Lucky Class Action Welcomes Rachel Rybaczk

By Jenny Ladd

How lucky Class Action is to have Rachel Rybaczk as Interim Executive Director. Rachel was in the first 8-week cross-class dialogue group that Felice Yeskel and I led in the fall of 2001. Having grown up poor in a racially diverse urban neighborhood, Rachel was one of an equal number of people from owning class backgrounds and poor and working class backgrounds in the group. Rachel says, “That dialogue group changed my life. It was so powerful to see Felice and Jenny stay connected, despite challenges that came up. It was life-changing to be able to share so honestly, and to listen intently to one another’s totally different class stories.”

Rachel is deeply rooted in Class Action’s history and her experience inspires a dynamic vision for Class Action’s future. She knows the power of authentic cross-class dialogue and wants Class Action to foster and guide these deep transformational discussions around the country. The more we are able to acknowledge, name and openly explore our own and others’ class backgrounds, the more our communities will effectively navigate challenging decisions about strategies for social change.

Rachel recently assessed Class Action’s existing programs and sees the necessity to amplify the groundbreaking work of Staffing the Mission and the First Generation Summits.

Breaking New Ground in the UK

By Milan Rai

Training of activist trainers on class and classism.

The Exploring Class weekend in Gloucestershire in West England, hosted by the radical nonviolence magazine Peace News, was the first training of activist trainers on class and classism that there’s ever been in Britain, so far as we know.

About a week before Exploring Class took place in June, a participant got in touch to check if there were other working-class participants coming. She didn’t want to be in a tiny minority of working-class people at the training of trainers, especially a four-day residential workshop focused on class and classism. Would this be a mainly middle-class event, with the same middle-class domination that happens in so many progressive groups? We reassured her that the majority of people coming had told us that they identified as working-class.

The long weekend was led by Betsy Leondar-Wright of Class Action, with two British co-facilitators: one of the most experienced activist trainers in the UK, Kathryn Tulip of the Navigate training collective, and me, Milan Rai, editor of Peace News, and graduate of the Seattle 2016 Class Action training of trainers. Kathryn is from a white working-class background, raised in the North of England, and I’m a first generation South Asian immigrant from a professional-middle-class background.

One goal of Exploring Class was to give people a chance to strengthen their facilitation skills and their ability to apply those skills to class issues.

continued on page two
Most people agreed that we achieved this aim. One person wrote afterwards that she’d improved her own facilitation abilities, and had increased her confidence in facilitating proactive dialogue. Someone else wrote: ‘I’ve given up having expectations of training because so many trainings can be disappointing. This training did not disappoint and I am taking away things to think about and a list of action points.’

Another goal was to start a network of UK trainers who want to work on class and classism. The workshop did support new connections between people, as well as ongoing group work for an online reading group which includes many of the participants. We’re reading chapters from Betsy’s terrific book, Missing Class: How Seeing Class Cultures Can Strengthen Social Movement Groups, and talking about them using Skype video.

Another core goal of the training was to share exercises developed by Class Action in the US. Generally, people thought they were also useful over here in the UK. One day, the UK folks delivered their own – slightly-altered or completely transformed – version of one of the Class Action tools they’d experienced earlier. (We also had a French participant.)

We also shared some Training for Change (TfC) tools, including a UK version of a TfC exercise on wealth inequality. To help people explore these shocking injustices, we gave people jelly babies to demonstrate how much wealth the super-rich own. (In the UK, we have jelly babies, not the jelly beans you have in the US; our babies are softer and squidgier than your beans.)

A couple of months after Exploring Class, I went to the Earth First! Summer Gathering. When I got there, I saw in the programme that there was a two-hour workshop on class. When I went along, I discovered that the workshop leader was Mark from Manchester, and he was delivering a shortened version of the Class Action three-hour workshop that we’d shared at the June training!

This is just one of the many workshops on class and classism that have sprung out of, or been enriched by, Class Action’s Exploring Class training. I know I speak for all the trainers and facilitators who were at the residential retreat when I express enormous gratitude to Class Action as an organisation, and to Betsy Leondar-Wright as a person, for all that we learned over that long weekend in Gloucestershire.

Lucky Class Action Welcomes Rachel Rybaczuk - continued from cover

These projects directly address classism in employment and education, two areas with the need and potential for cross-class solidarity building.

As well, she would love to gather Class Action Trainers together to pool wisdom, knowledge and experience to strengthen these thriving programs as well as build on our longstanding Exploring Class and Race Class Intersections workshop curricula.

