part of AWCA), who bullied others but kept his comments within the letter of law, left me permanently barred from the WCA listserv. As I had just gone through a divorce, and was unsure about my own future, I had a shorter fuse and tighter margins than I would have liked. And I was growing impatient, and surly. The anarchist in me grew frustrated as we started to hash out the minutiae of making AWCA a formal organization.

Adding to that, there was growing concern among some of the membership about formalizing the group as a non-profit. What would membership look like? Who was allowed to join? What were the criteria to define 'Working Class Academic' (criteria upon which we would never really settle)? How would we protect ourselves from being research subjects for those who studied the working class? Would we charge dues? How do we protect ourselves from lawsuits? It was this last question that broke the camel's back for me. I pushed back and rejected the idea that lawsuits would ever be a thing. Why would they? And I was tired of discussions about finance (ironically, I became the Treasurer) and dues – I'd rather have us just leave things open for donations and make membership free (a position that I would never let go, even after we finalized a dues structure). We would go be going back and forth about these and related organizational issues for the next couple of years in one way or another.

During the long process of formalizing bylaws, in particular, we started to get attrition in the steering committee, and it highlighted a problem under the surface. When the steering committee was at its peak, there was something like a 50-50 split between men and women. I

felt that we should work to keep this balance, and argued vociferously for it. But in Academia, women had too often been excluded from leadership. So, it was suggested that the majority (or perhaps it was all) of our final officer roles should go to women. As I had been doing a lot of the legwork, and had been there since the beginning, this stung. By the time we were agreed that bylaws were set, and we had a process mapped out to get us off the ground, we had been reduced to four: Allison, Tery, Signe and me. But then it was reduced to three, after Signe took on a larger and more demanding academic position at a new institution (though she remains a supportive colleague and an important voice for WCAs). Thus, when we had incorporated in 2008, it was just Allison, Tery and me taking on all the officer roles. Allison was the clearest choice for president – with an incredible wealth of useful skills and knowledge, and an absolutely sharp mind for organizational development (not to mention her instrumental role in getting our non-profit status). Tery Griffin took on multiple roles – communications and, most importantly, building the AWCA website and getting the membership portal set up using only free web resources (no small feat!). And though I hemmed and hawed about having any dues structure at all, I wound up in the role of treasurer – not a role I coveted, but one that was necessary all the same.

TG: I fell in the camp of wanting the organization to help working class people in academe—not necessarily to become or remain professors, but to get as much out of higher education as they could, and perhaps to avoid the stumbling blocks their predecessors had hit. I envisioned a mentorship structure, where tenured professors would mentor professors who were on the tenure track but not yet tenured, the tenure track professors would mentor students who were finishing graduate school and looking for tenure track jobs, the grad school students would mentor undergraduates who were considering or actively applying to grad school, and undergraduates would mentor high school students who were interested in going on to college. The official structure of AWCA would provide a more formal conference than the one organized by the people on Barbara’s list—a conference where presentations would easily be accepted as counting in hiring decisions, and toward promotion and tenure, and which could someday publish conference papers, which would provide publications to help people get and keep jobs.

ALH: It wasn’t until 2008 that most of this was ironed out. By that time, I had a new position as a visiting professor at Kenyon College. That position gave me a lot of time to help develop the organization. We working-class academics really know how to use unemployment and underemployment to our advantage! Tery Griffin put a website together for AWCA, and I proceeded to do the paperwork to incorporate us. When it came time to put forth officer’s names, there was just the three of us left. We made Alfred Secretary-Treasurer because he was the most likely to stay put for a few years and we needed a permanent address and bank account. Tery and I scrambled for VP position (neither wanted to be President), but I lost out, as she had already done so much work on the website.

Well, that was the long story about how AWCA came to be. We want to conclude by answering a few more general questions about being a working-class academic and organizing around class.

