Consider:

- The late 1990s were widely considered by economists to be a time of fantastic economic growth.

- The richest 1% of Americans own more than the bottom 95% combined.

- The 1990s saw executive pay levels rise an average of 481%.

Consider further:

- The ratio of top executive pay to factory worker pay over the past two decades has grown from 42-to-1 in 1980 to 419-to-1 in 1998.

- In 1998, U.S. workers put in more hours than in any other industrialized country in the world, outpacing German workers by 26%.

- U.S. workers in 1999 are working 43 hours more a year (2 full weeks) than in 1980. At the same time, median household incomes are about the same.

- 40 million (16%) of Americans live below poverty level.

- 44 million Americans have no health insurance.

- 13.5 million American children (18.9%) are living in poverty.

- 13.6 million children under age 12 in the United States—29%—live in families that had to cope with hunger or the risk of hunger during some part of one or more months of the previous year.

- 28.6% of all wage earners earned less than the roughly $7.75 per hour required to bring a family of four up to the official poverty level, assuming full-time, year-round work.

- 50% of all wage earners made $10.82 per hour or less in 1997. That works out to annual earnings of $22,500 for a full-time worker. In other words, in this “booming” economy of ours, a worker earning eleven dollars an hour is in the top half of all wage earners.

If we lived in a country ruled by a dictator, these figures wouldn’t be especially shocking. After all, dictators are supposed to kill, rob and swindle their people to enrich themselves. But we don’t live in a dictatorship. We live in a democracy. Even in a recession, we also live in a very, very wealthy country. So, for us at least, these figures are unsettling, to say the least.

You’d think that the misery and inequality represented above are unsettling enough that people all over the place would be talking about it. Politicians, reporters, talk show hosts, scholars and everyone in public life would be agitated and concerned to find a solution to this national tragedy. But a funny thing happens every time someone in public life tries to talk about the real reasons for these results and some of their real solutions. What happens is that they are accused of stirring up class warfare, fomenting hate, etc. It’s almost like no one will listen to the boy who cries out “The Emperor has no clothes!” Instead of the whole world waking up to the obvious, they take the boy away and lock him into a tower until he agrees to repent.
Well, we’re not inclined to repent. Nor are we inclined to be silent. For as we see it, the Emperor does have no clothes. We already have class warfare. Rich people have been engaging in class warfare for centuries in the country and for most of the last three decades they’ve been winning the battle pretty decisively.

So let’s put a name on what we see: classism.

While in this country classism is carried out under capitalism, there are other economic systems that oppress people based on class (slavery and feudalism to name two). There are three common elements of all forms of classism though.

- First, classism robs people of ownership or control of the tools to make a living on their own (often called “the means of production”), forcing them to work for the rich people who do own the means by which people might support themselves.
- Second, classism takes a large part of the value of people’s work (both the income generated from the work as well as the wealth created by the work).
- Third, classism gives this wealth/income to the owning class.

Where do I fit in all this?

Working class? Owning class? Middle class? What do all of these mean? Let’s spend a moment here delineating the various “classes.” Historically there has been a tendency to consider class in America, when it was considered at all, in terms of a trinity of upper, middle, and lower classes. For all their talk of throwing off the old categories of nobility, gentry, and peasantry, the English settlers and their American heirs rapidly duplicated this structure in deed if not in name. A component of the myth of class mobility was the casting of these classes as three roughly equal “thirds” of society: an upper, middle, and lower third. To engender support for this system, it was important to make the journey from one class to another seem like a brief trip across a quite permeable border region. In reality, such was never the case. There has long been a small, elite tier of super-wealthy separated by a demographic chasm from a moderately-sized middling class that expanded and contracted in rhythm with the business cycle. Situated below these two groups, in terms of wealth, income, and quality of life, was a vast working class and, of course, the poor.

Over the past thirty years there has been an acceleration in the accumulation of wealth by the super rich which, when coupled with a stagnation in real wages at the lower end of the income spectrum, makes it necessary to recast the historic trinity of classes into a version more reflective of the realities of today. There is still an elite class which, since it owns such a large percentage of the wealth and property, can rightly be called the “owning” class. Assisting the owning class is a greatly downsized version of the middle class which might better be described as the “managerial class,” since the function of many of its members is to serve the owning class in cutting expenses and maximizing profits, all in the vain hope that they might be let in on the next IPO, allowed to buy stock at a reduced rate, or otherwise be allowed admittance to the highest reaches of society.

These higher profits come about largely through the increased productivity and relatively static wages of what, again for lack of a better term, we still call the working class. It might be more accurate to describe this group as the working class/work ing poor since roughly one-third of the working-class people in this country are at or below the government-established poverty level. It should also be noted that, with the loss of much of the industrial manufacturing base in this country that came about with globalization of trade, and the concurrent rise of the retail/service sector, today’s working class is markedly different from the historic working class. While factory workers, craftspeople, and farmers still comprise much of the working class, they have been joined by lower- and middle-management people, as well as service and retail workers, farm laborers, and others in this greatly expanded working class.

The “Enclosures”

So how does it work? How does the system keep the wealthy on top? The basic structural support for maintaining our current class structure involves limiting access to the means of production—the ability to make a living on your own—to a relatively select few. In capitalism, this process actually began several centuries ago. Savvy industrial capitalists in the 18th Century were keenly aware of the difficulty of hiring workers to labor in their factories. After all, who would want to give up the relative independence and higher standard of living of being an independent farmer or craftsperson living in the countryside for the diseased, crowded, dirty and monotonous conditions of factory work in the cities? When 17th- and 18th-Century British industrial capitalists were facing this dilemma, they got assistance in their recruitment of a wage-labor pool by the reinvigoration of the “Enclosure” System.

