

THE REBEL GUIDE TO MARXISM

Class & Class Struggle



Theme 2: Class & Class Struggle

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Topic 1: The Ruling Class: Who Runs the World?

Who runs the world? The Marxist answer to this question is the capitalist class or bourgeoisie, the owners and controllers of the major means of production and concentrations of capital and the employers of wage labour. This answer is in opposition to various other answers out there.

It is a whole social class, not, for example, a tiny secret conspiracy (the Rothschilds, the Freemasons, the Bilderberg Group etc.). It is not possible for any individual or handful of individuals to run even a single modern society, let alone the world. Even where there appears to be a single dictator — Stalin, Hitler, Mussolini, Al Sisi etc. — that dictator rests on the support of a significant social layer, best described as a ruling class.

It is not, as we are officially told, elected politicians — presidents, prime ministers, TDs — or the United Nations. Some of these politicians can sometimes play an important role, but mostly they are just window dressing on the system, and even when they are significant, they still depend on the class that controls production. Political power is important, but in the final analysis, it rests on economic power.

The world is not run by just the bankers or the developers or the financial speculators or the generals or big pharma or the media or the judges. All these groups are very powerful, but they are all different components of the ruling class as a whole.

Who are the capitalist class?

The capitalists, or bourgeoisie, developed historically over many centuries. They began as the middle class in towns in the feudal Middle Ages when the ruling class were the land-

owning aristocracy — ‘bourgeois’ comes from ‘burgher’, which meant townsman. They first started to really make an impact in the 1400s and 1500s in Europe and first came to power in the Dutch Republic as a result of the Dutch Revolt (c 1556–1600) and the English Revolution (1642–47). The combination at the end of the 18th century of the American Revolution, the French Revolution (1789–94) and the Industrial Revolution in Britain turned the bourgeoisie into the dominant force in Europe, North America and, consequently, the world.

In Marx’s day, the mid-19th century, most of the world — including Russia, China, India and Africa — was pre-capitalist. The bourgeoisie was dominant militarily and through empire, but capitalist production was concentrated in Western Europe and part of the United States. Despite this, Marx grasped that the competitive nature of capitalism, its ‘need of a constantly expanding market for its products’, would chase the bourgeoisie ‘over the whole surface of the globe’. In *The Communist Manifesto*, he had this to say about capitalist competition:

It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilisation into their midst, i.e. to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image.

In the course of the 20th century, Marx’s prediction became empirical fact. Today, the capitalist class exists and is dominant in every country in the world, and its core elements, the giant corporations, operate globally. Since the Occupy Movement of 2011, the most popular term for the capitalist class has been ‘the 1%’. This term is not, of course, mathe-

matically exact, but it is very useful because a) it gives us a rough idea of the size and scale of the ruling class and b) it emphasises the gap and conflict between this class and the rest of us.

1% of the population of Ireland is approximately 60,000 people, say 40,000 if we exclude children. 1% of the world's population of 7 billion is approximately 70 million. This is a very small minority of society as a whole, but it is not a tiny handful who could simply be disposed of by a well organised conspiracy. 40,000 constitutes a definite and significant social layer, especially given that each of its members is personally rich and strategically located in a position of power.

The wealth of the 1% is phenomenal. According to a report from Credit Suisse in November 2017, the globe's richest 1% own half the world's wealth. The world's richest people have seen their share of the globe's total wealth increase from 42.5% at the height of the 2008 financial crisis to 50.1% in 2017, or \$140 trillion. Oxfam paints a similar picture: in March 2018, they reported that 2017 saw the biggest increase in billionaires in history, one more every two days. Billionaires saw their wealth increase by \$762bn in just 12 months (March 2016 – March 2017). This amount of wealth could have ended global extreme poverty seven times over. However, 82% of the new wealth created has gone to the top 1%, while 0% has gone to the world's poorest 50%.

But even these figures underestimate the real economic power of the capitalist class because they refer to the personal wealth of the 1% when what really counts in terms of exercising social power are the total corporate assets that the 1% control and that far exceed their personal wealth.

Thus, it has been estimated that the total capital invested in the oil/gas industries alone exceeds \$3,000 trillion.

This wealth is not only or even mainly about personal consumption; it is far more than is needed to buy any number of Ferraris, mansions and yachts. It is about economic, social and political power, about the ability of the 1% to impose their priorities on society as a whole.

The capitalist class as ruling class

When Marxists speak of the capitalist class as the ruling class, they don't just mean it is very rich and economically dominant, but also that it exercises political power through its control of the state apparatus. 'The bourgeoisie', wrote Marx, 'has conquered for itself, in the modern representative state, exclusive political sway. The executive of the modern state is nothing but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie'. Capitalist/bourgeois control of the state is achieved in a number of ways.

The personnel who occupy the key positions in the state – heads of the armed forces, police chiefs, judges, senior civil servants etc. — are mainly drawn from the same bourgeois class background. Even if, by way of exception, they come from lower class backgrounds, they will not be promoted to senior positions unless they are ideologically committed to the acceptance of the capitalist system. The leading figures in the state apparatus are socially and institutionally integrated into the capitalist class and system.