Q2: *When did you first realize you were a working-class academic, or have you? What does this mean to you?*

ALH: I didn't have the label to affix to myself until I read Jake Ryan and Charles' Sackrey's *Strangers in Paradise* in graduate school, probably around 2003. But I had known for quite some time that I was different from my peers. I've talked elsewhere (Hurst 2010) about some of the events that motivated me to switch dissertation topics from Intellectual Property Regimes and their impact on development in Africa to how working-class college students confront the possibility of social mobility. Suffice it to say there were a series of micro-aggressions against me and people I saw as like me that forced my attention. And I have to admit there was a great deal of comfort in putting a name to this. When I was younger I had often been the 'smart kid,' kind of the weirdo who liked to read and stay indoors. I was used to that description of myself. But what I realized in graduate school was that I was also different among other readers (actually, there are a surprising number of academics who don't appear to love reading, go figure). My difference was double-sided. That is the experience of the working-class academic. We have in many ways left our homes behind (some of us with deep regret, others not fast enough) but we haven't fully joined the middle class, either. I think this explains why so many WCAs love Bourdieu. He described the experience well. It was his own experience, too.

AV: One of the nagging issues that poor and working-class academics have as they navigate academia is that they will, at some point, suffer from imposter-syndrome. I still do. I have a Master's degree and a Ph.D., and I've always found it difficult to feel like I fit in to the ivory tower - which is why I decided to forego a career in academia and, instead, went back into project management (though I work with projects congruent with my Education and Human Development background). But I do adjunct regularly at a couple of universities, and that helps me feel like I'm still 'in the game.' It occurs to me, as I write this, that maybe it serves cross-purposes - I feel like I'm 'in the game' but I don't feel like I'm accepted as part of the larger institution. This may be another thing that characterizes the class-dissonance we feel in academia. We may have been allowed into the country club, but we sometimes feel our membership is easily revoked if we slip up and let our class roots show. It was my hope that AWCA might temper this, but it may have been the political events of the last year that gave social class the biggest discursive boost in a long time. Allison and I have written about this recently (Hurst & Vitale, 2016).

TG: Although I did not have the label, I think I was aware of the situation from the first time I tried to go to college. There are several long stories involved, having to do with not having the money to go unless I worked a lot of hours, which did not leave time for going to college. When I did finally maneuver myself into a position where I was able to go to college and work (by running my own business), the students—and the professors—at the college I went to either came from very different backgrounds from my own or were doing a good job of leaving their backgrounds behind. The people who were most familiar to me were the college's support staff: the secretaries, cafeteria workers, and groundspeople. Mostly what it meant to me was that everything was harder. I started college much later than the students in my classes, and before I finished undergraduate school, I was already aware that some doors were permanently closed. I would never be the hot young writer or hot young scholar that everyone wants to discover.

Q3: What lessons did you learn as an organizer of AWCA? What was your worst experience? Your best?

ALH: There are so many ways I can answer this! Although there were a lot of headaches, being one of the organizers of AWCA changed my life. After the loss of so many others, the three of us worked very well together. Although most of our operations happened virtually, and we rarely had the opportunity to meet together after that initial conference in Ithaca, I don't have strong enough words to describe how much I admire Tery and Alfred. Admire is probably not the right word. It is more that they have become family, in the working-class sense. They are there, like appendages, that I rely on and could never cut off even had I wanted to. They have been there *for the long haul*, through all kinds of lows and organizational woes. They are my fellow soldiers in the fight and I am so grateful we have been in the fight together for so long.