Enclosure had, since the 12th Century, been a slow and sporadic movement to take the land away from farmers and peasants. Prior to enclosure there had been an ancient and customary communal usage of farm lands between the harvest season of one year and the planting season of the next. The effect of this communal use of rural lands was to allow peasant farmers to graze their sheep and make other use of this open land for much of the year. Landless peasants and village dwellers alike were able to keep and
So, whatever wealth is held by the majority of Americans, it is for the most part not liquid enough to be utilized to procure the means of production.

Peasants had no option but to relocate to cities to take the only jobs available to them, as wage laborers in the new factories. Additionally, many small farmers and craftspeople, when faced with the prospect of having to pay rents and fees for grazing their animals upon the newly enclosed land, also surrendered in the face of mounting debt and made the move to the cities. The result of all of this was to rob people of their ability to survive without having to work for someone else. Thus, the beginning of wage labor.

**“Be Your Own Boss?”**

The modern day equivalent to the “enclosures” laws is our system of credit and finance. The old adage that “it takes money to make money” has never been more true than today. For a singular innovator, or even a group supporting such a person, to bring a product to market is an exercise which is highly illustrative of this premise. Capital must be raised either through a bank loan, which is problematic unless sufficient collateral can be posted, or from venture capitalists who will demand a rate of return that virtually guarantees low wages for the workers who will eventually produce the product. Another option might be personal savings although, with the rate of personal savings in the United States approaching an all-time low, this is problematic as well.

Once a prospective capitalist has obtained sufficient capital, from whatever source, there is then a myriad of patent searches and patent applications, insurance to be obtained, corporate articles to be drawn up, research and development costs, licenses and permits to be purchased, and real estate, plant and equipment to be procured for production. It is little wonder that many of these startups are swallowed by larger corporations in their infancy, assuring a return only to those who already had the money to invest and, in some rare cases, the singular innovator.

There still exists, however, a deep and abiding belief in the potential of “making it” by opening a small business in America. The facts, however, reveal that this is indeed a long shot. According to statistics from the U.S. Department of Labor and the Small Business Administration, nearly 819,477 new employer firms opened during 1995, a slight increase from the 806,885 that started in 1994. Within 8 years of opening, only 28% of these businesses will still be in operation under the same ownership; the rest will have “failed” in the classic sense—closed their doors with debt owed—or closed due to lack of profitability, or will have sold to new owners. Those that do try to remain in business must deal with an infinitesimal percentage of these firms will eventually become large, enabling their owners to join that elite group near the top of the owning class, but the reality for the overwhelming majority of entrepreneurs is a continuation of the legacy of failure and debt.

**“Aid for Dependent Corporations”**

These structural supports for classism are, in turn, backed up by a governmental and legal system which acts to protect the wealthy and their interests while simultaneously squeezing those who can least afford

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1 The CIA World Factbook for 1997 listed the U.S. personal savings rate at 3.8% of income and the government’s “Survey of Current Business” for February 1999 disclosed a NIPA personal saving rate—personal savings expressed as a percentage of disposable income—of 0.5% for all of 1998. This NIPA rate of savings actually declined to zero during the 4th quarter of 1998. Additionally, financial wealth—that is financial assets less debt—from savings, investments, inheritance, or any other source, is also largely out of the hands of the vast majority of people. Edward N. Wolff’s 1995 book *Top Heavy: A Study of the Increasing Inequality in Wealth in America* showed that the top 1% of Americans have 48% of all financial wealth, the next 19% have 46%, and the bottom 80% of financial wealth-holders have only 6%. If the definition of “wealth” is expanded to that of the so-called “marketable wealth”—this being financial wealth plus real estate and the residual value of consumer durable goods—then the top 20% still holds more than 84% of all wealth in America. So, whatever wealth is held by the majority of Americans, it is for the most part not liquid enough to be utilized to procure the means of production.
it. In the debates which led to the “Welfare to Work” initiatives of the mid-1990s and the elimination in Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), hardly a word was said about the out-of-control growth of Aid for Dependent Corporations or the fact that trade legislation passed by both houses of Congress would serve to supply corporations with cheap Third-World labor for years to come. According to Public

U.S. businesses are subsidized by taxpayer funds to the tune of $125 billion per year, which equates roughly to the amount of income tax paid by 60 million individuals and families.

Citizen’s Congress Watch, U.S. businesses are subsidized by taxpayer funds to the tune of $125 billion per year, which equates roughly to the amount of income tax paid by 60 million individuals and families. Examples of this “Corporate Welfare” are numerous:

- $31 million per year to build subsidized roads on U.S. Forest Service property so that logging companies can obtain access to so-called “commodity timber”—trees which they are allowed to purchase for $5 each, costing taxpayers another $111 million per year;
- mining companies that are allowed to extract minerals from public lands without paying $200 million worth of royalties;
- tobacco price supports and government-funded crop insurance for tobacco farmers which, in just one year, totaled more than $83 million;
- it is estimated that the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Market Access Program, which makes payments to companies like Sunkist, Dole, Ocean Spray, M&G Mars, Tyson Foods, Pillsbury, E. & J. Gallo and McDonald’s to offset advertising costs associated with their overseas sales, costs $347 million over a five-year period.

