

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Class solidarity of working youth in the service sector

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Abstract. The purpose of this article is to show the peculiarities of the class self-awareness and solidarity formation among the new working class youth occupied in the service sector of the economy. The main tasks include revealing the correlation between the traditional content and forms of class solidarity of workers and their manifestations among the new working class youth; substantiating the use of a class approach to the analysis of the problems of young people employed in the service sector of the economy; and revealing the contradictions between the class interests and corporate habitus of the young customer service workers. The research methodology is grounded in the traditional institutional approach adopted in Russian sociology. This article is based on the materials of an empirical study using quantitative and qualitative sociological methods: a mass survey of working-class youth in the Ural Federal District (a target multistage sample model according to four objective criteria: age, gender, place of residence, and employment). Additionally, a biographical interview was conducted, the informants of which are employed in the real sector of the economy and the service sector. The results have revealed that a new working class is being formed in modern Russia, a significant part of which is employed in the service sector of the economy. The active formation of the sphere of customer service reflects the global patterns of the traditional working class transformation. In the service sector, in contrast to the traditional working class, a significant proportion of young people lack the experience of the class solidarity of previous generations. A new generation of young workers is shaping their own experience of class solidarity in the face of conflicting demands of corporate culture and social status.

Keywords: working class, working-class youth, service, service sector, solidarity, new working class, corporate habitus.

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of solidarity is key when considering any types of communities. It is precisely this category that indirectly determines their boundaries and directly

identifies members of the community in question. The most important role of this concept is associated with the principles of class analysis. In the years since Karl Marx, working-class solidarity has been viewed as a condition for its transformation from a “class in itself” into a “class for itself”. Solidarity means manifestation of conscious class interests and is the direct source of all revolutionary transformations. The modern-day popularity of the concept of solidarity goes beyond the framework of class analysis and reasonable diversification of global communities. It reflects turbulence of their existence: fragmentation, partial identity, fluidity, and flexibility of social norms.

Nowadays, the interest in manifestations of solidarity as something “ensuring the stability of the social system and at the same time being a resource for its renewal” [10] is caused by the global instability of all social systems. The regulatory role of solidarity has become more vital in the face of social crisis or social trauma. In contemporary Russian and world sociology, there is a significant number of research on the problems of solidarity built on various conceptual foundations. However, the task of identification of the current types and forms of solidarity and their classification remains unfulfilled.

The topicality of the research material presented in the article is determined, first of all, by the fact that the problematics of working youth in service industries is practically neglected in Russian sociology. Contrary to the global trend, in Russia, employees of the routinized customer service, whose number is constantly increasing, are still not considered as part of the working class.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A range of theoretical and empirical methods correlate with the research aim and objectives. They included methods and tools for collecting empirical information developed by the author. The article is based on the empirical research data collected by a team of researchers in which the author of the article directly participated. Quantitative (a questionnaire-based survey) and qualitative (biographical interview) sociological methods were utilized. Representatives of the working youth of the Ural Federal District (15-29 year-old) took part in the survey. The sampling process included several stages based on four criteria: age (three age groups 15-19; 20-24; and 25-29 years old corresponding to the periodization of age cohorts in the official statistics of the Russian Federation); gender; place of residence; sphere of employment (the real sector of the economy / service). The number of respondents amounted to 1,534 persons in three cities and regions of the Ural Federal District (Yekaterinburg, Tyumen, Kurgan). Biographical interviews were conducted with 31 informants, 17 of whom are employed in the real sector of the economy and 14 are service workers. The respondents and informants of the biographical interview were young workers representing the traditional working class, as well as those (in proportion to the real distribution of workers in the Urals Federal District) employed in the service sector. The selection criterion involved the character of work (routine and strictly regulated) and participation in management (respondents do not perform managerial functions at their workplace).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The concept of solidarity is a traditional subject of social thought. In the past two centuries, it has been considered as an ideological basis of various political forces — from liberal to totalitarian. Russian sociologists V. Kovalev, A. Popov, and V. Khotsenko [6] analyzed the evolution of the idea of solidarity from Au. Comte to modern researchers. They single out four main globally recognized paradigms of solidarity and solidarity practices:

“sociological, philosophical, ideological and religious. Within the framework of the sociological paradigm, social solidarity was studied from the standpoint of the really established solidarity practices serving as a basis for integration within society and ensuring its stability. In the philosophical paradigm, solidarity was viewed as a moral duty derived from the scientific knowledge about social processes. The ideological paradigm involves the study of solidarity as an idea of serving the state. Within the framework of the religious paradigm, the Christian idea of solidarity evolved as the highest form of self-organization and manifestation of the divine plan” [6, p. 109].

