

Anarchist Political School

Class, Capitalism, and the State



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Capitalism

Capitalism is a **class society**. A class society is a society divided into classes based on the control of wealth, property and power. Slave societies, for example, are class societies in which slave owners constitute a ruling class and slaves constitute a subservient class. In a slave society, slave owners live off the labour of people held in a state of slavery.

Capitalism is a class society defined by the exploitation of wage labour. The capitalist system has edged out nearly all others, all over the globe. Capitalism is like the air we breathe. It's hard to see it unless we can view our lives from a different perspective, a radical perspective.

In a capitalist society, the **ruling class** are a small section of society who own or control the **means of production**—the land, factories, mines, offices, schools, hospitals and so on. Some own the means of production directly, like major shareholders or the state, whilst others help to manage or protect it, like senior managers and top government officials.

The ruling class lives off the wealth created by others rather than by working themselves. This parasitic relationship is enabled by their ownership of businesses, land and investments. The wealth and privileges of the ruling class also rest on the state, which maintains

control over the organisation of society through coercion, force, and defending property relations.

Discuss

Why is this concept of the 'means of production' significant to our understanding of capitalism?

The Working Class

The **working class** are those who, lacking property of their own, have nothing to sell but their ability to work. Most of us survive only by working for others, which means selling our time and energy in exchange for a wage.

The working class includes workers in factories, offices, shops, hospitals, schools, delivery vans and so on. It also includes family members dependent on wages, the unemployed, most retirees, and most students.

Because we don't own or control the means of production, we have to find someone who does and sell our ability to work to them. Our employers decide what work we do, how we do it, and under what conditions. Contrary to the old stereotypes, the working class is multi-racial, gender diverse, and found in every corner of society.

People often call themselves ‘middle class’ in a way that has little meaning. Normally, it stems from notions of identity and not an understanding of class divisions. Class is not about your personal character or status, rather it is about how we relate to the way society is organised.

Many people who think of themselves as ‘middle class’ are really working class, like teachers, lecturers, and public servants. Others do have some degree of ownership or control over the means of production, like small business owners, middle managers and lower-level government officials.

Discuss

Are there real middle classes? How should we categorise the following: gig workers and freelancers; family business owners; supervisors; workers who own investment properties?

The Ruling Class

Workers produce all the value in society. We make the products that capitalists sell, we build the machinery that we use to create those products, and we build the infrastructure that supports capitalist enterprises in general.

Workers are not paid according to the value we produce. On average, we only get paid enough to sustain ourselves and produce the next generation of workers. For part of the workday, we produce the value which pays our wage. For the rest of the day though, we work for free. The capitalists cream off the difference between what we're paid and what our work produces. This stolen surplus is where profit comes from. Bosses are interested in squeezing as much work out of us for as little as possible. The more wages we get, the less profit the bosses make.

Socially useful work is done by workers and doesn't require bosses. Competition drives them to maximise exploitation, cheapen production, and expand their share of the market. Any 'work' they do is fundamentally about directing the labour of others.

Clearly, the interests of the capitalist class are in total opposition to those of the working class: capitalism is based on inequalities in wealth, power and opportunity. Few workers get to go into business and very few become significantly rich through it. Instead, the rich get richer at the expense of the poor.

Discuss

In what ways is capitalism undemocratic? Who makes the decisions and why do they make them?

'Freedom' under Capitalism

Capitalism is an authoritarian and undemocratic system. At the workplace level, capitalist enterprises are run by unelected managers and owners, who make all key decisions on the basis of profit. The vast majority of people in a workplace—the workers—have no real say at all. Class inequality systematically excludes most people from active and equal involvement in political activity because they lack necessary resources such as time and education.

Most people in the capitalist system are working class. This large majority has no ownership or control. They are exploited and dominated, making goods or services to the primary benefit of the ruling class. Workers have the same lack of power in the public sector, where decisions are made by managers and government officials seeking maximum efficiency out of the workforce.

The very structure of capitalism requires that production be based on profit and power, rather than meeting human needs and wants. Even though there is enough food in the world to feed everyone, people starve because profits come first. Food isn't distributed on the basis of hunger, or any rational plan, but as a commodity to make capitalists more money.

Countless people are condemned to spend most of their waking lives in mind-numbing or back-breaking work, so that they can make profits for the bosses and ensure that the system continues to endlessly expand. Much of this work is useless or even harmful. Meaningful and fulfilling creative activity is transformed by capitalism into its opposite—soul-destroying drudgery which we have no control over. This is ‘freedom’ under capitalism.

Discuss

Why are goods and services produced under capitalism? How might decisions about production be different under a genuinely democratic system?

The State

The ruling class relies upon **the state** to protect and defend its interests. The state is a machinery of domination which ensures the suppression of an exploited class by a ruling one. It is a hierarchical and centralised institution.

In ancient Rome, it suppressed the slaves for the benefit of the slave owners. In feudal Europe, it suppressed the peasants for the benefit of the aristocracy. Under capitalism, the state suppresses the workers so that the capitalists can continue to rule and accumulate profits.

Today, states are composed of parliaments and unelected bureaucracies. They maintain class rule through violent mechanisms of law enforcement, such as the prison system, the police, the army, and border enforcement agencies. The key function of the state is to hold capitalist social relations together, mediate conflict within the capitalist class, and pacify class struggle through both reform and repression.