Yet, despite these facts, when Congress debated the fate of welfare in America it was the “unwed mothers” and the apocryphal “welfare queens” who bore the brunt of the welfare debate.

Another support for the existing system of class stratification and its resultant unequal distribution of wealth lies in our system of taxation. As recently as the early 1960s, the top rate for personal income tax was as high as 91%. From the time of the Great Depression the theory had been that those most able to pay higher taxes—the very wealthy—should bear a higher share of the tax burden. By the time that Ronald Reagan left office in 1988 this top tax rate had fallen to 28%. The owning class successfully financed elections, lobbied Congress, and flexed its collective muscle to achieve a nearly 70% reduction in this highest rate of taxation. Conversely, during this same period, the lowest tax rate decreased only slightly, from 20% in 1964 to 15% today with the lower threshold for taxation, the amount of income at which taxes must start being paid, actually dropping from $2000 per year to $1650 per year of earned income. Faced with the massive budget deficits of the Reagan years and the realities of the national debt, the top rate of taxation has since been raised to 39.6%, yet every session of Congress there is another call for “tax reform” which inevitably seems to equate to tax cuts for the rich.

Public Education—The Great Equalizer?

Even with the incredible advantages the rich get in the system of classism, it is possible for a poor person to climb the class ladder. A key step in this upward climb, however, is access to education. Unfortunately, this educational access is also largely determined by the wealth and social standing of students and their families. An example of this is evidenced in a comparison of test scores of students from the Ravenswood City Elementary School District of East Palo Alto, California and students from the Palo Alto Unified School District across the freeway in Palo Alto, California. When the state of California instituted its Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) system in 1998, it came as no real surprise that eighth-grade students in the Ravenswood School District of East Palo Alto scored lower than did eighth graders in the more affluent Palo Alto District. East Palo Alto, according to the 1990 census, had a per capita income of $9,968 compared to Palo Alto’s per capita income of $32,489. Further, fully 21.9 percent of children in East Palo Alto between the ages of five and seventeen were classified as living below the poverty level, while census figures revealed that 12.5 percent of children in Palo Alto were similarly categorized.

The bottom-line cost of this class disparity, in terms of test scores, was that the Ravenswood students ranked 27 in the National Percentile Rank (NPR) in reading, 36 in math, 29 in language, and 26 in spelling while the Palo Alto students, just across the county line, had NPR rankings of 80 in reading, 87 in math, 85 in language, and 71 in spelling. What a difference a hundred yards and $22,000 in annual income make. One official noted, in response to the disparity in test scores, that the most important factor in being admitted to the University of California system was now a high school senior’s ZIP code.

There are certainly examples like these all across the country, although not as stark and poignantly clear as that which these neighboring cities.
Divided We Fall: A Primer on Classism in America

afford us. The poverty within the families of East Palo Alto translates to a poverty of educational opportunity. Lacking the test scores and, even more important, the study and technological skills to succeed in college, the children of working class families will for the most part not be able to attend college at all, to say nothing of the “better” schools from which corporate America recruits new managers. Those that do attend college will most likely take out student loans and find themselves in a form of indentured servitude, taking jobs to repay their loans rather than jobs that they would really engage in. Undoubtedly there are still occasional exceptions to this cycle of educational inequality and class status, but with the ever-widening gap between rich and poor, the odds in this particular lottery will continue to lengthen.

A Rising Tide or a Tidal Wave?
Surely there is some respite to this inequality in our “free market” economy. One would think that an economic “recovery” like that of the mid-1990s would have somehow made. A recent report entitled “A Decade of Executive Excess” disclosed that the annual yearly compensation for CEOs of large companies increased more than 500% in just eight years—from $1.8 million in 1990 to $10.6 million in 1998. According to another report prepared by the AFL-CIO, executive pay over the past fifteen years has also risen three times more than corporate profits and seven times more than factory wages. The poster boy for executive excess has got to be Disney CEO Michael Eisner, who made a combined $575 million in cash and stock during 1998, while Disney production jobs moved first to Haiti, where women and young girls earned 28¢ per hour to sew Disney toys, then on to China and Vietnam where workers earn as little as 6¢ per hour.

According to statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau, the lowest 20% of wage-earning households actually decreased in mean income, adjusted for inflation, from $8,312 in 1967 to $7,762 in 1994, a decrease of 6.6%. During this same time period, the top 5% of wage-earning households increased in mean income, again adjusted for inflation, from $123,800 in 1967 to $183,044, a nearly 48% increase in real wages. This disparity becomes even more glaring in light of the fact that these Census Bureau figures do not include capital gains, which is where most income of the super-wealthy is created. Nor do the Census figures include those with annual incomes in excess of $1 million, thus excluding the incomes of the super wealthy from the equation. It would seem that a rising tide does not lift all boats—the smaller ones often get swamped in the wake of the larger.

ORGANIZED LABOR’S DECLINE
It would seem that with such glaring examples: the accelerating enrichment of the owning class, the global dash for lower wages, the stagnating real wages, the unjust tax structure, there would be some cooperative action among the members of the working class to exercise their collective power to remedy this inequality. Yet, curiously, the past thirty years or more have witnessed a precipitous decline in union membership and an increasing level of difficulty in organizing workers. In 1998 the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that a mere 13.9% of the workforce claimed membership in labor unions, down from 34.7 percent in 1954.

