

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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New working class youth: identity problems

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Abstract. The actualization of working-class studies in Russia can be explained by the dynamics of the social structure of the post-Soviet society. The analysis of class and stratification approaches has shown that a new working class has become the main element of the social structure of the contemporary Russian society. This article studies and defines the new working class in its difference from the traditional proletariat and other types of hired workers. The author studies the youth's professional identity, showing its instability and controversy, and its class-consciousness. That, in turn, speaks of the instability of the whole class identity and unformed class-consciousness. Contemporary working class shows no signs of the previous proletariat, but it is a new wide social class, which is still forming under social differentiation of new owners and hired workers in the economy and service sector. As already mentioned, the social position of the new Russian working class is fundamentally different from the status of the Soviet proletariat. Back then, the working class was the "leading social force", the source of all progressive social transformations, and even the criterion of public morality. Nowadays, it has become an actual social group of employees, subjected to all forms of exploitation and alienation, and has the right to fight with the employers for the improvement of their working conditions. This article relies on the empirical data of the study conducted in April-June 2018 in the Ural Federal District. Its results show that the young people do not show sufficient and stable signs of solidarity and identity, which were inherent to their predecessors.

Keywords: new working class, stratification and class approach, identity, precariat.

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INTRODUCTION

Modern Russian sociologists foreground the issue of the class structure in Russian society as open to investigation. Obviously, there is a class of large business and capital owners. The problems of the middle class are widely discussed. But the most numerous social group of hired workers to this day remains least studied. There are no clear criteria for their differentiation; class analysis is not used to identify differences within this group. A new current research challenge is justification of the class analysis for the description of the social stratification of Russian society.

In the Russian sociology of the late 20th-early 21st centuries, the concept of the working class is practically not used, apparently due to the ideological nature of the term. Throughout Soviet history, the working class was seen as the foundation of the social structure. The desire to abandon the communist ideology in social studies, as is generally known, led to the almost complete abandonment of Marxism as a methodology in the social sciences. The abandonment of the rigid ideological control in the period of late socialism, and especially in post-Soviet Russia, led to the denial of the heuristic meaning of the Marxist approach to the explanation of the social structure.

Marxism, Weberianism, and functionalism are the main theories of social stratification; the rejection of Marxism also meant the rejection of the search for class reasons to explain the new social stratification. In the Marxist theory, classes were considered as objectively existing structural elements, regardless of their representatives' awareness of their belonging to any of them. In the theory of class as the basis of social structure, the central idea is the category of interest.

It is the interests—economic, political, or cultural—that distinguish classes from each other. The difference between their interests determines class antagonism. Awareness of class interests is the element and the basis for the transformation of the “class in itself” into a “class for itself”. Self-identification of representatives of social groups with some class is one of the effective mechanisms of this process. Self-identity and awareness of belonging to a particular social group is a necessary step towards the formation and expression of class interests.

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH METHODS

Stratification theories, including class analysis of social differentiation, shaped the methodological basis for our approach. We also used empirical methods: a mass survey, an expert survey, and a biographical interview. We conducted a mass survey of the new working class youth aged 15-29, residents of the Ural Federal District.

The target multistage sampling was used. It was based on four objective criteria: age (three age groups corresponding to the periodization of age cohorts in the official statistics of the Russian Federation: 15-19, 20-24, 25-29 years old); sex; place of residence (city/village in the ratio of 80/20% in accordance with the distribution of the population in the Ural Federal District); and sphere of employment (real economy / service sector). The calculation of the sample size equaled to 1,500 respondents: 500 people in each of the selected age groups in accordance with the statistical data on the other three criteria.

Three cities (Yekaterinburg, Tyumen, and Kurgan) and typical rural settlements in these areas were selected for quantitative research. The required minimum for expert surveying equaled 100 respondents. During the biographical interview, 30 informants were polled in accordance with the selected characteristics of the respondent. All types of the tools used were developed by the team of the authors for the implementation of the project “Life strategies of a new working class young people in modern Russia”.