More importantly, the state under capitalism relies on capital accumulation for its success internally and on the world stage. If the state fails to create the conditions for capital to

accumulate, it will lack resources internally and risk being outcompeted internationally. Beyond this, bourgeois class rule also involves ideological hegemony. As Marx put it,

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it.

Bourgeois hegemony is primarily exercised through its control of the mass media, the education system and (though to a lesser extent than in the past) religion.

Another important element in bourgeois rule and hegemony is its ability to secure the loyalty of the upper layers of the middle class — especially managers and medium sized business people. This is done mainly through ensuring that the incomes and wealth of this layer, though in no way comparable to those of the 1%, are nevertheless significantly higher than those of the mass of working class people. To put it simply, the ruling class rewards these people for keeping the lower orders in line.

It is important not to imagine that these instruments of capitalist class rule operate mechanically. Not every government policy, police operation or court judgement is directly ordered by the 1% or always acts completely in their interests. Not every editorial in *The Independent* or *The Irish Times* is written by Denis O'Brien. All these state and social institutions have a certain autonomy that helps

them appear neutral and ‘independent’; it reinforces their legitimacy. But it is no less important to understand how, overall, they reinforce each other. If the core interests of the capitalist class and system are under threat, the forces of the state will be there to defend them, to ‘maintain law and order’, and the media will be on hand to explain that this was necessary in ‘the national interest’.

The international capitalist class

The capitalist class dominates the whole world at present, but this doesn’t mean that it is globally united. Capitalism is based on competition between rival capitals (business units), each of which strives to maximise its own profits. Even within a single nation, capitalists are not completely united; rather, they form what Marx called ‘a band of hostile brothers’, in solidarity with each other against the working class but also each trying to do down its rivals. It is one of the functions of the capitalist state to try to iron out these conflicts between rival capitals or sections of capital so as to present their own bourgeois version of a united front. But, at an international level, there is no overarching state apparatus with authority over individual nation states or national ruling classes. Consequently, internationally, the capitalist class is divided into numerous rival national bourgeoisies. Often these national bourgeoisies form alliances with each other (e.g. NATO or the EU), but these alliances are not stable or unchanging. Often, also, the conflicts between rival capitalist states or blocs spills over into open warfare.

The fact that the leading capitalist corporations operate globally has led some commentators (most notably, Hardt and Negri in *Empire*) to argue that the days of conflicts between nations are over or fast disappearing. However, this

misses the point that, although these corporations sell internationally, they almost always retain a specific national base (e.g. ExxonMobil in the United States; Toyota in Japan; Volkswagen in Germany; BP in Britain; Samsung in South Korea), and they rely on ‘their’ nation state (with which they establish very close ties) to back them up on the international stage.

Nor is the power of the international bourgeoisie distributed in any way evenly or equally — some national ruling classes are much stronger than others, and the balance of economic/political/military power is continually shifting.

At the beginning of the 20th century, there were six or seven major powers — Britain, France, Germany, the United States, Austria-Hungary, Russia and Japan — who were dominant over the rest of the world, colonising and exploiting it, and eventually formed into two rival blocs — Germany, Austria-Hungary v Britain, France, Russia (plus the United States) — which fought the First World War to decide which would dominate the world. These rival blocs essentially reconstituted themselves and fought again in the Second World War. Out of that War, two states and their respective ruling classes — the US and the Soviet Union — emerged as super-powers who divided up the world between them in the Cold War and attempted to enlist as many other ruling classes behind them. With the collapse of communism and the Soviet Union in 1989–91, the ruling class of the United States appeared for a while to be completely dominant (it retains to this day by far the largest military forces). Nevertheless, over the last few decades, its position, both economically and politically, has weakened, and now it faces a number of challenges to its power. The most powerful of these is from China, with its prodigious

economic growth, but a number of ‘sub-imperial’ powers, such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran, are also asserting themselves and gaining greater room to manoeuvre.

Finally, we must remember that, although these various bourgeoisies or capitalist classes (and, indeed, the giant corporations which are their key components), possess immense wealth, political and military power and ideological influence, they are by no means free to do or rule just as they please. Rather, they are all ultimately prisoners of the implacable logic of capitalist competition — accumulate or die! — and, consequently, they pursue that logic even when it is proving ruinous to themselves collectively (as in leading to environmental catastrophe). Fundamentally, they are not in control of the world they run.

Moreover, for all their apparent power, it remains the case that all of it — every barrel of oil, every car built, every army tank or aircraft carrier, every TV station and newspaper — depends on the labour of working people. However strong the international bourgeoisie may seem, their power is less than the potential collective power of the international working class.

Test yourself: Discussion questions

- (1) How does the capitalist class differ from previous ruling classes?
- (2) How do international organisations like the IMF, the World Bank and the United Nations fit into global capitalism and the global ruling class?
- (3) Explain the structural support that capitalist states and

corporations give to each other?

- (4) What is the relationship between the ruling class (the big capitalists) and small and medium sized capitalists?
- (5) Do the ruling classes have complete control of the global system?
- (6) How can the working class challenge the power of the 1% today?