This decline in union membership is perhaps not so curious in light of the degradation of labor laws during this same period. Business violations of labor laws are common, including illegal firing, worker intimidation, threats and worse. Until very recently, the U.S. labor movement has also felt stymied by the move toward globalization of the economy—afraid to ask too much for fear that the jobs of the rank and file members will be eliminated and supplanted by cheaper labor in Mexico, China, Indonesia or Vietnam. This migration of jobs to countries where labor standards and minimum wage laws are nearly nonexistent has been supported and encouraged by U.S. trade policies like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT), the covenant which spawned the World Trade Organization (WTO). Other factors leading to organized labor's decline include the rise of hard-to-organize “contingent” workers (the largest employer in the United States is now

The annual yearly compensation for CEOs of large companies has increased more than 500% in just eight years—from $1.8 million in 1990 to $10.6 million in 1998.
a temp agency—Manpower, Inc.) as well as dramatic shifts in the economy from manufacturing to service work, especially in high-tech industries.

Yet another factor in the decline of worker organization can be found in the structural increase in hours of work, leaving even less non-work time to be divided between family life, community-building, and other demands on time. With the average worker in America logging an additional 9 hours of work every year for the past twenty years, we are now working the equivalent of an additional month’s work of time more than we did twenty years ago. Adding commute time to this increase in actual hours worked, there is precious little time left for talking to co-workers about their lives, for setting up and conducting meetings about working conditions, for even getting to know your neighbors and co-workers on more than a first-name basis. How then can we ever expect to engage in a meaningful discussion about the structural and legal supports for the class system or how to overcome them?

Classism: The American Way

Even with all of the structural forces upholding class hierarchy in this country, shouldn’t we expect people to fight back, to say “Enough!”? Some do. But on a daily basis, most don’t. Why? Why do we tolerate an economic and social system that leaves so many people’s lives in utter ruin while leaving millions of others on the insecure brink of financial catastrophe? We could do so much better and we have many of the tools with which we could do so democratically. Instead of condemning the system, popular opinion sometimes seems to encourage the stratification in our society. “Anyone can make it—all it takes is hard work and determination.” “Just pull yourself up by your bootstraps.” “Rags to riches.” “The American Dream.” “You just have to be in the right place at the right time.” “See you at the top.” “Whose next?” Where do these ideological catch-phrases celebrating our “Cult of Wealth” come from?

An ideology of classism plays a key role in the propagation of class-related doctrine in this country. The roots of our classist ideology go deep. Early in this nation’s history there was the myth of the “classless society.” Borrowing heavily from Enlightenment thought, early American elites utilized the rhetoric of “inalienable human rights” to posit the idea that all men were created equal. In only one of many examples of double-talk by founding elites, these “equally created men” they spoke of were, in fact, property-owning, white men of European heritage. Excluded from these lofty words were all women, the natives from whom the land had recently been stripped, slaves and indentured servants, the poor, and the landless. Thomas Jefferson, one of the founding fathers of the United States, mused about his dream of a nation of small tenant farmers, more or less equal—all the while surrounded by his vast personal landholdings worked by unpaid human beings whom he legally “owned.”

The ideological myth of the classless society, in the face of massive immigration and the shift toward industrialization during the mid-nineteenth century, gave way to the only slightly more believable myth of a loosely-structured, yet

Classism imposes on working class and poor people a set of feelings, thoughts and behavior patterns that, when they are “internalized” or absorbed, justifies their domination and then encourages them actively to reenact or play out the submissive roles designated for them under the system of class oppression.

Examples of double-talk by influential society members of the generation. While not the originator of this “Rags to Riches/ Anyone Can Make It” doctrine which still permeates American culture, Alger was undoubtedly the most vocal of its early proponents.

If this myth of class mobility, propped up by an ideology which clearly states that “Anyone Can Make It” through hard work, honesty, perseverance and luck is to be believed, then there is a terrible consequence for those who haven’t “made it.” Their view of self reveals that obviously they haven’t worked hard enough or given their all; perhaps they are lacking in virtue or haven’t taken the right chances; maybe they just aren’t lucky enough to achieve success. The “blame” for being a “failure,” under this scenario, lies squarely upon the shoulders of the
have-nots in society—they are doubly-cursed because not only are they mired in poverty or the near-poverty of the working class, but it's their own fault! If only they would pull themselves up “by their own bootstraps,” then their situation would surely improve.

None of this is to imply, of course, that there is some grand and codified system or structure engaged in a dark conspiracy to “keep the lower sorts down.” It doesn’t have to be a dark conspiracy because the goals of capitalism—the creation and enhancement of private profits—are so widely accepted that they can be discussed quite openly.

There doesn’t have to be a dark conspiracy to “keep the lower sorts down because the goals of capitalism—the creation and enhancement of private profits—are so widely accepted that they can be discussed quite openly.

The most insidious part of the system of class oppression is the way that it gets the very people most hurt by the system both to go along with the system, and then also to become its chief defenders. Like every other form of oppression, classism oper-

ates first by systematically using the institutional rules and customs of the society to impose its domination onto its targets. This system has been described above. But simultaneously, classism also imposes on working class and poor people a set of feelings, thoughts and behavior patterns that, when they are “internalized” or absorbed, justifies their domination and then encourages them actively to reenact or play out the submissive roles designated for them under the system of class oppression.