MAIN PART

As is known, K. Marx did not clearly define the concept of the “working class”, although it was he who devised the theories of class and socio-economic formations. For many decades, Marxism had been the basis for the scientific research in Soviet social studies. Its framework not only outlined, but also limited the range of possible problems and research tasks. The ideological commitment of the working class research also posed problems. Thus, a number of applied projects on the working class were implemented during the 1970s, but the setting of tasks was related to its role in the development of socialist relations, the influence of this class on the success of “building communism” [18, p. 29; 25, p. 9; 8, p. 14; 13, p. 21, 15, p. 24; 7, p. 13; 10, p. 18; 17, p. 30].

Already in the 1980s the subject-matter began to change gradually; there were attempts to study the transformation of the class of the hired workers in the sphere of material production, their creative potential, and real role in the life of the society [11, p. 19; 19, p. 25; 18, p. 28]. In the 1990s, the concept of the “working class” virtually ceased to exist in Russian sociology. Despite this, the “working” topic did not disappear completely from Russian studies. A number of articles and dissertations appeared reflecting the real situation and the real problems of industrial workers in the transforming Russia [22, p. 33; 23; 24, p. 8; 14; 16; 6].

In the second half of the 20th century, the notion of a “new working class” appeared in Western sociology to designate a particular stratum. The new working class differed from the traditional working class by a higher level of education, engagement in technologically complex labor and their social intentions focused on the problems of power and management, unlike the old working class who was engaged only in solving economic problems. For the first time the term *new working class* was used by S. Malle (1963), followed by A. Touraine, A. Hertz, Blouner, Galli and others.

The ideas of the active participation of highly skilled workers in production management, increasing influence of trade unions, workers’ control over production and their growing political consciousness have not been confirmed in the globalizing capitalism and did not correspond to the realities of the modern world. On the contrary, current realities demonstrated tendencies towards increasing inequality, successful policies of global capitalism in separating the working class, preventing development of political organizations, and reducing the role of trade unions.

Meanwhile, the working class has inevitably changed alongside capitalism itself. It is quite obvious that nowadays neither industrial workers nor those employed in



the real sector of the economy are methodologically sufficient to be included in the working class. Probably, that part of the hired workers which belongs to the service sector (in its broadest sense) is also part of the new working class. Moreover, it is the service working class (grey-collar workers) that today shows the greatest growth dynamics: their number in the countries with developed market economies already exceeds the number of the workers employed in traditional industrial sectors.

Revitalization of the “working class” problematics requires the solution of not only applied tasks related to studying the real situation of industrial workers, but also comprehensive research and theoretical underpinning for using the class approach in modern Russia. We have analyzed the features of the class and stratification approaches to the explanation of the social structure of contemporary Russian society and offer our own definition of the new working class (the co-author of the proposed definition is T. V. Gavriiliuk, the head of the above-mentioned project). It is a group of hired workers employed in all spheres of material production and service, whose labor, in content and nature, is routinized and segmented; they do not participate in management and have no ownership rights in the enterprise (organization) they work. As a rule, these are workers without higher education. They are beyond the organizational authority and control; the degree of their freedom and powers in the organizational structures are limited; they practically do not affect any planning, organization or control of labor. The key difference in the new working class is not its place in the system of state power relations—proximity to the sources of the centralized resource distribution, but their relation to property ownership rights and participation in the management of a particular enterprise” [3, p. 25].

This class includes not only hired workers employed in industrial production (as is still considered a priori in Russian sociology), but also the ever-growing group of hired service workers. To this day, in theoretical sociology and especially in applied research, workers are considered to be only a part of the traditional (industrial) class. Stable nature of employment and a mandatory formal labor contract are not class-forming attributes for the new working class i.e. it also includes a certain percentage of the precariat that meets the basic characteristics. One of the arguments proving the erosion of social classes is often the fact of ownership of a certain number of shares of the enterprises by their employees. In our opinion, if the owner of the shares cannot influence the company’s policy, then their presence does not affect their social class status. Even with the shares of their companies, workers do not actually participate in organizational decision making, still remaining only employees.

