

Class

Thinking about anarchism

Alan MacSimoin

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Contents

STOLEN WAGES	3
WHAT ABOUT THE UNEMPLOYED?	3
NONSENSE	3
TAKING OVER	4
POTENTIAL FOR CHANGE	4
THE WAY TO FREEDOM	5

WHY IS THE concept of class so important to anarchists? Why are we constantly talking about classes and class struggle? Some of our opponents accuse us of living in the past, they claim the working class is dying out. After all you don't see too many workers wandering around in donkey jackets, cloth caps and heavy boots. So that settles the question, doesn't it? No, it doesn't, so let us get away from silly caricatures and get down to basics.

The modern world, like the societies that preceded it, does not consist of a single group of people who have more in common than they have dividing them. Sadly there is no single 'humanity', not yet. In every country there is still a division of people into classes which have conflicting interests.

Classes are defined by their relationship to the means of production; their relationship to the factories, machinery, natural resources, etc. with which the wealth of society is created. Although there are groups such as the self-employed and the small farmers, the main classes are the workers and the bosses. It is the labour of the working class that creates the wealth. The bosses, through their ownership and control of the means of production, have legal ownership of this wealth and decide how it is to be distributed.

STOLEN WAGES

Only a part of this wealth is returned. Some is paid as wages, some as the "social wage" (hospitals, schools, public services, and so on). The rest is creamed off as profit. But labour creates all wealth. An apple on a tree is worth nothing until someone picks it, coal in the ground has no use until someone mines it. What is known as surplus value or profit is stolen wages.

The working class is the majority in Ireland today. All who work for a wage, salary or commission are in its ranks. It consists of all who have to sell their ability to work to those in control. It makes no difference if you work in a factory, office, school, hospital or shop. It makes no difference if you work with your hands or your brain, whether you wear overalls or a suit, whether you earn 'good' or bad wages.

WHAT ABOUT THE UNEMPLOYED?

The unemployed also form part of the working class. Social welfare payments are made to those who have worked and those who may potentially provide some employer with their labour power. It is a condition of payment that a claimant is "available for and actively seeking work". Needless to say, the partners and children of workers are also part of the same class, as are the retired.

The interests of the working class (wages, working conditions, jobs, useful public spending, etc.) are in constant and inevitable conflict with those of the boss class. They seek to maximise their profits and gain an advantage over their competitors at the expense of the workers.

NONSENSE

Anyone who talks about 'social partnership', about labour and capital working together for the benefit of all is talking nonsense. What rights we have and gains we have made have been the result of long and often bitter struggles. The bosses only give such rights and concessions as

they are forced to. In times of recession, such as now, they try to make workers pay through job losses, cuts in real wages, cuts in public spending, productivity deals, etc. for the crisis that is a periodic and inevitable product of capitalism.

Although capitalism oppresses people on many different levels, race and sex to name but two; it is the exploitation of our labour that is fundamental to the system. It is on this front that the fight for a new society will be won or lost. If we can reclaim that aspect of our lives, the system can be overturned and replaced with something much better.

TAKING OVER

The working class are brought together in large towns and cities. At work we co-operate with others. Each person has to do their bit so that the person at the next stage of production can do theirs. In the services it is the same; in hospitals, schools and offices. This means that the working class can be a force capable, not only of rebelling against injustice but of taking over and recreating society in its' own interests.

As a class we have to think and act collectively. In a strike you need the support of your workmates and of the workers in supplier firms. Individual action won't get you very far. We have to co-operate. The same applies to the mammoth task of creating a new society. We cannot divide up an office or factory between all the workers there. We act as a group or not at all. This collective nature that is part and parcel of our class provides the basis for the solidarity and mutual aid we will need to scrap the old order and build a truly free and egalitarian society.

POTENTIAL FOR CHANGE

However just because someone is a worker it does not always follow that he or she will think of themselves as a worker, or realise the potential for change that the working class collectively possesses. We all know of workers who sometimes identify with their boss, or unemployed people who become demoralised and totally isolated from any sense of belonging to the working class. And there are plenty of ignorant academics running around talking rubbish about a new 'sub class' and a 'natural conflict' between those with jobs and those without.

Class consciousness, an awareness of our common interests and the potential we have for real change, needs to be encouraged and strengthened. This is one of the tasks of an anarchist organisation.

The struggle between the classes will only come to an end when the boss class and the state which protects their privileged position are overthrown. Nationalisation or state control of the means of production would not mean an end to class society. It would simply mean the replacement of individual capitalists by a bureaucratic state capitalism. Like their predecessors they would be in control and would have the final say about what happens to the wealth we create. Whether they like it or not this would be the logical outcome of the statist politics of the Workers Party, Sinn Fein and the Labour Left.

THE WAY TO FREEDOM

Only the direct control and management of production by the working class themselves can end the class division. A classless society is not possible without this.

Everyone affected by a decision should have a say in making that decision. Production in an anarchist society would be managed by an elected workers' council in each workplace. Planning on a higher level would be subject to the agreement of delegates from the councils, delegates who would be subject to a mandate from their members and instantly recallable if they don't do the job they were elected to do. In such a society the wealth would be created and managed for the benefit of all. There would be no elite of bosses or rulers. This is the vital precondition for real freedom.

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