As we see it, there are four great myths embedded in the ideology of class oppression that are internalized by working class and poor people. These myths are usually experienced in our everyday lives as unexamined background assumptions that are so taken-for-granted that they have almost become invisible to us. We label these invisible assumptions: 1) the myth of scarcity; 2) the myth of isolation; 3) the myth of division; and 4) the myth of despair.

1) The Myth of Scarcity:
One way to get us to work within and support the current system of class hierarchy is to convince us that we have some important interest in doing so. In this particular case, what is held out for us is that if we go along with classism and also work really hard, we can earn some significant material reward for ourselves. Now because the reality is that almost all of the rewards go to a very small percentage of people ensconced at the top of the class ladder, in order for the ideology of class oppression to work, there also needs to be some confusing emotional charge attached to our whole view of the class system. So, we also are meant to feel a pervasive urgency and apprehension as we go about our daily business within the class system that obscures the reality of what we really need and what we are likely to end up with as a result of our collaboration with classism.

This urgency and apprehension often have the effect of leaving us feeling that our ongoing participation in classism (whether through continuing to work in boring and/or exploitative jobs or persevering through mind-dulling and oppressive educations, or through some other mechanism) is somehow vital to our survival and well-being. Often, this is because we are led to feel that there isn’t enough of what we “need” to go around for everyone. In other words, we are left feeling that there is a generalized scarcity of the goods we need for survival. In short, we are made to feel scared. BUT, we are told, if we work hard and fast enough, we won’t be left out.

Thus, we are left with a low level crisis-mentality and desperation epitomized by the mad shoppers who line up in front of stores on special sale days (such as December 26) to snatch up “bargains” before anyone else can do so. Consider also the ambivalent anxious relationship many middle or “manager-
But what is never really considered is this: do we need to get ahead of the pack? Why can’t we stay together? Wouldn’t we be fine if we all simply cooperated to share what we have?

What is never really considered is this: why do we need to get ahead of the pack? Why can’t we stay together? Wouldn’t we be fine if we all simply cooperated to share what we have?

Venues for this advertising have invaded every social space, whether private or public. Of the households in the United States with electricity, 99.5% are said to have televisions. Ninety-five percent of all Americans watch some television every day. The average adult actively watches some 5 hours per day, while the television is turned on as a near-constant background an average of 8 hours a day in the typical American household. Thus, through the television alone, the average person is subjected to some 21,000 advertisements each year. And this doesn’t even count the “product placement” advertising and the “life-style” advertising that has become pervasive in the content of the programming.

Of course, there are many other venues for consumer socialization to occur. Some 56% of US households now have access to the Internet and typically 25% of the population goes on-line every day. (This figure, of course is growing rapidly. Between 1993 and 1998 the number of Internet users increased from 3 million to 100 million.) On virtually every commercial web page a computer user logs onto, one will find a minimum of one advertisement for some product that has been tailored to the user’s interests. Increasingly, public and private schools are also becoming sites for commercial indoctrination. Desperate for funds, educational institutions are turning to the private sector to sponsor everything from sporting events and vending machines to I.D. cards and classroom equipment. Corporations such as Coca-Cola and Pepsi are paying millions of dollars for exclusive marketing arrangements with school districts and their captive marketing audiences.

Corporate logos are even turning up in educational content as many schools rely on commercial ventures such as “Channel One,” the in-class television program complete with commercial ads being used in some 40% of American high schools and junior high schools. School text books are even the site for “product placement.” Consider the following example from a McGraw-Hill math text: “Will is saving his allowance to buy a pair of Nike shoes that cost $68.25. If Will earns $3.25 per week, how many weeks will Will need to save?” Other plugs in the text included equally “subtle” mentions of Barbie dolls, Big Macs, and Oreo cookies.

Throughout each of these means of commercial indoctrination we are repetitively sold the myth of scarcity. We are led to believe we “need” the many commodities that corporations have for sale. This is often done most effectively by essentially selling us our own sense of our self-worth: “be the first kid at school to have x toy,” “enhance your sex appeal with x item of apparel,” “recapture your youthful vigor with x body product,” “feel like a million bucks in x automobile.”

Of course, none of this would be very effective if we felt good about ourselves in the first place. But this is taken care of nicely by a parallel system of socialization that robs us of our self-esteem. Researchers have consistently demonstrated that while most children enter school with relatively high self-esteem (60% of girls and 67% of boys), by middle school high self-esteem has dropped to 37% for girls and 56% for boys. By the time they have reached high school, high self-esteem plummets to 29% for girls and 56% for boys. While most commentary has focused on the horrible gender gap represented in these figures, what we also find remarkable is that overall a majority of both boys and girls do not feel good about themselves.

An integral part of the self-invalidating that so many of us feel is the incessant comparison of our selves to others. Competitive grading and academic ranking; People magazine’s annual “100 Most Beautiful People in the World” issue; Forbes’ magazine’s annual survey of the wealthiest Americans; Competitive sports; “We’re
Number One!" Given all of this, we have concluded that virtually any time we competitively compare or judge ourselves to be better than or worse than anyone else in relationship to virtually anything, we are acting at least in part based on the hurtful mythologies of our system of class oppression.