The nature of youth employment in the new working class and its dynamics in the Urals Federal District in the last decade demonstrate consolidation of class positions and a rather low social mobility (see Table 1). We analyzed youth employment based on the results of the household monitoring projects conducted by the National Research University Higher School of Economics. For the purposes of our project we identified only the households in the Urals Federal District as the subject of the research.

Such surveys have been conducted in Russia as a whole and in its regions since 1992. Their goal is to obtain “information on the number and composition of the workforce (employed and unemployed), the level of participation in the workforce, the level of employment and unemployment and their dynamics in the administrative units of the Russian Federation. The selection units are private households; the observation units are persons aged 15 to 72—members of these households. During each survey, about 70 thousand people are polled” [12].

The overwhelming majority of the working youth employed in the formal sector of economy (the situation is the same for the village and the city) work full time, have one main place of employment and no second jobs. The position of the young people aged 15-19 is somewhat different: slightly less than 90% of them are full-time workers (in 2010 and 2015). Employment structure in the informal sector looks less uniform. In this sector, about 2/3 of the working youth are employed full-time, and about 1/4 have second jobs; and less than 60% of the respondents work full time in the villages, while almost 30% (about 1/3 in 2010) have a second job. The situation in the informal youth employment sector remained almost unchanged from 2010 to 2015. The exception is the situation in the age group 15-19.

With this in mind, the structure of Russian society can be presented not only in the categories of stratification theory, but also justified within the framework of the

Table 1. The employment and availability of additional work in the formal and informal sectors among urban and rural youth of the Ural Federal District (by age group, %) *

| Age groups | Main job | | | | | | Second job | |
|------------------------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|-------------|------------|-------------|--------------|--------------|
| | Full-time | | Part-time | | Flexi-time | | 2010 | 2015 |
| | 2010 | 2015 | 2010 | 2015 | 2010 | 2015 | | |
| <i>Formal sector</i> | | | | | | | | |
| 15-29 years old | 97.11 | 97.57 | 2.09 | 0.79 | 0 | 1.28 | 0.8 | 0.36 |
| 15-19 years old | 88.64 | 88.96 | 9.85 | 6.49 | 0 | 3.25 | 1.52 | 1.3 |
| 20-24 years old | 97.15 | 97.51 | 1.96 | 0.81 | 0 | 1.19 | 0.89 | 0.49 |
| 25-29 years old | 97.62 | 97.94 | 1.69 | 0.55 | 0 | 1.24 | 0.69 | 0.26 |
| City (15-29 years old) | 97.39 | 97.99 | 1.9 | 0.7 | 0 | 0.94 | 0.71 | 0.37 |
| Village (15-29 years old) | 96.37 | 96.39 | 2.58 | 1.05 | 0 | 2.23 | 1.04 | 0.33 |
| <i>Informal sector</i> | | | | | | | | |
| 15-29 years old | 64.94 | 62.56 | 6.53 | 3.75 | 0 | 6.12 | 28.53 | 27.57 |
| 15-19 years old | 46.96 | 28.74 | 10.43 | 11.49 | 0 | 2.3 | 42.61 | 57.47 |
| 20-24 years old | 67.17 | 64.65 | 7.17 | 4.84 | 0 | 7.99 | 25.66 | 22.52 |
| 25-29 years old | 66.39 | 65.43 | 5.25 | 2.2 | 0 | 5.51 | 28.36 | 26.86 |
| City (15-29 years old) | 69.17 | 66.04 | 5.18 | 2.87 | 0 | 4.49 | 25.65 | 26.59 |
| Village (15-29 years old) | 57.21 | 56 | 9.01 | 5.41 | 0 | 9.18 | 33.78 | 29.41 |

* Source: [12].



class approach. It includes the following main classes: large shareholders, the middle class (small and medium businesses, managers, including public officials, intellectuals and creative workers), the new working class, the underclass.