Rachel also brings a new expertise to the organization with her experience creating and teaching a race/class conscious curriculum, also known as the “Class-Class,” which does more than simply raise race/class consciousness or increase literacy about class. Rachel has taught this at Hampshire College where young owning class people were inspired to take action to address classism, in addition to joining Resource Generation.

She has also taught at the Smith College School for Social Work, where Rachel educates social workers to be particularly aware of their race/class attitudes because they can have such a pivotal impact on people navigating systems of oppression within the mental health system. Yet another exciting possibility for the future is integrating the Class-Class into Class Action’s programming, allowing more people to increase their class literacy and access the power of cross-class solidarity-building.

Rachel is also a Class Action senior trainer and speaker, most recently with Glide Church in San Francisco, American International College in Springfield, the Food Bank of Western Massachusetts and the Brearley School in New York City. In addition to experience working with grassroots organizers, non-profits, students and educators, Rachel participated in the panel “Locating Pride in the Poverty Class” at this year’s Working Class Studies Association, organized by Class Action trainer Adj Marshall. This led to creation of the first Poverty Class Caucus, which acknowledges the important distinctions between poverty class experience and working class experience.

Rachel brings a lived wisdom combined with excitement about expanding Class Action’s already strong content, like sharing Betsy Leondar-Wright’s extremely useful descriptions of class cultures in social change movements. She knows that Class Action’s work is invaluable and timely for building strong cross-class alliances for significant social change.

Rachel brings much experience with Class Action together with a vision for what could be. We are indeed fortunate to have her as our Interim Director. May we all step forward as she is stepping forward and do all that we can to create a more just, equitable and kind world.
By Chris Collins

In July, Senior Trainer Shane Lloyd and Interim Executive Director Rachel Rybaczuk co-led an Exploring Class workshop for members of Glide Church in San Francisco. The training was in support of Bridging The Divide (BTD), a project bringing people from across the political spectrum into dialogue on a monthly basis. Bridging The Divide is a powerful example of the cross-class solidarity-building central to Class Action’s mission. The workshop contained material from our Activist Class Cultures framework and provided insight into the ways class norms may influence BTD. Chris Collins, Bridging The Divide organizer, shared his thoughts about the class issues that inspired him to invite Class Action to Glide and the workshop’s immediate outcomes.

How do you see class issues showing up in San Francisco?

If you’ve ever visited San Francisco, you’ve seen that it’s a diverse place, both racially and culturally. We often live in the same neighborhoods and ride the same buses, but there’s not a lot of interaction outside of our social comfort zones. We’re living amongst each other, but we’re really not living with each other. In this beautiful, multicultural city with a rich history of fighting for equality, class divisions are very visible and they keep us from knowing one another. What about at Glide Memorial Church?

In our divided country, Glide is a beacon of hope. I invited my friend Regina to Glide for the first time, and she immediately noticed the congregation and choir’s incredible diversity of race, class, gender, and sexuality. My friend had to wipe the tears from her eyes before the celebration even started. This is not an unusual reaction to Glide. It’s a powerfully spiritual experience to gather with people who look different and live differently, for the common purpose of celebrating life by welcoming, respecting and loving everyone.

What inspired you to bring in a Class Action training?

Since the beginning of Bridging The Divide, I’ve been doing a lot of research on political and social division. Classism kept coming up again and again. I discovered the book Class Lives at the San Francisco Public Library and learned about the work Class Action is doing. I also had recently read White Trash by Nancy Isenberg, which argues that contempt toward poor and working classes is a 400-year-old American story. I’ve come to realize that we can’t talk about political, racial and religious division without talking about classism. Glide has a unique opportunity to confront classism, and it just made sense to ignite this conversation with training by Class Action.

What did participants gain from the training?

We had about 40 people from the Glide community participate in the workshop. Many of us had never asked ourselves how class had impacted our upbringing. There’s so much value in asking that simple question and reflecting on our answers in a group setting. We heard the stories of working class kids going to college and struggling with the feeling of not belonging. We heard from a woman who had struggled with homelessness, and how she now sells shots of liquor on the sidewalk after the bars close to make ends meet. We also heard from people who grew up middle class, who actually felt a bit embarrassed that they were able play in their neighborhoods without any fear of danger. Across the class spectrum, people feel both pain and pride. We have that in common. We can connect on that.

Was there any particular exercise that you found impactful?