All of this socialization leaves us vulnerable to the myth of scarcity and, as a result, we find ourselves working harder and longer simply to "stay competitive." It is not all, however, simply a race to catch up. In fact, we are "rewarded" along the way with the pleasures of consumer culture. For every budget there is some item we can purchase to salve the wound inflicted on us by classism, some commodity which, at least temporarily, can leave us feeling whole, complete, and satisfied. Whether it is a pack of cigarettes, a big-screen TV, a new car, or a Hawaiian vacation, we can at least momentarily escape the feelings of inadequacy, urgency, and fear that are part of a system of hierarchy and classism. Unfortunately, however, the feelings of satisfaction are always ephemeral. The nicotine wears off, a new generation of digital TV makes what we have obsolete, we get a scratch on our car, or the vacation ends. And then it’s back to the incessant grind of trying to make it, to be good enough to survive and hopefully even advance to the next rung on the class ladder.

And God forbid that we should slip down the class ranking to the level of poverty. For even worse than the fear of standing still while everyone else “makes it” is the fear of falling. This fear is even more palpable since the demise of “welfare as we know it” (AFDC) and the introduction of the more rare occasions when we do not have to put up with the most degrading and lowest paid work available rather than swallowing the humiliating experience of getting a “hand out” from the government.

So, in summary, how do you create an urgent feeling that there is deep scarcity of resources in the midst of a society with plenty? First you rob people of their self-esteem; then you indoctrinate them with a frantic consumer mentality; you give them enough temporary material rewards to keep them hungry and wanting more; and finally you remind them that the consequences of not playing along are dire hardship and humiliation.

**2) The Myth of Isolation:**

To drive class oppression successfully, it's not sufficient simply to have a mythology of scarcity. For even in hardship, and sometimes because of hardship, human beings will often band together to help each other out. This, of course, would be a devastating blow to a system of classism which relies on the great majority of people never exercising their collective power against the tiny ruling minority. Thus, a second great mythology which relies on the great majority of people never exercising their collective power against the tiny ruling minority. Thus, a second great myth within the system of internalized class oppression is that we are fundamentally alone in the world.

The roots of this myth in the United States are deep, beginning with the first wave of European settlers who fled religious and economic oppression in Europe. For established urban communities, one could always strike out and claim a stake on one's own, pull one's self up by the bootstraps, rely on rugged individualism, “Go West, young man,” and so on.

Within the mythology of individualism, the models of the successful person that are held up to us historically and continuing today are of the individual who has “made it”: the entrepreneur, the lone hero, the local Joe that “made good.” Open any standard U.S. history book and see who is highlighted: kings, queens, ship captains, robber barons, generals, presidents, industrial giants—not the communities or cultures surrounding these people. And so goes the mythology. The truth, of course, has always been much more complicated. No one ever really survives or flourishes alone. As a species we have always been dependent and interdependent. Even in the Western Frontier, pioneers settled towns together, helping each other with barn-raising, harvesting crops, and herding animals. Still, we lionize the rich (e.g. Bill Gates, Donald Trump) and even on the more rare occasions when we make heroes of the people who were devoted to their communities (e.g.
Mother Teresa) we still focus on the individual.

Today, the myth of the rugged individualist is carried on in a variety of ways. The contemporary equivalent of “The Great Frontier” is said to be education. It is in the educational arena that “each man stands on his own feet,” where true merit and hard work will let the best and brightest climb to the top of the social ladder. After school, the economic marketplace is said to be the great sieve through which the wheat and chaff are separated. The meritorious individuals are rewarded and those found wanting are left behind.

In this cold and calculating world, we are said to be alone. We will live by our own strength and wits, or we will fail. Push ahead, because if you don’t someone else will. And then, if you do make it, you owe nothing to anyone. For within the mythology where the efforts of communities are taken for granted and thus made invisible, any success you achieved was on your own and you deserve the rewards of your hard work and sacrifice.

The political structure of the United States has also reinforced the myth of individualism by creating the illusion of greater mobility and individual freedoms than actually exist. Because of the comparatively democratic nature of political power in relationship to the formal government (greater voting rights, elective office, Constitutional guarantees of individual freedoms), in the popular imagination we have always been a country where “the people” were in control and “anyone could grow up to be the President.” This popular focus on our country’s theoretical political equality has commonly led to the assumption that such rights and opportunity are the norm throughout the society. For example, people commonly believe they have “rights” in the workplace such as freedom of speech, the right to a job, etc. So the reasoning goes something like this: if anyone can be the President, then anyone can do anything. We are only bound by the limits of our individual desire, talents and will. If we work hard at it, we can make it.

In this way, our theoretical political freedoms have thereby tended to obscure our much more rigid system of classism and economic limitation. The average person may be quite surprised to learn that our Constitutional freedoms do not extend to the private sector. Unless specifically otherwise by a union contract (result of collective bargaining), once you enter the workplace, you check these basic “rights” at the door.

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no free speech, freedom of assembly, right to a job, etc. (Not to mention, of course, the most basic democratic rights to worker representation in the managerial structure.)

It’s not just with workplace rights that the myths surrounding rugged individualism and opportunity don’t stand up to the light of day. Take, for example, the basic myth of lone individuals making it on their own. In truth, no one ever really survives or flourishes alone. As a species we have always been dependent and interdependent. We would literally die if not for the collective efforts of the entire society working together to create technology, education, art and other creative impulses—not to mention the basics of language, food, shelter, love and companionship, and of course, rote necessities like taking out the garbage, etc. . . . Society and progress are always the result of a larger community of support and a massive pooling of social resources that make any individual effort possible.

