

What Are Wages?

Revoluciana

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Contents

Broad Strokes	3
Conceptualizing <i>wages</i>	3
Ownership	3
Hierarchy	4
Speech	4
Basic Existence and Marginalization	5
Agreement upon terms	5
What can be done?	6

*This post is part of a series that deals with basic leftist concepts and terminology. It is also a **living document** and subject to change on revolucionaria.net*

The concept of *wages* may seem so straightforward, such a fundamental part of our economic relations, so *banal*, to not bear the need for explanation. Perhaps it's not explanation so much as extrapolation and contextualization that are needed.

Broad Strokes

Let's start with the obvious:

- *Wages* is a term representing *money paid for work*

Yes, but not good enough. If I play my mandolin on the sidewalk and you put money in my hat, we wouldn't consider that to be my *wages*, nor would a tip paid to your server at a restaurant in the US— I qualify in the US because in most other countries, servers are paid in *wages*, not in tips. Moreover, if I write a book and you buy it, or if you become a paying supporter of *Revoluciana*, this does not constitute *wages*, either. You don't pay *wages* to the plumber who comes to fix your drain, either.

Wages only exist within the context of an employer-employee relationship. So, let's try this again:

- *Wages* are payments made by an employer to an employee for *time* spent doing *labor*, generally under conditions dictated by the employer.

Conceptualizing *wages*

If I sell you a book I've written, or if a friend sells you a quilt they've sewn, you are not buying our time and labor, you are buying a *product*. When you provide a tip, support a radical newsletter, or give a donation to a cause or organization, you are supporting those people and their work, a form of mutual aid (*mutual aid*, tagging for future discussion) that expresses your desire for the fruits of their labor to exist in the world and for these laborers to have the material ability to continue it— you are a *patron*, not a customer or an employer.

When an employee is paid *wages*, the *product* itself is *alienated* from an employee's *labor* and *time*. Despite the fact that the employee has deducted *time* from their life, and done all of the *labor*, the employee owns no share of the *product*, the fruits of their labor. The *product* is simply the *property* that is created as a result of *labor*.

The *product* is therefore owned by the employer, though the employer has done no *labor*, the employer has done *nothing* to create the *product*.

An employer is simply another term for *owner*.

Ownership

When you work for an employer, you might imagine that you work for your boss, but your boss may simply be a manager, another laborer who works for the company; however, it's not

really the *company* that you work for, either. You work for the *owners* of the company. To put it in other terms, you work for a *landlord*.

When working as a *wage-laborer*, you are not an owner of the *product*, nor are you the owner of the *means of production*– the factory, the tools, the land, etc. (again, these also are all things created and/or maintained by the laborers). In your capacity as a *wage-laborer*, you aren't even really a person– you are simply one of the expendable (and exploitable) *costs of doing business*.

As a reminder, generally speaking, under the global capitalist system, and definitely in the US, companies are *obligated* by law to do what is in the best financial interest of their shareholders, their *owners*. This means that a company is legally obligated to pay you as low of a wage as they believe the market can bear. Mind you, they are not legally obligated to give you a *fair wage* (whatever that would mean), and they are not legally obligated to give you a *living wage*, but simply just enough in order that the work gets done and the shareholders, the *owners*, get paid the maximum profit. Your needs and interests never enter the equation– *never*. Companies are not only *incentivized*, but legally *obligated*, to make life worse for you than it otherwise could be.

Hierarchy

The employer-employee relationship is inherently hierarchical. For this reason alone, anarchists such as myself take issue with the concept of *wages*, even without the economic issues raised above. When your employer has power over your livelihood, it affects your freedom and autonomy in the world, and even your ability to seek and advocate for better, both as an individual and as a member of society.

Speech

I'm not trying to shame any of you for some thoughts I'm about to pose to you, but I want to illustrate a point.

I wonder how many of you reading these words right at this very moment would feel comfortable reading it on your work computer. I've already been told by some readers that they are unable to read it on their personal phones during break time while connected to their work's wifi because of the company's filters. It's probably a filter that catches basic words like *anarchist* or something.

I wonder how many of you would feel comfortable talking about this subject at work, or any of the other subjects I discuss in my writing, around the water cooler, during break, or even in the parking lot after you've punched out for the day.

I wonder how many of you would you feel comfortable talking about forming a union.

I wonder how many of you would feel comfortable sharing these posts on your social media or forwarding to friends (based on the number of people who continue to sign up, I know at least some of you are sharing, and thank you!).

I wonder how many of you would feel comfortable publicly posting about these topics in your own words, with you identifiable as the source, or going to a protest where you were likely to have your picture in the media, visible to your employer.

I wonder how many of you are afraid to speak or make your voice heard, not only at work, but in other places, for fear of losing your job if your employer found out.

How absolutely *fucked up* is it that your so-called right to exercise your freedom of speech is hindered almost entirely by the fact that you might not only be fired, but ruin your entire career, just by speaking?

Do you know who doesn't have this issue? The *owners*. They can say whatever they want without fear of being fired. Sure, people can boycott. There are definitely consequences, but the consequences are not really the same for the people who have exploited, amassed, and hoarded large quantities of wealth, are they? Most people are in an existential crisis if they miss a paycheck or two. I'm not going to feel bad for Nazi billionaires when people torch their product line.

