



Faiza Shaheen

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To counter the Far Right, elite capture and welfare cuts we must reinvigorate class consciousness

Rather than “working people” (Labour) or “white working class” (Reform UK), Faiza Shaheen argues that we need a politics that serves the whole working class – as well as an increasing number of middle-class families currently failed by the system we have in Britain today.

*“The British class system is far subtler and more pervasive than any system of legal inequality” – George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937)*

The British have long been preoccupied with class, but how relevant is this obsession in understanding modern society? A decade has passed since the findings of the BBC’s **Great British Class Survey**, and while conversations about class have waned in sociology and public discourse, its impact on people’s lives remains undeniable. Class isn’t just an abstract sociological concept – it shapes real lives, opportunities, and policy decisions. Last month, we brought together working-class people, practitioners working in these communities, and academics to reignite this crucial conversation. The takeaway was clear: even if we’re not talking about class, it doesn’t mean it’s not important. In fact, after 20 years of working on inequality, I can confidently say that class, and indeed class war, has never been more evident in my lifetime.



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Class is more than just a measure of poverty; it's about understanding relative positions and hierarchies. Unlike poverty, which focuses on one end of the spectrum, class forces us to examine the systemic structures that create and maintain both poverty and wealth.

At the top of this hierarchy are the winners – those who benefit from a system designed to concentrate wealth and power in their hands. Meanwhile, those at the bottom face poor working conditions, demonisation, and a lack of opportunities. This isn't accidental – it's by design. Our economy and our political systems are rigged to funnel wealth upward. By separating conversations about poverty and wealth we fail to join the dots and understand the causal routes. What's been refreshing about the public discourse about the Labour government's welfare cuts in the last few weeks is that people are pointing to the wealthiest to instead foot the bill. We need more of this but we also need to go deeper, pointing out that the poor are poor *because* the rich are rich.

It is not just the **amount we speak about class that is a problem**, but also the way we do so. Too often, assertions about class are made without actually speaking to working class people. This is something we want to do differently with planned new research, and to kickstart this work we held last month's event – a closed-door one day seminar. The idea was simply for working class people, frontline practitioners and academics to listen to each other's perspectives. During our discussions, three key themes emerged from the experiences shared by working-class individuals:

1. Mental health

Mental health was a recurring topic. Workers from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) highlighted how mental health struggles are tied to a lack of opportunities. Young people feel like “losers” in a society that glorifies success on social media and getting rich while offering them few pathways to achieve it. According to the **Mental Health Foundation**, people in the lowest socioeconomic groups are two to three times more likely to develop mental health problems than those in the highest groups.

This isn't just a health issue – it's a class issue. This finding is particularly relevant given Health Secretary **Wes Streeting's controversial claim** that mental health issues are being “over-diagnosed”. Rather than cutting benefits, a better approach would mean addressing the societal causes that are making people mentally ill. The quote, “It is no measure of health to be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society” by Indian philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti, especially resonates at this time.

2. Regional similarities and the housing crisis

In general, the similarities in working-class experiences across regions of the UK were more striking than the differences. One glaring exception, however, was the housing crisis in London, where many

young people are growing up in temporary housing. The charity **Shelter reports** that a record 151,630 children in England are living in temporary accommodation, with London bearing the brunt of this crisis. This figure from 2024 was a 15 per cent increase on the same figure in 2023. This instability in housing has long-term effects on education, mental health, and future prosperity.

3. The erasure of working class stories

Working-class representation in media and culture is shrinking, and when it does appear, it's often riddled with stereotypes. This lack of authentic representation dehumanises working-class people and perpetuates the myth that they are the problem, rather than victims of systemic inequality. A 2024 **study** by the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre found that only 8% of people in the creative industries come from working-class backgrounds. 23% of the UK workforce is from a working-class background, meaning there is considerable underrepresentation in this crucial industry. This erasure has real consequences for how working-class people are perceived and treated.

Our evening event, available to watch **here**, focused on the politics of class. Here again, we came up against the problem of how we speak about the working class. While the Labour Party often speaks of “working people” which I believe is a narrative choice to support their efforts to punish those people not working, the Reform Party talk about the white working class in order to drive a divisive anti-immigration agenda. It seems that no political party is actually fighting for the whole working class, or trying to find the issues that unite us.

Yet, listening to the struggles and concerns working class people have now, I know there are many lower middle-class families who feel similarly. For example, the majority of us are struggling with ever-increasing bills, and are worried about our children's futures, particularly in the face of rising housing costs, stagnant wages, and dwindling opportunities. It's clear that the effects of inequality are spilling over into the middle class. This shared anxiety could be a pivotal moment for unifying the working and middle classes and building a broader coalition for change.

The need for class consciousness

Class remains a powerful lens through which to understand and address inequality in modern Britain. Reinvigorating class consciousness – the awareness of one's position in the class hierarchy and the collective power to challenge it – could be key to countering the Far Right, the concentration of elite power, and a whole range of policies, such as cuts to disability benefits. The voices of working-class people remind us that this isn't just about statistics or abstract theories – it's about real lives, real struggles, and real opportunities for change.

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About the author

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Faiza Shaheen is an economist, political commentator and activist, and a Distinguished Policy Fellow at the LSE's International Inequalities Institute. She is the author of a range of publications on topics including inequality, austerity, immigration and social mobility. Her book, "Know your place: How society sets us up to fail and what we can do about it" was published in 2023. Faiza ran as a Labour then Independent candidate in her home seat, Chingford and Woodford Green, in 2019 and 2024.

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