

Class, Dignity and Self-Esteem



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During a House of Commons debate on the government's flagship Universal Credit programme this January, Erewash MP Maggie Throup asserted: 'let's face it, self-esteem and dignity are so much higher when income comes from earnings rather than from the taxpayer'. Her remark speaks to the extent that demonisation of the working class has become embedded within our political system, it is framed as if general knowledge, as if this is accepted and depoliticised speech. In reality, her comment is deeply divisive in a community already weakened by six years of regressive austerity.

Erewash's working class communities of Ilkeston and Long Eaton were impacted greatly by the gradual decline of Stanton Ironworks that took place from the 1980s. This extensive local employer fell victim to the Conservative-catalysed economic shifts away from U.K. industry. As employment shifted towards the service sector, the social division between the working and middle classes grew larger. The high-level industrial skills within a working class community have little economic value in a service economy, meaning that workers who had previously maintained high-value skills were suddenly perceived as being of low economic worth. Working class men and women could not compete in a new job market where middle class workers had the benefit of an education that was largely inaccessible to those from poorer families. The employment of the working class shifted towards low-skill jobs with little upwards mobility and minimal pay.

Despite endless rounds of policy implementations attempting to overcome the social mobility blockage that exists for working class people, inequality has been increasing since the 1980s in terms of both income and wealth. The divide faced by the working class isn't shrinking; instead, it's getting deeper. In Erewash recent policy shifts towards academisation saw a school in one of the most deprived communities closed down altogether – limiting the chances and opportunities for the most vulnerable to an even greater extent. Other schools here, such as Kirk Hallam Academy, converted while holding 'outstanding' ratings from Ofsted, and then subsequently found themselves downgraded.



Self-esteem and dignity for working class people in this community is not dependent on if someone is forced to rely on benefits. The community here has had its dignity steadily taken away by divisive and oppressive politics. The term ‘taxpayer’ that Throup uses is problematic. The problem is that it falsely implies that there is a fundamental opposition between people who contribute to the system and those who take from it. This divide is political mythology; it does not exist. In reality we are all taxpayers and all people who take from the system in one form or another. This type of language simply shifts the debate, it makes working class communities turn against themselves, when really there is an important united cause.

The growing employment figures here are telling not of success and growth, but of a lack of choice for people under threat of destitution. Austerity measures have forced working class people into exploitative jobs where they are not treated with any sense of dignity or respect. Often, people in these jobs don’t even earn the minimum wage due to legal loopholes. Apprentice schemes are being used not as a way to provide skills for working class people, but as a way for corporations to enhance their profit margins by paying just £3.30 an hour. The narrative that Throup provides disguises this exploitation by saying it is dignified to work, and that the alternative is lacking in self-esteem. If Throup really cared about dignity and self-esteem, would she not oppose exploitative employment, rather than encouraging people into low paid work at her apprenticeship fairs? Would she not fight the academisation programme? Would she not oppose the government’s austerity mission?

There are of course many people who are simply unable to work, and have to rely on benefits. People who suffer disabling conditions or have caring responsibilities for other people. Are these people lacking in dignity as Throup suggests? Quite the opposite, they tend to be the backbone of the community. As Lisa McKenzie pointed out in *Getting By*: people outside of employment often contribute a much greater value to their community than they would be able to provide if they were employed; this often comes in the form of volunteering, either formally or informally.

Maggie Throup has profoundly misunderstood the community she is representing. Value here does not come from your earnings from employment, or where that money comes from; it comes from who you are in ways that the economy, more often than not, fails to recognise. We only have to consider the earnings of a nurse or a teacher to see that wages are a fundamentally bad way of measuring value. And importantly, people’s lives outside of employment can be as valuable as their lives within employment. Communities in Erewash are important in and of themselves; they have value. People in Erewash look after each other; they care for one another without asking for money – people’s sense of dignity should come from being a part of that.

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