

Class and Exploitation

A Workers Solidarity Movement Position Paper

Workers Solidarity Movement

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The left talks about class in ways that are often contradictory and confusing. This paper represented our collective use of class and how we understand exploitation. The scope of what we cover means that it necessarily makes sweeping generalisations but the goal is to sketch what our collective perspective is around these, not to be an educational resource in itself.

1. How We Talk About Class

1. The most common way that class is talked about in the global north is an ideological ‘common sense’ definition of class which focuses on poverty & wealth in themselves, formal education received and often most importantly whether those who work primarily use their physical strength or their brains. This is reflected in the deeply ideological expression of politicians and media that ‘we are all middle class now’. That is that almost no-one in the global north is working class outside of a small population highly marginalised by poverty and snobbery.
2. A more radical variant of the same often espoused on the left insists there is still a significant working class because as well as manual workers that class also includes the unemployed, and most of those in service industries including the public sector. This variant puts emphasis on the capitalist class and tends to minimise the existence of the middle class, outside of using it to describe their political opponents on the left.
3. The section of the left influenced by intersectional feminism is a sub set of this where class is an added oppression rather than also being the core of exploitation. Here it is ‘classism’ that must be opposed, although we prefer the directional term snobbery. That is the criminalisation of the lower classes — often very much linked to racism — and the fact that people with certain accents or who live in certain districts are discriminated against. All this is to be opposed but it’s not a complete picture of the way living in a class society deeply shapes every aspect of our lives and that society. This can only be fully understood through the lens of exploitation.
4. Leaving opposition to snobbery aside we prefer to talk about class with the following broad divisions:
 - A. A working class or proletariat that includes the vast majority of society. Basically all of us who lack capital and therefore need to work for others plus those that have only enough capital to survive — subsistence farmers remain a large minority of the world’s population, street traders are another example.
 - B. A capitalist class that comprises people who would have no need to work to remain wealthy and who continue to generate wealth by having others work for them, either directly or through rent. This class is less than 1% of the population.
 - C. A middle class of small landlords, shopkeepers and very well paid functionaries which includes top lawyers, civil servants, academics, media personalities and managers.

That class unlike the rest of us can accumulate substantial capital across their lifetimes. In most societies it's probably 5–10% of the population.

5. This division we choose is functional. We choose it because anarchists we see the route to freedom lying in a large part through the class conflict between the working class and the capitalist class. If we increase our proportion of wealth generated through wage demands their share of the wealth decreases. The working class is often so divided we fail to articulate that common interest but the capitalist class remains fully aware of and pursues its class interests. The position of the middle class is more complex, it's often well rewarded by the capitalist class but still subservient to it.
6. A successful revolution requires the working class to overcome its internal divisions and so reach an awareness of itself as a class including an awareness of its own power to transform society. This is why the struggle against oppressions is essential, it's the existence of racist, sexist and colonialist ideology within the working class and the privileges given to the white male sector in particular that produce and reproduce divisions in the working class. Although we focus on exploitation in this paper it is not somehow sealed off from oppressions, rather the creation and reproduction of class rule in general and of capitalist rule in particular require the division and redivision of the working class across multiple intersections.

2. Origins and Development of Class and Exploitation

1. For most of humanity's existence we lived in groups that had no class structure. There was some labour specialisation but there doesn't appear to have been divisions in power and wealth that were passed from one generation to the next. There is nothing natural about class, it's entirely something we have constructed.
2. Class appears to have developed around the same time and in the same locations as agriculture. Agriculture and animal husbandry along with grain storage meant that surpluses could be accumulated over time. Individuals and groups could lay claim to these surpluses and the land on which they were produced. Warfare for the purpose of claiming additional land, seizing food stores and animals and enslaving additional workers became possible. A specialist class who ruled by the sword rather than working in the fields came into being. The imposition of patriarchy allowed the members of this class to pass on their power and wealth, primarily to male sons. From within this military group emerged individual ruling families who often concentrated power absolutely in their hands, sometimes founding dynasties that continued for many generations.
3. Most of the remaining 10,000 years of recorded history can be broadly described in the above terms. That is broadly there was a specialist military command class that used direct violence to rule over the classes. Exploitation was immediately obvious as the soldiers physically sized the output of those who worked, torturing, killing and imprisoning those who refused. New patriarchal religions came into being that emphasised the divine nature of rulers, sometimes they were literally presented as gods.

4. A common re-occurring feature of such societies was the emergence of classes of merchants who accumulated considerable wealth through trade. Quite often such groups were suppressed and their wealth seized by the ruling class when their wealth became too powerful or because the ruling class wanted to wipe out debts they had accumulated.
5. Most societies also contained a layer of skilled workers whose work meant they were not so easily subject to the usual mechanism of exploitation through violence. Their skills were rare and not easily replaced which gave them a limited form of power that could be expressed through flight or even organised work stoppages. Even 3000 years ago we have records of tomb builders at the Valley of the Kings in Egypt going on strike in the reigns of Ramesses III, IX and X.
6. The emergence of capitalism is the story of the successful effort of an emerging European merchant class to demand universal democratic and legal rights that would serve to protect its wealth from arbitrary seizures. Ironically a major component of their wealth was the product of slavery and colonialism, i.e. accumulation built on seizing the wealth and even bodies of people who were conquered by military force. This required the creation of the racist and colonialist ideologies recognisable today to justify the process of conquest and enslavement.
7. That accumulation of wealth allowed the emerging merchant class to use its monopoly of capital rather than simple violence to accumulate further wealth. Rather than using slave labour to crew ships or work in mines they paid mariners or miners a wage in return for their labour on the voyage or in the mine. The factory system grew out of this where machinery was used to allow a single worker to do the work that once many workers would have done. Instead of the workers selling what they produced the output went to the factory owner who sold it for profit and used part of that profit to pay the wages of the worker. Machinery was expensive, far beyond what any worker could afford. The cost of machinery and the space to install it along with the inputs needed to keep it running came to be called 'capital' and hence those with enough wealth were called capitalists.
8. The development of capitalism did require considerable violence, factories were dangerous unpleasant places, early industrial cities were overcrowded, filthy and had high mortality rates. Force had to be used to turn people into workers but once they were workers it was the wage system itself that enforced capitalist discipline. Stripped of land and any other means of subsistence workers either worked or they starved. This working class was still a small minority but increasingly laws in general were framed around the needs of the capitalist class to obtain and discipline workers.
9. The capitalist class were not a military class as previous rulers had been and their birth of capitalism saw the emerging capitalist class of merchants and bankers come into conflict with the old military feudal class. Parliamentary democracy and the 'rule of law' was born out of that conflict and the need of the capitalist class for a system that would simultaneously protect them from the military class seizing their wealth but also prevent the far more numerous classes of workers doing the same. Creation of that system required mass revolutions that threw down the old feudal order and erected the new capitalist order in its place.

10. Exploitation can be understood as the working of this system where the wealth generated does not flow to those doing the work but rather those owning the capital. The owners don't directly threaten the workers with violence, instead the workers depend on the owners for work and indeed learn to be grateful for it. Today that capitalist class are often talked of by media and politicians as 'job creators' and 'entrepreneurs' to whom us workers should be grateful. In Ireland we are told we need to be grateful to super profitable tax avoiding corporations like Apple and Google because they 'create jobs'. This underlines just how invisible exploitation has become. The focus is not on the huge profits that are made on the brain of each worker but on the job being 'given'.

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