Of course, the class structure of any society, including contemporary Russian one, does not deny the existence of non-class social groups: schoolchildren, college students, asocial groups including criminal, etc.

Nowadays, in global and national sociology, the class approach is most clearly reflected in the controversy over the birth of a new social class—the precariat [20], which, according to some researchers, replaces the traditional working class. The author’s definition of the precariat as a “new dangerous class” is not represented in G. Standing’s work, but he describes its distinctive features.

G. Standing emphasizes the fundamental differences between the precariat and the traditional working class. He sees the main differences in the concept of “security which includes 1) labor market security; 2) job security; 3) labor guarantee; 4) labor safety; 5) qualification reproduction; 6) income security; 7) the security of expression” [20, p. 10]. Other differences are related to the participation of these classes in social distribution and peculiarities of their occupational identity.

The precariat lacks occupational identity. This is expressed in the absence of career growth and class solidarity prospects. “The precariat does not feel as part of a solidarized labor community” [20, p. 12]. Considering the precariat as a new class, G. Standing determines its place and relationship with the other social groups. Contemporary class structure consists of four main groups: the elite—a small layer of “absurdly wealthy citizens who are able to impose their decisions on any government”; “salarial”—those in stable full-time employment; professionals and, finally, the surviving industrial working class experiencing decline and loss of the sense of solidarity.

“A new class, the precariat, is actively developing in the new social structure. It consists of many disadvantaged people living an uncertain and insecure life, working irregularly and constantly changing jobs without any prospects for professional growth” [20, p. 7].

In contrast to the stand of Standing, 2011, the methodological approach of Russian sociologists is vaguer: from recognizing the precariat as a new class to the complete denial of its class features. Zh. T. Toshchenko, who published the monograph “Precariat: From Prototype to New Class” in 2018, shares G. Standing’s ideas [21].

Despite the popularity of unstable forms of labor relationships, we do not consider the precariat a new social class. In our opinion, the precariat is now becoming part of the new working class reflecting global stability and radical changes in labor relations. Treating the precariat as a separate new element of the social structure or as a new social class, we shift the research emphasis from the process of precarisation of all wage labor and global changes in labor relationships in the 21st century. Precarisation extends to almost all layers of employees regardless of the nature of their work, level of education and employment. Precarisation is a widespread phenomenon of global labor and economic relations in all countries with market economies.

Following G. Standing, domestic sociologists are trying to identify the danger of the precariat. Young Russian people, graduates of higher professional education institutions, are at risk: according to official data, up to 10% of university graduates cannot find employment. Thus, actual social risks are associated with this group:

1. The danger of deprofessionalisation of young professionals who are not in demand at the start of their careers as representatives of their profession.
2. The lack of desire among the precariat to accumulate human capital, improve their skills, change something in their working life.
3. The precariat is most common in the service sector, trade. Its representatives are engaged in the field of manual labor and services.
4. Most of the precariat today are citizens of Russia (by birth), in contrast to the developed western countries where this social stratum is replenished mainly by migrants.
5. Precariat representatives avoid any innovations and are not ready for changes in their employment behavior considering instability and temporality of employment as a sign of time and fluidity as the standard of existence [4, p. 103-106].

The global social trends in the changing forms of employment alongside the transformation of the formally and permanently employed wage earners into precariously employed was noted by Western researchers in the twenty-first century [1]. Precarisation as a process of quantitative and qualitative change in employment concerns the majority of modern employees. This process is especially painful in Russia, where for many decades previous generations not only had the right to work, but were also legally obligated to work. Formalized employment was accompanied by the social guarantees of the employee's job security and stability as well as "confidence in the future".