We did an exercise that focused on how people from different classes communicate. I learned that it’s too easy to dismiss statements from people who do not have the same training in writing and speaking as I do. It also made me realize that we should look at some of the BTD promotional language to see if it is inadvertently excluding people. Overall, the workshop really helped me develop the skill to better hear the values being communicated, rather than getting distracted by the differences in communication style. It’s energizing to realize that I can meaningfully connect with people of different classes, if I can get past these technicalities and really and truly hear what is being said. After all, that’s the point of all of this. I imagine a world of diverse people connected through love and compassion, and that keeps me going.

GLIDE CHURCH WORKSHOP IN SAN FRANCISCO
Maria is a radical communications and media strategist with a background in community organizing. In her work for restaurant workers’ rights, gender justice and environmental regulation, she has carried out strategic communications campaigns in order to advance progressive policy, shift public opinion, and build power. Maria was raised in Colorado and is from a white, working-class family. As a first generation college student with a B.A. degree in Political Science and English from Colorado State University, she’s committed to using the power of media to amplify movements led by working-class and poor communities. She is currently the Communications Director at Resource Generation, which organizes young people with wealth and class privilege to support poor and working-class led anti-capitalist economic and racial justice organizations and movements.

For fun she instigates conversations with people about class, consumes feminist science/speculative fiction, checks out women-led independent horror movies, reads/watches a lot about astrophysics that she doesn’t fully understand, and visits farmed animal sanctuaries.

“As a first generation college graduate who wished she had stumbled upon Class Action way, way sooner, I’m super pumped to join the Class Action team. I’m especially excited to help build resilience among working-class and poor-raised college students through the First Gen program and foment necessary class consciousness among young folks.”

WORKING CLASS STUDIES ASSOCIATION – POVERTY CLASS PANEL & CAUCUS

By Adj Marshall

As a first-generation, low-income college student, I knew that the feelings of inadequacy I was having were my own version of imposter syndrome. I had never been to an academic conference, and here I was standing outside the Centre des Congrès de Quebec, about to present at one of the most prestigious conferences in the sociological field, the American Sociological Association Annual Meeting. It was 2017, and my co-authored book chapter Bringing Class into the Classroom had been accepted as an official ASA session and was receiving interest from a number of working-class academics.

In speaking to working-class raised academics about my experience as a poverty-class-raised person, I found my lived experiences were either being folded into the working class identity—or I was being asked to justify and articulate the differences that made it necessary to separate the identification of poverty-class from working-class raised academics. In these moments I realized that while working-class raised voices were far and few between in the academic world, poverty class voices were even more rare.

When the 2018 Working Class Studies Association (WCSCA) conference proposals were invited, I felt this might be a unique opportunity to bring poverty-class voices to the forefront within the Working Class Studies field, which already had a Working-Class Academics section. I reached out to my network, and two people emerged as fellow collaborators: one who I had met briefly years before, Rachel Rybaczuk; and someone completely new to me, Megan Osborne. Together we crafted our panel proposal, Locating Pride with the Poverty Class and found our way to Stony Brook University to present. Our audience included a cross-section of men and women, from different types of college, and from across the class spectrum. A number of conference organizers were present, as they listened for ways they might better support and promote poverty-class voices within this academic space.

The success and enthusiasm generated from the session opened our eyes to a need for further opportunities to approach this topic. This past summer, Megan spearheaded the development of the Poverty Class Caucus within the Working Class Studies Association, which Rachel and I supported. We are a new caucus just beginning to build our membership, and are excited to see what this next chapter will hold for us and the poverty-class-raised community in academia.

CLASS ACTION IS EXCITED TO WELCOME OUR NEWEST BOARD MEMBER, MARIA MYOTTE!

Maria is a radical communications and media strategist with a background in community organizing. In her work for restaurant workers’ rights, gender justice and environmental regulation, she has carried out strategic communications campaigns in order to advance progressive policy, shift public opinion, and build power. Maria was raised in Colorado and is from a white, working-class family. As a first generation college student with a B.A. degree in Political Science and English from Colorado State University, she’s committed to using the power of media to amplify movements led by working-class and poor communities. She is currently the Communications Director at Resource Generation, which organizes young people with wealth and class privilege to support poor and working-class led anti-capitalist economic and racial justice organizations and movements.

For fun she instigates conversations with people about class, consumes feminist science/speculative fiction, checks out women-led independent horror movies, reads/watches a lot about astrophysics that she doesn’t fully understand, and visits farmed animal sanctuaries.

“As a first generation college graduate who wished she had stumbled upon Class Action way, way sooner, I’m super pumped to join the Class Action team. I’m especially excited to help build resilience among working-class and poor-raised college students through the First Gen program and foment necessary class consciousness among young folks.”

OFFICE@CLASSISM.ORG