



# Union Strong

## Inequality and the life and death of the working class

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**I**N November, The New York Times reported the findings of a recent study that showed that between 1999 and 2013, white middle-aged men and women in the United States — especially those with no more than a high school education — began dying at sharply increased rates. The report also noted an increase in the mortality rates of white non-Hispanics between ages of 45 to 54.

This study by Princeton University economists Angus Deaton and Anne Case concludes that the death rate was “driven by an epidemic of suicides and afflictions stemming from substance abuse: alcoholic liver disease and overdoses of heroin and prescription opioids.”

This study is significant because it adds a new understanding of the widespread health and social crisis affecting lower-income groups, women and minorities in the United States. But much of the analysis barely touches on the issues of class and inequality.

Working people know of the differences in access to housing, food and health care between the rich and poor. We see it in day-to-day life. Yet the media often fails to connect their analysis with the importance of class differences and its dramatic impact on the life and death of working people.

We are always told that life expectancy in the United States is rising, and that supposed trend is often cited by conservatives as a reason to raise the retirement age for Social Security. In reality, the expected lifespan of middle-and lower-income women is declining.

According to a study by the Brookings

Institution, a 55-year-old woman in the richest 10 percent bracket may expect to live 35.3 more years. But a 55-year-old woman in the bottom 10 percent bracket can expect to live 27.9 more years. A rich man born in 1940 who reaches 55 will live 10 years longer than a poor man.

When looking at the data of Deaton and Case, a recent post in the Health Affairs Blog found that rising mortality is especially pronounced among white working-class women at child-bearing age. The proposed explanation is the misuse of prescription opioid drugs, suicide, obesity, and smoking-related diseases.

Social class differences are accentuated when income inequality widens.

The United States and other countries have experienced a considerable change in income inequality since the 1980s. In 2013, the average income of the top 10 percent of the population exceeded 17 times the average income of the poorest 10 percent, with the United States showing the largest income inequality among industrialized nations.

The link between life expectancy disparities and increased economic inequality has enormous implications for working people and the labor movement.

This is a call to support an agenda that protects life by delivering services, access to affordable housing and health care — including maternity leave and sick leave — for all workers. As trade unionists, it’s up to us to be leaders in the fight to protect Social Security as a real safety net and to lead the fight for jobs with living wages.

—**Juan Fernandez** is president of Local 154

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