The issue of the precariat was raised again in the sociological community by the Russian government. In April 2013 at the international conference "Modernization of Economy and the Society", Deputy Prime Minister O. Golodets stated that 38 million able-bodied Russians are employed in the "non-legitimized labor market," "it's not clear where and how they are employed" [5].

This prompted domestic researchers to conduct a "revision" of the Russian wage labor market. It revealed that about 30% of Russians are in precarious employment [4, p. 101]. The fact of non-stable insecure employment does not allow us to confidently assert the 30% share of the precariat in the contemporary social structure. This is only the starting point for the study of the actual transformation of the labor market, employment, and new forms of wage labor.

Short-time and part-time employment, freelancing, housework, self-employment, contracted work, and other forms of modern labor can hardly be categorized as precariat. All the more, one cannot argue that all those who are in unstable employment form a certain class. Z. T. Golenkova considers the precariat to be a certain social stratum. One can agree with her in determining deprivation as the basic criterion of belonging to this group.

“Only those representatives of informal wage labor who are subjected to deprivation can be considered the precariat. The necessary condition is the forced nature of informal employment. The imposition of temporary employment on the individual, deprivation of his/her freedom of choice, his/her leasing or externalization – all these events are signs of precarious social and labor relations” [4, p. 101].

It should be noted that Russian state authorities are much concerned with precarisation of Russian employees.

January 1, 2016, a law prohibiting non-standard forms of employment namely, externalization, outsourcing and staff leasing in all their forms, came into force.

The process of precarisation of wage labor is particularly pronounced in the characteristics of the contemporary, new working class of Russia. These characteristics are associated with the loss of class solidarity and erosion of class identity. Some features of class self-consciousness of working youth, which we identified in our empirical study, are shown in Table 2.

The contradictory assessments and exactly opposite statements of the respondents characterize the vagueness of class consciousness and absence of class identity. This is particularly evident in their assessment of life prospects. Recognizing that being a worker (craftsman) is beneficial, they are nevertheless confident that their position is “not for the entire life”. More than 70% of young workers are confident that “tomorrow” a worker can become a successful businessman. The call for class solidarity (“must fight”–86.2%) is immediately refuted (42.3%–“there is no working class”). The signs of unstable class identity even more clearly demonstrate the attitude of the working youth to their own class and representatives of other social strata (Table 3).

Table 2. The class identity attributes of the new working class youth

| Attributes | Agree (% surveyed) | Disagree (% surveyed) |
|--|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| Today being a worker, a professional, is profitable. | 73.4 | 26.6 |
| Working people have always been the majority, they are the basis of any society. | 75.1 | 24.8 |
| The new working class today is the only force capable of boosting the country's economy. | 53.1 | 46.9 |
| Being a worker today is prestigious. | 36.2 | 63.8 |
| Workers today are those who could not achieve anything in their lives. | 19.2 | 80.8 |
| Workers are the most powerless part of society. | 27.4 | 72.6 |
| Workers must fight for their rights, defend their interests in relations with employers. | 86.2 | 13.8 |
| There is no working class today; everyone who is employed is in completely different conditions. | 42.3 | 57.7 |
| Today's worker may be a successful businessman tomorrow. | 70.7 | 29.2 |

Table 3. The attitude towards the representatives of different professions and groups (% of the respondents)