Historically — beginning from the 19th century to the present day — the idea of solidarity has been exploited “by different, even opposite social trends. It was developed by socialists and liberals, reformists and revolutionaries, conservatives and innovators ... anarchists and etatists, mystics and adherents of strict science” [5, p. 6]. P. Sorokin defined the sociological meaning of the category of solidarity. In his concept of integralism, solidarity is

“a positive form of interaction between individuals which presupposes a high degree of agreement regarding attitudes and behavioral goals as well as the desire for mutual assistance and support. The opposite of solidarity is antagonistic interaction based on forced social ties” [8, p. 47].

Modern sociology considers social solidarity through “relations of solidarity within certain groups” [1, 11]. At the same time, sociologists divide the practices of solidarity actions and relations into:

“positive and negative. If positive solidarity erases boundaries, the negative one erects barriers rallying people on the basis of rejection of something: values, social positions, lifestyle, qualities, external features, actions ” [2].

As noted by D. Efremenko, it is only in the last decade that a certain systematic approach to the consideration of the phenomenon of social solidarity was revived [3]. This approach is especially noticeable in the countries which have not abandoned the class concept for the analysis of contemporary societies, particularly American sociologists.

Despite a significant number of research devoted to the problems of solidarity, its definition, contemporary forms and their typology remain an unsolved research problem.

The relevance of the research is determined, first of all, by the fact that the problematics of working youth in service industries is practically neglected in Russian sociology. Contrary to the global trend, in Russia employees of the routinized customer service, whose number is constantly increasing, are still not considered as part of the working class. However, we consider those employed in the service sector (sales, catering, housing and communal services, banking, healthcare, security, culture, sports and recreation, repair and consumer services) as an integral part of the new working class that is emerging in modern Russia [4]. Russia's services sector has been developing extremely rapidly in recent decades partly due to the outflow of labor force from the traditional working class.

According to official statistics, nowadays, more than 18% of all those employed in the economy work in sales. The professional group of salespeople is the largest in terms of the number of workers — about 5 million people. In addition to the sellers themselves, other personnel should be taken into account: cashiers, assistants [7, p. 112]. Russian researchers stress that most of sales jobs are held by young people which is caused by the typical for the post-industrial economy combination of high technological and organizational culture with the widespread use of low-skilled manual labor. There are two other important features of the development of this sphere of service: high employee turnover within sales companies and a relatively closed intra-industry movement of personnel. Those who leave a sales company will most likely seek employment options in the same business [9, p. 101].

This article focuses on the following research question: What institutional factors are currently having the greatest impact on the professional and class solidarity of young people in the service sector of the economy? To provide an answer it is necessary to understand the extent to which views on class identity and class boundaries existing within modern society have been formed in the minds of working youth. Table 1 presents analysis of answers to these questions.

As expected, respondents employed in industry, transportation, and construction classify themselves as the working class. Gender and age characteristics are clearly manifested: older men formulate their class affiliation much more clearly. A different picture is observed among service workers. First, the analysis of the data obtained shows a higher educational level of those employed in the service industries; secondly, in some age groups women predominate. Among those employed in industry, only 43.9% of respondents are satisfied with their official duties as compared to 56.1% of employees in the service sector. In biographical interviews informants expressed a need in variety and creativity. Here is a fairly typical description of such motivation (Natalya, an administrator, 22 years old),

“I am such a person... I explore the whole sphere in six months. And during these six months, this is about the kind of activity when, first of all, you learn everything; when you can do everything on your own and when you already get tired of constantly doing the same thing; there is no development. After six months, my work becomes uninteresting ... you need some kind of impetus because otherwise you start to decay. When you do the same monotonous work, there is no development. It is one thing if you know that there will be development in the future, then you can

hold on to this place. This can motivate me. But if I know that there will be no further development, that this is it, then I no longer see a goal. Well, just make money, come home, everything is monotonous: home-work, home-work, and you know that it will always be like this.”

At the same time, while highly appreciating their work duties, service workers are almost twice as likely to express dissatisfaction with their relations with colleagues (Table 2).