Second, while at various points in the history of this country there has in fact been greater class mobility than in some of the countries from which some of the founders of this nation came, there has also always been significant inequality of social and economic opportunity for the vast majority of people who lived here (i.e., indigenous people, slaves, women, the Irish, southern and eastern European immigrants, all Asian immigrants and their descendants, etc.). If you are born poor and working class in this country, it is likely you will go to your grave in that same class status. An important corollary to this truth is that those who are born with wealth, die with wealth. As noted with ample examples in earlier sections of this article, higher class status has always been accompanied by political, social and economic privilege that protects and enhances the continuation of this status.

So, as much as elites would like to propagate the myth of the lone individual fighting his way to the top, the truth has always been more complicated. Simply opening one’s eyes reveals a quite obvious truth: None make it on their own and none fail on their own. No one is truly isolated.

3) The Myth of Division:
The myth of scarcity makes sure that we are driven by fear to participate in the game of class hierarchy with a high level of urgency. Then, the myth of individualism makes sure that we don’t rely on anyone else too closely. In addition, though, there also must be some additional aspect of the internalized class oppression that keeps us not only isolated and alienated from each other, but actively fighting against each other rather than against the forces of classism.
Thus, the myth of social division leads us to believe that not only are we fundamentally all alone, but we also live in a world that is hostile to our needs and where some “other” people are constantly planning to take what we need to survive.

These fearsome “others” can simply be any stranger, but more often the “others” are people from race, class, gender, religious, or nationality groups that are different from our own. Our social conditioning to be separated from these groups commonly begins with the lack of correct information we are given about the history and culture of groups other than our own. Social and economic segregation then reinforces this ignorance, which is then further reinforced with the message that these other people are out to do us harm. Fear-mongering about “others” is the norm. For example, each election season we have a newly risen scapegoat: immigrants, welfare cheats, affirmative action recipients, gang members, teenagers, common criminals, corrupt union bosses, lazy school teachers, foreign terrorists— the problem is always some other group of people simply refusing to play by the rules of the game.

The real and imagined (but always exaggerated) threats posed by these bad “others” becomes even more tenable when combined with the messages of urgency from the first myth of scarcity: you need to “stay competitive” in a high tech, fast-paced and changing global economy. Layoffs, “downsizing,” “right sizing” “just in time” workforces—all of these mean you have to be “at your peak,” “on your game,” “have the right stuff”—because if you don’t, someone else will and you’ll be “left in the dust.” Above all, don’t trust anyone else. Don’t share information. Copyright your work. Protect your “intellectual property.” Get there first! In school, don’t share your work, don’t work collaboratively. BUT DO, constantly compare yourself with others, especially if there is a system of curve grading. Know just where you are in the hierarchy of classifications, social rankings, and who’s-got-what lists. (Of course, though, never talk at your workplace about your paycheck, or you may get fired for “undermining workforce morale.”)

It is not uncommon for average citizens to have absolutely no knowledge of the history of organized labor or of the tremendous gains made throughout the 1920s and 1930s by the labor movement in the United States: minimum wage laws, maximum work weeks, Social Security laws, unemployment insurance, workers compensation, medical benefits, or simply the right to belong to a union at all.

Ultimately, the main message from the myth of division is this: you have nothing in common with anyone in these “other” groups. Your main allegiance is to the system of capitalism and its owners.2

4) The Myth of Despair:

The myth of despair is very simple. Even if you don’t believe in the first three myths of internalized classism, but especially if you do, you should give up any hope that there can ever be a way of organizing society that does not entail class hierarchy. This is either because “the powers that be are too powerful to dislodge from their positions of privilege,” or because “all the alternatives have already been tried.”

In the former case, the myth of despair is kept in place primarily by obscuring or hiding the long history of successes working class and poor people have had in reclaiming control over their own work and lives or else treating these victories as the result of benevolent gifts from elites. Thus, for example, it is not uncommon for average citizens to have absolutely no knowledge of the history of organized labor or of the tremendous gains made throughout the 1920s and 1930s by the labor movement in the United States: minimum wage laws, maximum work weeks, Social Security laws, unemployment insurance, workers compensation, medical benefits, or simply the right to belong to a union at all.

Even today, the vast majority of the populace has little or no consciousness of the contemporary history and culture of groups other than our own. Social and economic segregation then reinforces this ignorance, which is then further reinforced with the message that these other people are out to do us harm. Fear-mongering about “others” is the norm. For example, each election season we have a newly risen scapegoat: immigrants, welfare cheats, affirmative action recipients, gang members, teenagers, common criminals, corrupt union bosses, lazy school teachers, foreign terrorists— the problem is always some other group of people simply refusing to play by the rules of the game.

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Even today, the vast majority of the populace has little or no consciousness of the contemporary
struggles and victories of workers organizing throughout the world. We know of not one major newspaper, radio or television network that has a regular section dealing with labor affairs. Yet in every one of these media organs, finance, business and industry sections are the norm. As a result of this media blackout, the major labor organizing victory of 70,000 houseworkers in Southern California in 1998 went largely unnoticed by the general population. The massive demonstrations and strikes in the summer of 1999 to protest the globalization of the economy registered as less than a blip on the media screens of most people. The fact that workers in most other western democracies belong to unions at more than twice the average in the U.S. (and thus enjoy huge benefits such as 4–6 weeks paid annual vacation, free child care, etc.) this too is not part of the popular consciousness.

We are not, of course, saying that the history of working people in their struggle against bosses has always been successful. What we are saying, though, is that this history—good or bad—is largely simply absent. The result is that most people cannot even conceive the possibility of fighting back against the rules and institutions of class hierarchy. Most people feel like even if they wanted something different, in the end they would both lose and lose out.