Basic Existence and Marginalization

As a trans woman, I'm keenly aware of the difficulties of finding work in this world. So many trans people are afraid to come out at work for fear of losing their jobs. I've known plenty of trans people who have been fired and demoted simply for existing as themselves. This hierarchical relationship with their employers has meant that it has forced so many to stay in the closet, often for *years*, sometimes their entire lives, living in pain throughout, simply because they are reliant on living within a system that forces them into *wage labor* but punishes them for existing.

How many times have black people been fired for their hair, or forced to wear it in a way acceptable to their employers? How many people have been fired, or refused to be hired, for wearing a hijab? How many talented autistic people haven't been hired because they have difficulty with making eye contact?

All marginalized people have first-hand knowledge of what this means to live in a system where they have little power, but must still navigate. Women make significantly less money than white men for the same work. Trans women make significantly less money than cis women. Trans women of color make significantly less money than white trans women. People with disabilities are *legally paid less*. Extrapolate for all other marginalized groups.

This is all assuming people with these marginalized qualities *can even get hired in the first place*. There is so much more to say on this topic, but for the time being, this relationship between employer-employee, and especially the system under which those relationships exist, punish marginalized existence.

Agreement upon terms

A person might react to the employer-employee relationship and determine that it is, in fact, *not* exploitative because both the employer and the employee agreed upon the terms. The workers are free, after all, to quit and work for another employer.

So, to be clear, I want to reiterate that corporate interests, which is to say, the interests of the *owners* of society, otherwise known as *capitalists*,¹ have worked to create not only *incentives*, but also legal *obligations* to maximize their profit at the expenses of laborers. In the case of the US and similar governments, it would otherwise be fair to say that these corporate interests have *colluded* to make this the reality, but the actual truth is *not* that this government has been *captured* and

¹ *Technically, only a person who owns capital is a capitalist, anyone else who describes themselves as such is merely a capitalist sympathizer. That being said, words are merely vessels for communicating ideas, so don't put too fine a point on that definition as a rule. Feel free to use it in the sense of someone who is merely exploited by capitalism but who is a proponent of it anyway, misguided by their own lack of class consciousness as they may be.*

subverted for the benefit of *capitalists*. The truth is that this government was created this way from the start. The truth is that regardless of how it started, this is the basis of *all* capitalist forms of government.

Let me ask you, how free do you feel to quit your job? If you're out of a job, how free to you feel to turn down an offer of employment to go work for someone else?

How much leverage or power do you feel to negotiate on your terms with an employer? Perhaps a greater sense of power and leverage if you have a rare but necessary skill, but this is still simply supply and demand, right? You're still a commodity. You're still expendable and you lose that leverage the instant more people are capable of your skill.

How fair is it to really say that employees have *agreed upon the terms* of the employer-employee relationship when they have little to no leverage or power, and all employers are in a governmentally enforced form of collusion that lead to only marginal differences between employers?

How fair is it really to say that employees have *agreed upon the terms* when their lives, and the lives of their family members, are at stake? Meanwhile the employer treats them as a commodity and suffers essentially no consequences for firing or choosing not to hire a particular employee? The employer can, and does, squeeze the employee for every ounce of profit it can in this relationship.

How many of you see the soaring profits of your company's *shareholders*, the people who have done absolutely no work while they take these profits, while you and your coworkers go into debt to pay for medical bills and the needs of livelihood?

How many of you feel deeply that you deserve more for your labor, but feel helpless to demand it, or to even ask it?

Is this an *agreement upon terms* or is this *coercion*?

What can be done?

Aside from freeing ourselves from the grip of *capitalism* itself, which must be done, there are only a few choices as a wage-laborer that you have to shape this dynamic and gain small amounts of agency within the *capitalist system*.

Capitalist option:

- You can become a *capitalist*. You are free within our society to break free from being exploited by becoming an *owner*, a *landlord*, an employer, a *capitalist*. I don't advocate for you to do this, but it is an option to you if you choose to exploit others to avoid being exploited yourself.

Anti-capitalist options:

- You can work autonomously, as a freelancer, independent contractor, or as a sole-proprietor.
- Join and participate in a union. Unions work as a collective force to create pressure on your employers and governments in order to negotiate better contracts and create better conditions.

- You can start a worker-cooperative. Join together to buy out the business where you already work, if possible, or start a joint venture together, sharing the equity. Equity does not mean equal, by the way. Someone involved in the business for 20 hours a week is likely to have halve the equity as someone involved for 40 hours a week. You don't have to start from scratch. Multiple models exist to make this fair based on the type of work you are doing.

Unions and *Cooperatives* deserve their own separate posts in this series– in good time.

Ultimately, when determining *what can be done*, you first have to ask what type of society you want to live in. Do you want to live in a society built upon *wage exploitation*? Do you want to be exploited? Do you want to exploit others?

It takes work, it takes effort, it takes time to move away from this system, but we can only do it by putting one foot in front of the other, and only if we each walk in the right direction– away. We must each *refuse to be complicit*.

Certainly *capitalism* is not the only exploitative system to ever exist, but it is the one under which we currently find ourselves.

We *can* change this. It is large and it is powerful, but it is not inescapable.

Ursula K. Le Guin once put it this way,

“We live in capitalism, its power seems inescapable – but then, so did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings.”

no ends, only means

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