Characterizing their workplace relationships, young workers in service industries emphasize competitiveness of the environment, rather frequent conflicts, indifference and disinterest of colleagues. Representatives of the traditional working class (almost half of them) point to the preservation of relations of solidarity, mutual assistance, and understanding. An informant of the biographical interview (Alexander, 28 years old, a car sales manager) assesses competitiveness of the working environment as follows,

“The main problem is random people coming and then quickly leaving the company. They think that there is nothing difficult in our work, but very quickly understand that this is not true but do not want to learn and develop at all ... And one more problem is unfair competition as a result of which not the professionalism of the salesperson plays the main role, but the power of the manager to offer discounts.”

Table 1. The distribution of answers to the question: “Which group do you identify yourself with” (% , by groups of respondents)

Response options	By gender groups		By age groups			Groups of respondents by sphere of work		In the overall sample
	Males	Females	15-19 years old	20-24 years old	25-29 years old	Industry	Service sphere	
Middle class	39.9	60.1	29.9	33.5	36.6	38.2	61.8	28
Working class	57.8	42.2	27.8	33.8	38.4	58.3	41.7	40.7
Lower class	41.2	58.8	52.9	29.4	17.6	32.4	67.6	2.5
Employed worker	48.6	51.4	29.7	24.3	45.9	35.1	64.9	16.3
Freelancer	45.7	54.3	42.4	32.7	24.9	31.4	68.6	4.7
Creative class	67.1	32.9	37.1	37.1	25.7	44.3	55.7	2
Other group	46.7	53.3	46.7	33.3	20	26.7	73.3	1
Total								100

Table 2. The distribution of answers to the question: “Which type of relations between the employees prevail in your organization today?” (% , by groups of respondents)

Youth groups HPK	Solidarity, mutual support and assistance	Competition — “everyone defends their own interests”	Enmity conflicts, intrigues	There are small groups within which you can count on mutual support and assistance	Indifference — nobody cares about anyone
By gender groups					
Males	51.4	45.2	51.5	49	52
Females	48.6	54.8	48.5	51	48
By age groups					
15-19 years old	33	38.5	39.4	28.9	36.6
20-24 years old	35.9	24.4	12.1	35	24.4
25-29 years old	31.1	37	48.5	36.1	39
Groups of respondents by sphere of work					
Industry	45.7	39.3	30.3	45.7	52.8
Service sphere	54.3	60.7	69.7	54.3	47.2
In the overall sample	57.4	8.9	2.2	23.4	8.1

Assessment of the degree of competitiveness and solidarity in the working environment is currently devoid of definitely negative connotations. Moreover, there are opinions that it is the competitive environment that contributes to employees’ self-development, improvement of their skills and professional growth.

Peculiarities of employment relationships, especially in customer service, are also associated with the fact that these employees are included in the relationship with the third, sometimes the most important participant of these relations — the client. The “employee-client” relationship regulated by the corporate culture most often acts as an institutional factor of control on the part of the employer and a source of potential conflict in the work environment. According to the analysis of biographical interviews, these relationships act as a destructive factor in workers’ solidarity. Bound by the norms of corporate culture, an employee entering into a relationship with a client has no support of other team members and bears personal responsibility for the nature and result

of this interaction. In the survey and especially in biographical interviews, informants emphasized the lack of employees' rights in interactions with difficult clients. Here is how an informant (Alina, an administrator, 25 years old) describes these situations in a rather restrained manner, without going beyond the corporate culture,

“Well... [sighs], it's rather hard work because you have to be responsible for everything, get on the right side of people who are not always adequate. Well, sometimes ... after work I feel emotionally tired.”

Informants emphasize that the double dependence on the employer, control of the immediate supervisor and requirements of the corporate culture in the relationship with the client multiply the risks of labor relations and create a feeling of powerlessness and discomfort. Another informant (Ruslan, a salesman, 20 years old) explains why he feels uncomfortable at work,

“I just do not like the fact that ... there is a person who is superior, who can ... at any moment say, “You are fired”; “We will pay you less next month because you did not work well.” It seems to me that the biggest problem is inadequate people (clients), this, I don't know (paused), is the problem of problems, so to speak, but there are also inadequate bosses who, for example, don't even know how to manage business.”

Awareness of their rights or lack of rights in labor and social relations differs significantly across various socio-demographic groups (by age and gender). Differences are especially striking in the work environment by fields of work (Table 3).

