



September 10, 2021
Working Class Studies Association
Presidential Address

Dear Fellow Members of the Working Class Studies Association,
It is with much joy and humility that I assume the mantle of current president of our Association. I know I speak for many of our members when I say that Working Class Studies is not just any professional organization, but is rather, for many of us, a labor of love. I have been an active member of the organization for 12 years, and have done service to Working Class Studies in a variety of capacities, but being elected President was one of my proudest moments. Working Class Studies is my academic and activist home, a place where I can pursue my research interests and exchange ideas with scholars, artists, and activists, all within a secure and welcoming environment that encourages openness, collaboration, encouragement, and solidarity. I know from bitter experience that the same cannot be said of other such organizations. This is our home. Let's continue to work to make it a welcoming place for all.

Before I go any further, let me take a moment to acknowledge predecessors, both immediate and long-term. First, thanks to Scott Henkel, now past-president, who eased the way by doing a tremendous job during the last three years, vastly improving our administrative infrastructure, and presiding during the difficult Covid period. And also, thanks to now-past president Allison Hurst, who guided us through the most difficult Covid issues, including the cancelled 2020 conference, and the 2021 redux. Like Scott, Allison's term has been marked by exciting changes and necessary improvements in our communication and recruiting capacities. As well, I wish to acknowledge the deep pool of talented people who have served in various official roles, and who have lent their abilities to our humble organization. We have truly been blessed with some great people, and I stand on their broad shoulders.

I am pleased to report that the state of Working Class Studies Association is strong. In spite of the challenges of Covid, and the often-hostile political climate, our organization has held its ground during hard times, and even thrived in the face of adversity. In the last three years, we have had our first non-U.S. conference (Kent 2019), handled the crisis of the cancellation of WSC 2020, and staged an excellent and well-attended cyber-conference in 2021, that included our live event commemorating the founding of our organization at Youngstown University. Our journal has found a new home at the University of Wyoming, and continues to publish top-notch research papers from across the academic spectrum. Our membership has held steady in the face of the global pandemic, and we have had an exciting influx of younger members who will carry our work into the future. Our current paid membership stands at 172. We are now looking forward to our first west coast conference, Corvallis 2022 at Oregon State University. Our members continue to produce cutting-edge scholarship, and also continue to share ideas, strategies, and theoretical approaches promoting working class power, and advocating for radical change and direct challenges to capitalism.

As a result of our efforts, the state of the field of working class studies is as strong as it has been in decades. The past year saw the publication and release of the Routledge International Handbook of Working Class Studies. Our in-house journal found a new home, with an improved look and stimulating content. Nationally, the study of working class life and working conditions for wage workers received more attention, as the global pandemic forced workers to toil in dangerous conditions, and forced many more out of work. In other words, class is back on the table, and definitely more prevalent as a mode of analysis at the level of both academic work and journalism, as well as in the arts. I can recall few periods in the past 40 years when discussions and research on work, class, wages, and working conditions have been so prevalent, stimulating, and ubiquitous.

As usual, our most challenging issue is the state of the global working class itself. In spite of the efforts of scholars, organizers, activists, and workers, the capitalist system continues to exploit working people even during a global health crisis. But while exploitation of the working class continues apace, so does the fight back. Workers around the globe are resisting the dangerous working conditions created by the pandemic, and are oftentimes refusing to work for less than a living wage. The crisis of capital brought on by this quiet (and sometimes loud) uprising has led to a slow rise in wages, and some improvements in working conditions for many wage earners. In addition, the pandemic has exposed brutal gaps in social welfare systems in areas such as child care, health care, unemployment insurance, and worker's compensation. It is now more important than ever that academics, activists, and artists continue to maintain pressure points on the system that aid the working class in their struggle for justice and equity.

So while we have done great things, and should be proud of our efforts, there is still so much work to be done. As president of WCSA, I want to emphasize and encourage several initiatives that I believe are vital to the health of the organization, to the field of study, and to the working classes themselves. Of the things I would like to see us focus on, the first and foremost is expanding our reach and membership. This is not simply a numbers game, adding new members at conference time, but should rather take the form of a comprehensive, multi-year

effort to broaden the scope of our organizational umbrella. Let's be frank---WCSA is painfully white. It will not do simply to "reach out" to non-white scholars and activist. I believe broadening our scope to change this situation will require intense effort, radical change, and even pain and discomfort. It may involve not "inviting" others in, but seriously breaching the walls we have inadvertently (and perhaps at times purposefully) constructed around our definitions of terms such as working class, scholar, activist, member, and artist. What I will suggest, to the executive committee, steering committee, my fellow officers, past and present, and to the general membership, is a multi-year, multi-pronged effort to de-colonize our infrastructure and break down the barriers that have thus limited our scope and scale. I believe this to be our most pressing issue, and if we fail, we imperil our future.

In addition, I hope to expand and improve upon some of the work already done by my predecessors in terms of technology, outreach, funding, communications, and basic organizational structure. We face the perennial problem of attracting young scholars to carry on the work. We all need to do more to encourage and promote dissertation research, independent scholarship, artistic creation, and the promulgation of tactics and strategies that support the study of working class life, and the well-being of workers everywhere.

There are hard times ahead, but then times have always been hard for workers. That does not mean we should ever lose sight of the joy of our work, and the importance of the struggle for justice. Like many of you, I have spent much of my adult life fighting for and with our fellow workers, and striving to cultivate the beloved community. It has never been easy, but it is always filled with the ineffable joy of solidarity, that feeling we get when we see workers and allies come together, and fight for a better world. We know such a world is possible. Let's help to make it while walking, one step at a time.

In solidarity,
Joseph Varga