AV: I don't feel that there was ever a well-articulated 'worst experience' for me. Organizations like AWCA are roller coasters by nature, so ups and downs are part of it. I think that I felt more disappointment – because I had hoped more people would have recognized the importance of having a collective of working-class academics who could leverage that collective strength to improve our experiences in academia, and that they'd naturally want to take the organization and grow it. But I've learned – through AWCA and many other groups I've worked with – that no matter how much you strive for consensus, or encourage broader organizational power-sharing, it will fall on the shoulders of the few most dedicated members to keep things afloat. And in the end, most of the membership in a group wind up being okay with that (happy that someone else is taking on the work). But there's also a larger lesson that is important for most socially-just organizing: the marginal populations you wish to empower will inevitably have twice the hardships and obstacles to participating as the mainstream. WCAs are the ones working full-time through their college careers, and are saddled with six-figure student loan debt (something else that Allison and I share), and can't take the time off to attend conferences that they have to pay for up front (thereby missing opportunities for career development), and can't take time away from their overburdened schedules to draft bylaws or get a PO Box set up or keep up with collecting dues or providing fresh content on websites or social media. As an organizer on the Left, I see this with well-intentioned groups wishing to mobilize the poor and working-class – forgetting that those systemic forces we oppose are the same ones that are keeping them from participating in the first place. So, the bottom line is simple: expect nothing, do what you can, and don't resent it when you're the one left holding the ball despite everyone else's insistence that they wanted to play.

TG: Like Alfred, I don't really have one worst experience. What I found most difficult to deal with was the frustration of not having more people willing to get involved. With just the three of us, all we could ever do was just keep the organization afloat. The visions I had for the organization remained just visions.

ALH: We had many visions! Hopefully, some of them can still come true through the WCSA and its new WCA section. It won't be easy, though. Alfred is exactly right about the difficulty of organizing WCAs, and we see this with campus groups organizing around class as well. Back when I was working on my dissertation, I ran into a woman named Sophie, who was working in financial aid at the University of Oregon. She told me that she had started a working-class students group, but that it fell apart within a year because so few people had the time to keep it up and running. When she graduated, that was the end. Since then, I've seen this happen on many other campuses. One of the things we wanted to achieve with AWCA was an institutional

base from which to coordinate and support these campus efforts. We are still working on achieving that at the Working-Class Studies Association (see our ‘Class on Campus’ pages).

Alfred, Tery, and I spent a lot of time keeping things going, too much to allow us opportunities to expand our programming. I learned how important volunteers are, and I also had a real lightbulb moment realizing that I never learned this growing up working class. We were always just too busy keeping our lives afloat, our children fed, to think much of *volunteering*. I’m sure I am not speaking for all working-class people here, especially those with strong religious communities who learn to be active and engaged just as part of being human (something I saw a lot when I lived in South Carolina). But for my family, and many others I know personally, volunteering reeks of privilege. Voluntary organization work is also foreign to many working-class people because we have learned to clearly separate ‘work’ from the rest of our lives, which tend to be focused on home and family. Work is where you have to go, where you are told what to do, and what you leave behind when you punch out. So, to ask people to take on labor voluntarily just kind of doesn’t make a lot of sense. I always assumed that things ran somehow, without my input, by people with a lot more power than me. Once I myself was in a position of leadership, I realized how wrong this sense of mine was, but I think a lot of our WCA peers still haven’t figured that out. When we say we need input we really mean it! When we ask people to build their own organizations, that’s not a luxury or a privilege but a necessity.

TG: My background there is very different from Allison’s. My family was involved with the church, so volunteered there. And my brothers were all active in their unions. I learned from my family that if you see something you want done, you should do it, not wait for someone else to do it for you.

Q4: What hopes do you have for working-class persons in (or out) of the academy?

ALH: Oh, that is a tough question! Alfred, you go first...