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The second way the myth of despair is kept in place is by getting people to believe that even if they could fight back, there is nothing worth fighting for. Capitalist hierarchy, according to the mythology, is the best system we have available. The old Soviet Union was held out to be the only alternative to capitalist hierarchy. With the collapse of the Soviet empire, social commentators announced the triumph of capitalism and “the end of history.” History, it is said, has demonstrated that capitalist hierarchy, driven by profit motivation and a hierarchy of structure, had shown itself to be the most efficient, or at least the only viable, system of economic and social ordering. The messages are consistent: Humans are greedy. Someone has to be on top. Relative equality can only be created by government regulation which invariably leads to Soviet style dictatorship and loss of popular freedom. Cooperative and humanitarian drives never act as adequate motivation for real work. Any attempt to provide goods and services that are not driven by individualistic and self-serving motives (i.e. money, profits, power) will inevitably lead to an apathetic workforce mired in complacent inefficiency. After all, look at the public school system (“lazy teachers,” “violent schools” and “low test scores”), the post office (“long lines” and “crazy workers”), the social security system (“going broke”), Medicare (“out-of-control costs”), etc., etc.

The answer: privatize everything! Let the market take care of it all. Or maybe just do nothing, because ultimately nothing can ever be changed or made better—much less be fixed.

Of course, the picture painted by the mythology of despair conveniently leaves out quite a few facts. Firstly, Soviet style “communism” is not the only alternative to U.S. style capitalism. Other modern democracies have a long history of successful experiments in the non-capitalist provision of basic goods and services from education, to medicine, to child care, and manufacturing. In fact, throughout Europe’s advanced democracies social democratic governments have frequently held power. Standards of living throughout Europe and Canada rival those in the United States, but with much lower levels of poverty and inequality, universal provision of medical care, and generous annual vacations and unemployment benefits. All this, and workers put in appreciably fewer hours of work than Americans.

Second, even within the old Soviet Union (corruption and dictatorship notwithstanding), the record of economic growth was quite remarkable. From 1928 to 1940, the USSR averaged 5.8% annual economic growth, compared to 1.7% growth in the United States. From 1950 to 1975, Soviet growth was 4.8%, compared to 3.3% in the U.S. Even in the year’s immediately preceding the collapse of integrated economic planning in the Soviet Union (from 1986 to 1989), growth rates averaged 4%.

Third, even within the United States itself, there are countless examples of many, many people choosing to spend their life’s energy not being driven by individualism and self-serving material benefits. Currently there are more than 1.4 million nonprofit organizations in the United States employing 10.5% of the workforce. In addition, there are millions of people working for state, local and federal government
agencies, none of which operates on a for-profit or free-market model. Then, there are the 89 million Americans who volunteer an average of 4 hours a week helping out in churches, shelters, schools, neighborhood centers and countless other places just because they want to do the right thing.

Does the non-profit sector work? Not always. But then neither does the for-profit sector. We gripe about bad public schools and the post office. But the truth is that teachers do an amazing job with the paltry resources they are given. The average starting teacher’s salary is well below those for private industry jobs requiring comparable education. Spending on public schools in many states simply does not pay for adequate facilities. And while postal service costs have risen a cent or two every year, the fact is that for 30-something cents, they hand-collect and hand-deliver your letter to anywhere in the United States—Alaska and Hawaii included. No matter how far away and remote the location, they get it there, and usually within a couple of days. No other delivery service provides daily service to virtually every address within the United States—Alaska and Hawaii included. No matter how far away and remote the location, they get it there, and usually within a couple of days. No other delivery service provides daily service to virtually every address within the United States for so little cost, every week, year in and year out. (How well, we wonder, could Microsoft function with underpaid staffs working in decaying buildings, often without adequate heating or air-conditioning, much less integrated computer networks?) So as we see it, there’s really something to be said for the non-profit sector of the economy. Not that this is the absolute model we would advocate, but it points closer to the right direction: collective efforts to provide for the common good based not on a motivation of making a profit but on the idea that we do better as a society when we share and think about each other. This has been and continues to be done throughout modern society. Far from there being no alternatives to hierarchy and domination, we have countless (if still somewhat imperfect) living examples of them daily.

Where Do We Go From Here?

It’s one thing to critique the system of capitalist hierarchy, and something else again to do something about it. There are alternatives to giving in to the dominating ideologies of internalized class oppression. Throughout the rest of this book there are numerous examples of people successfully fighting back and making a difference. Media activists are successfully taking back the airwaves at the local level and challenging the powers that be at the national and global levels. Union activists every day are organizing workers to win contracts and rights for working people all over the nation. Poor people are fighting for dignity and the opportunity to compete on a level playing field. Women’s rights groups, neighborhood activists, civil rights advocates, peace workers, community development agencies, and even many elected officials are engaged in the struggle to win back our country from those who would deny democracy and freedom to average working people and their families. People all over are organizing and building successful alliances across previously unconnected groups and boundaries of different races, classes, genders, nationalities, and religions. Finally, many people are busy at work creating a different vision of the kind of world we could have, a world in which cooperation, not competition, were the preferred mode, a world where people were more concerned about the quality of their social relationships than about the size of their cars, where people come before profits, a world in which we could find genuine meaning in our daily lives. We hope you will be inspired to read and re-read the articles elsewhere in this book pointing the way to what we truly can have if we are willing to organize for it and to win.