

Survey reveals majority of British see themselves as working class

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This year's annual British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey revealed that 60 percent of the British public describe themselves as working class. This includes half of the people employed in managerial and professional occupations.

The report conducted by NatCen Research declared its intention to uncover the consequences of seven years of austerity for social and political attitudes in Britain, by looking at the effect of austerity on public attitudes in five important areas of life—social class, benefits, work, the National Health Service and politics.

Of the more than 4,300 British citizens surveyed, more than three out of four expressed the opinion that the class divide, i.e., social inequality, is “very” or “fairly” wide. It found that those who viewed “society as divided between a large disadvantaged group and a small privileged elite, feel more working class...”

A growing proportion of those surveyed said they believed social mobility to be in decline. Nearly three out of four surveyed believe it is “fairly” or “very difficult” to move between classes, a significant rise from 65 percent in 2005.

In a foreword, NatCen noted how the financial crash of 2008 and the austerity that followed still exert a lasting impression on the British economy, including slower economic growth, declining living standards and stagnant wages.

The authors note that the political response of the Conservative and previous Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition governments was austerity in the form of public spending cuts and tax increases. Cuts to the welfare and further regressive forms of taxation, have, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), reduced average annual household income by £1,127.

The IFS notes that austerity is set to continue and deepen until the end of the decade at least. However,

the report was published ahead of June's referendum vote to leave the European Union (EU), which will result in further economic contraction and an acceleration of austerity.

The BSA research offers ample evidence of the continuing leftward political trajectory of tens of millions of people in response to seven years of savage financial austerity and public spending cuts. Standing at 45 percent, public backing for more taxation and public spending is back at pre-crash levels and its highest point for a decade. Almost as many want to see spending and taxation increased as would like them to stay the same.

Alongside a growing enthusiasm for funding public services goes a rise in opposition to welfare cuts. A majority of those surveyed oppose cuts to welfare and almost four out of ten think the government should spend more on benefits—higher than at any time since 2003.

The BSA found a high level of support for the National Health Service. In contrast to the years of government propaganda that the NHS is “ringfenced” and not being cut, the reality is that more than £20 billion in “efficiency savings” were made during the last parliament. This is why 93 percent stated the NHS is facing a funding problem, with 32 percent (up from 19 percent in 2014) identifying it as a “severe” funding problem. Forty-five percent of those who are dissatisfied think the NHS has a “severe” funding problem compared with just 26 percent who are satisfied.

The attitudes and opinions expressed in the research are testament to the enduring significance of social class as the primary determinant of life under capitalism.

In recent decades, politicians from both main parties

have tried in vain to disabuse British workers of their stubborn belief that the country is stratified by class or even the merest suggestion that family social class background is the key determinant of life chances. In 2013, former Prime Minister David Cameron famously made the preposterous claim that politics in the UK was not run by a private school-educated elite, of which he of course, is a member.

Although politicians and the media have declared ad nauseam that “the working class is dead,” or that “We’re all middle class now,” the survey shows that many Britons adhere to working class identity regardless of career movement into supervisory or managerial roles or qualification for professional positions.

The response of the authors of the report and media commentary was one of incredulity. The authors concluded that workers were suffering mass class myopia and were mistaken about how much things have improved. Their attitude resembles former Conservative Prime Minister Harold McMillan’s infamous flippant response of “You’ve never had it so good!” when a heckler demanded “What about the workers?”

Echoing the attitude of the NatCen Research authors, the *Guardian* commissioned Lynsey Hanley, a visiting fellow in cultural studies at Liverpool John Moores University, to write, “Although just 25 percent of people now work in routine and manual occupations, 60 percent of Britons regard themselves as working class, a phenomenon described as a ‘working class of the mind’ that has withstood dramatic changes in the labour market.”

The authors of the report attempt to explain away growing consciousness of class as a failure of managerial and professional layers to understand the nature of social inequality!

The report acknowledges that family background is an important indicator of class self-identity. Having parents who worked in a manual or routine job, for example, meant respondents were more likely to state a working class allegiance. But the study suggests that people who they considered to be middle-class (professionals, managers and supervisory positions), identified as working class because they perceive themselves and others like them as disadvantaged in a society dominated by a tiny wealthy elite.

These layers will not acknowledge the simple fact that the reason why nearly two thirds of the British population consider themselves workers is because objectively they are.

Indeed, the ranks of the working class are being swelled, not reduced, by changes associated with the globalisation of commodity production and the proletarianisation of professions previously viewed as middle class.

Regardless of gender, ethnicity or nationality, whether they are white collar or blue, craft, labour, technical, retail or knowledge workers, what workers all share in common, regardless of superficial differences, is their non-ownership of the means of production and exploitation by the class that does.

The survey provoked concerns among the ruling elite as to its implications.

Noting the majority of British people identifying as workers the *Financial Times* nervously noted, “Exactly the same proportion—60 percent—identify themselves as working class as did in 1983, a year before a bitter miners’ strike which heralded a wave of deindustrialisation that wiped out many traditional working class jobs.”

The *FT* are not the only ones looking nervously over their shoulder. Kirby Swales on behalf of NatCen Social Research wrote in the BSA survey’s foreword, “... for the most part the changes are not big attitudinal leaps, but rather small steps. This is of course usually how attitudes change. But a cohesive democracy should worry about a public that describes society as divided by class and says social mobility is decreasing... We must think about how we can find consensus on a way forward for the health service and the welfare state. Because with austerity expected to continue until at least 2020 these small steps might well add up to a leap.”



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