AV: This is where my collegial kindness hits a wall. Many, I think, would like to believe that a type of equality (social or economic) is possible through convincing systemic forces that the poor and working-class deserve equality. I, on the other hand, think this slow-motion slog of discursive dilly-dallying will never really move the needle without an absolute, loud, public and pointed indictment aimed directly at affluence and the institutions which serve to sustain it. It is, and should be, time to call them out harshly. I would rather destabilize the cultural, social and economic foundations that tacitly condone, praise, or support the pursuit of affluence and instead I want to recast them as being the shameful, immoral causes of human suffering. As Allison has alluded, my anarchic tendencies characterized my engagement with AWCA – but it was the integrity, skill, clarity and thoughtfulness of Allison and Tery that kept that side of me fairly subdued as we built AWCA. Yet I was never censored, and I felt that I was able to express the most radical ideas to Tery and Allison without the judgement I would receive from some of my non-WCA colleagues. We may have few filters for our words, but this openness of expression is precisely one of the most wonderful characteristics of WCAs. Around each other, we don’t care if our class roots are showing.

ALH: We always had to balance our more personal revolutionary tendencies with the necessities of building a large and inclusive group! Look, there are many WCAs out there that really want

to put their pasts behind them and move on to better things. They don't have a critique of capitalism. They want the good life. We always wanted to keep space open for these people, because they need support and mentorship as well, and, we kind of secretly hoped, building solidarity with them might make them appreciate the things about their working-class selves that they were trying to move past. But we were always striving to be a big tent, and I think that is important.

Personally, I am with Alfred in that I'd like to see the system of inequality called out, destabilized, toppled. But I am also pretty sure that this can't happen without getting as many people with working-class experiences into the conversation as possible. There is a difference between having a theoretical dislike of inequality, or even a humanistic disgust of inequality, and having the experience of seeing family members systematically oppressed and exploited for their entire lives. A bunch of platitudes just implode when you know people personally whose lives have been permanently deformed by capitalism. And it isn't always the big things, it's at the mundane level most clearly. Here's an example. Cleaning toilets (which I did as a Merry Maid for one summer only) is a hard job. It hurts your back and your knees and gives you a chemical headache. It also needs to be done – but not by the same person for twenty to forty years of her life, six to eight to twelve hours a day. We need to figure out more equitable ways to distribute this necessary labor. Having working-class persons in the academy means we have people with intimate knowledge of the daily effects of capitalism on workers, to remind us that a vision of a better world is not pie in the sky but necessary and achievable. I realize that may sound very idealistic, but I still believe in the power of democracy. Democracy only works when everyone has a voice and every voice is heard. What's not working with the system we have? Stop asking the people who are benefiting from it and ask the rest of us. We'll tell you.

TG: That is an immense question. The fact that we even have people we call working class bothers me. It suggests that we accept a culture where some people are expected to spend large blocks of their lives in jobs that give them little except money they need in order to live, while other people have no such expectations placed upon them. And more and more, those working people cannot earn enough with one full time job to survive—if they can even find a full-time job—so are forced to work multiple jobs. This thing that we're all in the middle of is supposed to be a life, not a never-ending job.

And that, folks, is why we need to organize around class, even when it is quite difficult to do so!

Author Bios

Allison L. Hurst is an Associate Professor of Sociology in the School of Public Policy at Oregon State University, where she teaches courses on the sociology of education, inequality, qualitative methods and sociological theory. She has written two books on the experiences and identity reformations of working-class college students, *The Burden of Academic Success: Loyalists, Renegades, and Double Agents* (2010) and *College and the Working Class* (2012) and is the co-editor (with Sandi K. Kenga) of *Working in Class: Recognizing How Social Class Shapes Our Academic Work* (2016). Her current research focuses on the outcomes of college graduates, specifically the role of class and the impact of student debt. She was one of the founders of the Association of Working-Class Academics, for which she also served as president

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Tery Griffin is a writer and computer consultant specializing in working with writers and other artists. Her fiction has appeared in literary journals including *ninepatch: A Creative Journal for Women and Gender Studies*, *Moondance*, *Men As We Are*, *O. Henry Festival Stories* and *The Wittenberg Review*. Now retired, Tery was Associate Professor of Communications at Wesley College until 2016. She was a co-founder of the Association of Working-Class Academics, where she served as vice-president from 2008-2014.

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