The state can never represent the interests of workers. Even within parliamentary systems, the decision-making power of most people is restricted to periodically selecting representatives. After an election, workers are alienated from the process entirely. Power is in the hands of a governing group, with the unique capacity to make and enforce laws within a certain territory.

Inevitably, those laws must be written and enforced to serve the interests of those who control the economy. Under capitalism, that means guaranteeing perpetual growth, maintaining a competitive climate for investment, keeping big business owners happy, and keeping workers from being too disruptive.

The state must also reproduce its power. Whatever the ideology of a governing party, maintaining the authority of the state, and their power within it, comes to be seen as a necessary goal.

It is impossible for the small minority who actually govern—top state officials and politicians—to do everything that the state needs to do. The state only works when this elite can instruct, control, or rely on the labour of millions as part of a large workforce.

Therefore, the state itself produces class divisions, both through the labour that the state controls, and by enforcing property rights.

The state needs soldiers and police. It needs people to keep records. It needs to collect taxes. It needs people to carry out whatever other activities governing requires. In most countries, this means that the state must also employ teachers, gardeners, scientists, academics, cleaners, road builders, journalists, and many others.

As a result, class struggle also takes place against the state as an employer. Just like a private corporation, the state is centralised, exploitative, and dominating. It doesn't change simply because you change the personnel at the top.

This is the nature of all states, including so-called 'communist' states, like the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba.

Discuss

*Can the state be a vehicle for workers to run society?
Why/why not?*

Class Struggle

Capitalism must be fought and ultimately overthrown. The working class has an essential role in accomplishing this task, because the ruling class relies on the surplus value workers create. We have a powerful weapon in our hands: our ability to disrupt the profit system through workplace action like strikes, slow-downs, sabotage, workplace occupations, and so on. This ability to hit the ruling class where it hurts most—the pocket—is the most powerful weapon in the hands of the working class.

The power of the ruling class derives from their control over the means of production, and their power can only be broken by taking the means of production off them. Luckily, the working class already has its hands on the levers of power, because we are the ones who actually do the work. Workers need to co-operate with each other for production to occur, so co-operation in seizing the means of production is a natural extension of co-operation in work. When workers are concentrated in large workplaces, it is easier to build organisations like

unions, so that we can successfully fight back against the ruling class.

This doesn't mean that only employed workers can fight back—working class neighbourhoods, education facilities, and a range of shared activities also bring people together in groups, large or small, in a way that facilitates action. Struggles outside of the workplace can often lead to victories on a social level. At the same time, it must be remembered that the power of capital will only be truly uprooted at the primary site of capitalist activity: the workplace.

Discuss

What is it about the position of the working class within capitalism that creates the potential power to struggle and win against capitalism?

Opposing All Forms of Oppression

Class struggle is essential to defeating forms of oppression like racism, sexism and queerphobia. These oppressive systems arose from within class societies. They help to sustain capitalism and are in turn sustained by capitalism.

The fight against racism and other oppressions is not something separate to the class struggle: these are

working-class issues. We say this for the following reasons. Firstly, these oppressions support the capitalist system and are an obstacle in the way of overthrowing it. Secondly, most people who are affected by these forms of oppression are workers. In fact, workers suffer far more from the effects of these forms of oppression because we are not shielded by our class status. Thirdly, a united struggle by the working class can only take place if people are mobilised on the basis of opposing all oppression and exploitation. That is, on the basis of a programme that addresses the interests of the entire working class: that programme is anarchism.

We believe that capitalism and all other forms of oppression can only be ended once and for all when the workers overthrow the capitalists and create a world without classes, governments, or production based on profit.

That is to say, an anarchist communist society.

Discuss

What effects do homophobia and transphobia have on the whole working class? Should all workers oppose these forms of oppression? If so, is it purely on the basis of altruism or class interests?

Anarchist Communism

The alternative to capitalism we fight for is **communism**: a classless, stateless, moneyless society, based on the principle “from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs.” **Anarchism** is the movement which advocates for the abolition of all forms of domination in favour of a society based upon the principles of liberty, equality and solidarity.

In a communist society, everything we produce would be owned in common and under the control of democratic workers’ organisations. Workplaces would be managed by the workers, not bosses. Rather than elect unaccountable politicians, broader social decisions would be handled by assemblies of workers’ delegates.

Production would be dedicated to meeting needs, not making profit. This would eliminate the enormous waste and artificial scarcity generated by capitalism. Food, shelter, and other necessities would be freely available to all.

Because unemployment would no longer mean poverty, every person would then be free to choose whatever cooperatively organised work they want to do. Health, safety, comfort, and enjoyment could be prioritised at every workplace. We could dedicate ourselves to things we care about, not just what happens to make money.

Without capitalism's endless need for growth, or the structural need for unemployment, work hours could decrease significantly.

Communism hasn't been 'tried and failed'. What has failed is trying to build socialism from the top-down, under the control of one-party states which kept capitalist structures intact. The idea that communism equals authoritarianism is Cold War propaganda. Communism is when the state no longer exists, not when it does more things.

This is why, far from being a contradiction, communism is a logical extension of anarchism. The real contradiction is the idea that a world without bosses and politicians can be created through dictatorship and central planning.

The overwhelming majority of anarchists throughout history have been communists. They held the view, just like we do today, that anarchist methods are the only ones capable of making communism a reality.

Discuss

Lots of working-class people still associate communism with authoritarianism and anarchism with chaos.

Should we still use these words to describe the society we envision? Why/why not?