Table 3. Agreement with the statement: “Workers are the most disenfranchised part of society” (% , by groups of respondents)

Groups of youth HPK	Agree	Disagree
By gender groups		
Males	42.3	53.5
Females	57.7	46.5
By age groups		
15-19 years old	32.4	32.8
20-24 years old	27.5	36.2
25-29 years old	40.1	31.1
Groups of respondents by sphere of work		
Industry	39.1	47.7
Service sphere	60.9	52.3
Groups of respondents by territory of residence		
Cities	28.8	71.2
Village	23.1	76.9
In the overall sample	27.4	72.6

Below is a typical position of an informant from the middle age group (Sergey, a sales manager, 22 years old). When asked about the feeling of injustice in the relationship with his bosses, he replies,

“Can be different, there were sometimes such cases when, for example, applications got cancelled because our bosses, it happens, overlooked some nuances and the application got cancelled and they did not warn us, and we lost money because of this, because our, sales managers’, wages depend on how much we sold, but they have fixed salaries and it happens — not always, but sometimes — that they don’t care. And I think it is unfair, mean on their part.”

Feelings of injustice, lack of rights and frustration are most clearly manifested among working youth in the service sector. More than 60% of the respondents believe that the working class is deprived. This statement becomes even more obvious when we analyzed responses of our respondents to the question about defending their interests (Table 4).

Table 4. The distribution of answers to the statement: “Workers must fight for their rights, defend their interests in relations with employers” (% , by groups of respondents)

Groups of youth HPK	Agree	Disagree
By gender groups		
Males	50.2	51
Females	49.8	49
By age groups		
15-19 years old	31.6	41.3
20-24 years old	35.8	19.7
25-29 years old	32.6	38.9
Groups of respondents by sphere of work		
Industry	45.6	43.3
Service sphere	54.4	46.7
In the overall sample	86.2	13.8

Their distribution by socio-demographic groups demonstrates that there is practically no difference between them: those who are at the beginning of their career and experienced professionals clearly understand the difference between their class interests and the interests of the owners. Moreover, the younger generation of workers in modern Russia considers it normal to fight for their class interests. At the same time, the fear of losing their jobs is expressed mostly by workers in the service sector. This is how the same informant (Sergey, a sales manager, 22 years old) characterizes the situation when answering the interviewer’s question “If you

or your colleagues are treated unfairly, do employees have any ways to influence this?" The informant replied (pause),

"Most likely not, it seems to me, because we work under a contract, and if the bosses want, we can lose our job literally in a second."

Thus, the contradiction between the awareness of one's own class interests and the practices of corporate habitus creates additional tension in labor relations among young people employed in the service sector of the economy. It would be wrong to claim that young workers are unaware of their employee rights or of the institutional channels for upholding them (Table 5).

However, this knowledge turns into abstract, declarative statements whenever a young worker experiences a workplace injustice. Losing one's job is one of the most common fears of service workers.

Table 5. The distribution of answers to the question: "If your labor rights are violated, what methods of influencing the employer are you ready to use?" (% , by groups of respondents)

Response options	By gender groups		By age groups			Groups of respondents by sphere of work		In the overall sample
	Males	Females	15-19 years old	20-24 years old	25-29 years old	Industry	Service sphere	
Employees' rights protection by unions	47.7	52.3	27.3	43.4	29.3	48	52	20.3
Commencement of action	42.5	57.5	34.4	41.4	24.2	33.3	66.7	18.2
Appeal to the Federal Service for Labor and Employment (Rostrud)	52.2	47.8	37.9	40.1	22	37.4	62.6	12.1
Appeal to the prosecutor's office	46.4	53.6	23	35.9	41.1	37.1	62.9	16.5
Appeal to regional and local authorities	43.7	56.3	40.8	38	21.1	47.9	52.1	4.7
Appeal to the company's labor disputes commission	48	52	32.4	43.9	23.6	33.8	66.2	9.9

Table 5 (end)

Refusal to perform works not included in the employment contract	46.4	53.6	32.1	32.6	35.3	42.3	57.7	31.3
Strikes and other forms of collective protest	52.7	47.3	35.1	35.9	29	45	55	8.7
Appeal to mass media	46.2	53.8	40.7	36.3	23.1	46.2	53.8	6.1
I am not ready to take action	53.9	46.1	32.8	26.4	40.7	47.9	52.1	34.5

CONCLUSION

Thus, the young working-class people represent a non-homogeneous formation. They are quite clearly aware of their own class interests and institutional mechanisms of their protection. A part of the nontraditional working class, that is those employed in the service sector of the economy, have no historical experience of class solidarity practices. Nowadays, they are exposed to the risk of double deprivation: by the employer and by the client. For service workers, the rules and norms of corporate ethics are more important than class interests. More than half of young workers in the service sector do not fight for their employee rights even if they are violated; they are ready to put up with injustice in order to keep their jobs.

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