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On The Working Class

Bertram Ledbetter

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During Marx's time, the urban proletariat certainly was a rising class. Rapid industrialization made the powers of the day increasingly demand factory wage-workers at an unforeseen scale. In 1840, in Britain, only 8.8% of the working population worked in manufacturing. By 1870, one in three Britons did. In 1840, in the USA, a meager 12% of families worked in any kind of non-agricultural industry. By 1900, that had grown to a full 27%. In Russia, the number of workers in factories and large mills quadrupled between 1865 and 1900. The "old" working class, comprised of the peasant farmers and their cottage industries, were surpassed and rendered progressively irrelevant (In 1840, 68% of Americans worked on farms; by 1900, this number decreased to 40%; Nowadays, its less than 2%). They were still, for a long time, a sizable and influential group, but they were a dwindling minority, and a dwindling minority can't very well lead a populist revolution. And hence, for that reason, leftist rhetoric always proclaimed that the factory workers, the proletariat, would lead the revolution to victory, not the farmers.

But nowadays, things have changed. In 1870, 30% of Britons worked in manufacturing; in 2010, manufacturing only accounted for 8.2% of the workforce. Across the Atlantic, the trend is similar.

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In 1910, 32.4% of non-agricultural workers in the USA worked in manufacturing. Today, only 8.7% do. In every advanced economy, the same thing has happened. Automation, and massive increases in productivity due to technological advancements, are the reasons behind this trend. The urban proletariat is quickly going the way of the peasant-farmer. They're a dwindling minority (there are nearly six million less manufacturing jobs in the US than there were twenty years ago) and a dwindling minority can't very well lead a populist revolution.

The modern rising class, the new working class, is the workers of the service industry. In the USA, over 80% of the population lies in this grouping, making them an overwhelming majority. The revolution won't be led by some mythical group of assembly-line workers, but instead by Walmart greeters. Which brings up something rather interesting: most of these "service" jobs would effectively be rendered nonexistent by a communist revolution. You don't need corporate financial advisors if money's been abolished. Salesmen and clerks alike are useless in a world of free-stores. And many other occupations would be cut down in number drastically due to the increased efficiency of communist cooperation over capitalist competition. For instance, many locales have two or three hotels when there's only the actual need, in terms of capacity, for one hotel, but the motive of profit causes multiple to open. This leads to awkward situations of half-full hotels with empty rooms that still must be maintained. It leads to twice the number of employees being hired than socially necessary, who then must do twice as much work then is actually needed. Twice as much furniture must be bought, twice as many hallways have to be lit, twice as much electricity must be used. You get the point.

Capitalism is tremendously wasteful, both of resources, and of the people who are trapped in its jobs, doing unnecessary labor. Once the inefficiencies of capitalism are removed- once we stop working for the sake of work and overproducing for the sake of production- each individual's workload could drastically decrease.

Communists in the past were fighting for the ownership of their own work, fighting against the theft of their surplus value. But communists today are essentially fighting for the abolition of their work- or, specifically, the abolition of the useless, extraneous, and sometimes downright destructive labor that we're compelled to do in the holy name of profit. The 4-hour workday is no utopian vision, but a very real possibility- hell, the 2-hour workday isn't far off either. And imagine all that humanity could accomplish when liberated! Imagine all the paintings, the books, the songs that could be created! Think of the philosophy and science that could be advanced, the inventions that could be discovered! There are a million Einsteins, Beethovens, Monets, and Tolstoys out there, and probably half of them are stuck as bus drivers and waiters.

"A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail..."