| | With respect, would like to be one of them | With respect | Indifferent | Rather negatively |
|-----------------------------|--|--------------|-------------|----------------------|
| Businessmen | 35.3 | 38.6 | 23.1 | 3.1 |
| Workers | 8.8 | 78.9 | 11.7 | 0.6 |
| Artists, actors | 10.1 | 56.5 | 30.5 | 2.8 |
| Scientists | 8.9 | 67.5 | 21.0 | 2.6 |
| Officials | 8.0 | 32.2 | 37.2 | 22.6 |
| Managers | 6.4 | 43.6 | 45.9 | 4.1 |
| Designers | 10.4 | 48.5 | 38.3 | 2.8 |
| Military personnel | 13.1 | 68.1 | 16.7 | 2.1 |
| Policemen | 9.5 | 56.0 | 29.2 | 5.3 |
| Teachers | 7.5 | 79.5 | 11.8 | 1.2 |
| Doctors | 8.0 | 81.4 | 9.3 | 1.3 |
| Musicians | 7.3 | 53.5 | 35.8 | 3.4 |
| Migrant workers | 2.1 | 20.4 | 42.5 | 35.0 |
| Crime bosses | 4.6 | 16.6 | 35.4 | 43.4 |
| Politicians | 4.6 | 26.0 | 41.6 | 27.8 |
| Sales Consultants | 3.2 | 44.4 | 45.2 | 7.2 |
| Bankers, Financiers | 6.9 | 41.9 | 43.7 | 7.4 |
| IT specialists, programmers | 6.1 | 50.8 | 38.2 | 4.9 |

Table 4. The distribution of the answers to the question “How long are you going to work in your current profession?” (groups of respondents, %).

| Working youth groups | Hope it is for the entire life | I think, for quite a long time, until I become a manager | Not for long, until I find something more suitable | I would prefer not to work at all if I could find other sources of income | I don't know, we'll see | Total |
|---|--------------------------------|--|--|---|-------------------------|-------|
| By sex | | | | | | |
| Males | 57.5 | 54.3 | 41.4 | 61 | 47.8 | 100 |
| Females | 42.5 | 45.7 | 58.6 | 39 | 52.2 | 100 |
| By age groups | | | | | | |
| 15-19 years old | 21.5 | 28.2 | 38 | 41.5 | 34.2 | 100 |
| 20-24 years old | 38.7 | 35.5 | 35.7 | 25.4 | 30.6 | 100 |
| 25-29 years old | 39.8 | 36.4 | 26.3 | 33.1 | 35.1 | 100 |
| Groups of respondents by field of employment | | | | | | |
| Industry | 50.2 | 54.3 | 33.1 | 48.3 | 44 | 100 |
| Service sector | 49.8 | 45.7 | 66.9 | 51.7 | 56 | 100 |
| Groups of respondents by residence | | | | | | |
| Cities | 71.3 | 87.4 | 77.1 | 87.3 | 70.1 | 100 |
| Rural areas | 28.7 | 12.6 | 22.9 | 12.7 | 29.9 | 100 |
| In general, all respondents | 17.3 | 22.6 | 23.2 | 7.8 | 29.2 | 100 |



Along with the traditional high rating in the public mind of the professions of teachers, doctors, scientists and the revived respect for the military (from 67.5% to 81.4%; 8—13% do not exclude the possibility of becoming one of these), the span of assessments of the “worker” status is remarkable in itself. Almost 80% of respondents indicated that they treat workers “with respect,” but only 8.8% would like to retain their current status. This implies the severest identity crisis among working-class youth and lack of prospects for the growth of class-awareness. The instability of class identity is also manifested in the evaluation of perspectives and professional affiliation (Table 4).

Professional identity of working youth, according to the distribution of the respondents’ answers, is unstable and contradictory. This indicates instability of class identity and unformed class consciousness.

CONCLUSION

Nowadays, the working class as the main element of the social structure is not a return to the proletariat of the past centuries: it is a new large social class that is emerging in the course of the social differentiation of new owners and new employees in the real sector of the economy and service.

The social status and social position of the new Russian working class differ significantly from these characteristics of the traditional working class, the “Soviet working class”. The Soviet period in the history of the country was characterized by the recognition of the working class as the source of everything progressive and positive (even in the sphere of moral relations); it was the backbone of state policy. The new working class is still being formed as an actual social group. Its social role and status do not allow us to claim that nowadays it is turning from a “class in itself” into a “class for itself”. At the same time, it is the new working class that represents a new large social group of employees who are exploited and alienated.

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