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Topic 2: Who Are the Global Working Class?

According to Marx in *The Communist Manifesto*, ‘What the bourgeoisie [...] produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers’. He was referring, of course, to the working class. But who are they?

In a footnote to the 1888 edition of the *Manifesto*, Frederick Engels writes simply: ‘By proletariat [is meant] the class of modern wage labourers who, having no means of production of their own, are reduced to selling their labour power in order to live’.

This very succinct definition immediately tells us a number of important things. It distinguishes the working class or proletariat — we can treat the terms as interchangeable here — from slaves and peasants, the two other main exploited classes in history, by the fact that they do not own any means of production (as peasants do) and that they sell their labour power (unlike slaves, who are owned). It also makes clear that the working class is not, for Marx, defined by certain occupations, e.g. mining, textile work, bus driving, nor by the nature of its work, e.g. manual labour versus white collar work, but by the social relation of wage labour.

By this definition, teachers, nurses, shop workers, clerical workers, call centre staff, librarians, lecturers and so on are just as much part of the working class as factory workers or dockers because they all live by the sale of their labour power. This is extremely important for analysing the class structure of modern Western societies, where many of the old industries have declined and the proportion of white collar workers has much increased. Many sociologists and media commentators use this to suggest that the working class has declined and that most people are middle class now. But this is to misunderstand how the working class is

defined.

One qualification to Engels' definition is necessary, however, for today's world. Not all wage earners are working class. There is a section of employees who are paid, not for the goods and services they produce, but to manage the labour and exploitation of workers below them. These people are usually well rewarded for their service to the system by the real bosses — they earn much more than the value of their labour power — and are managers, not workers. But even taking into account this layer, who make up 10–20% of society, the working class remains the large majority: around 70%, in Western societies like Ireland, Britain and Germany.

The dominant narrative

Since the 1950s, the dominant narrative, in the media and also among various sociologists and other academics, has been that the working class is in decline and is no longer a force for social change. At first, during the big post-war economic boom, the story put about was that the working class had been bought off by consumer goods — refrigerators, TVs, cars etc. — that had previously been the preserve of the middle class. The academic name given to this argument was 'the Embourgeoisement Thesis'. But this was disproved by the great international revolt of the working classes in the late sixties and early seventies. The academics and pundits then switched to the claim that the working class was disappearing. This argument was based on the fact, especially from the recession of 1979–83 onwards, that many of the traditional industries most closely associated with the working classes and the labour movement — mining, the docks, steel, shipbuilding, car production,

engineering and so on — were evidently in sharp decline in Europe and North America. As a result, they claimed, it was time to say ‘farewell to the working class’ (*Adieu le Proletariat* was the title of an influential book by André Gorz).

As we have already noted, this claim was not even valid for the advanced Western capitalist countries, where the decline in some traditional industrial manual occupations did not at all signify the complete disappearance of the manual working class and where their relative decline was balanced by the growth of the white collar working class and by the driving down of the relative wages and conditions of many of these white collar occupations (their ‘proletarianization’ as it has been called). There was also a massive growth of new occupations, such as call centre workers, logistics workers, McDonald’s workers and the like who, while not the traditional industrial working class, were by no stretch of the imagination middle class or ‘bourgeoisified’. Rather, they were subject to low, often minimum, wages and to poor and precarious conditions of work.

On a global scale, however, the dominant narrative that the working class was disappearing was not only false but the opposite of the truth. From the post-war boom of the 1950s through to the era of neo-liberal globalization in the 1980s and down to today, the international working class has experienced spectacular growth.

The growth of the working class

In 1848, when Marx urged in *The Communist Manifesto* the workers of the world to unite, the working class was confined to north western Europe and small parts of North America — it numbered no more than 20 million. By the

time of the Russian Revolution, the international working class had grown massively, but it was still concentrated in Europe and North America. Russia, Asia, Africa and Latin America — although they contained pockets of workers who were politically very important — remained overwhelmingly peasant countries. In the last few decades, this has changed dramatically. In a careful study in 2002, Chris Harman estimated the global wage labour force at approximately 3 billion. Since then, it has grown even further, especially because of the huge expansion of Chinese capitalism.

For a number of reasons, it is not possible to provide exact figures for the number of working class people in the world: the bourgeoisie don't collect statistics using Marxist class categories, and statistics may be unreliable in some key parts of the world, e.g. China and India. Further, in many countries of the global south, there is a considerable but very hard to measure layer of 'marginalised' people in the cities who are neither peasants nor properly petty bourgeois nor fully proletarianised. But exact statistics are not needed here; what we need are a) a correct picture of the overall trend and b) a rough idea of how far that trend has developed.

What is indisputable is that by far the largest national working class in the world is that of China, followed at some distance by India and then the United States and Indonesia. After that come countries such as Brazil, Russia, Nigeria, Japan, Bangladesh and Pakistan. The urban labour force in China is something in the region of 800 million, with a considerable portion in factories (it is estimated that there are 60,000 factories in the Guangdong region); in India, it is 380 million, about 170 million in the United States and about 120 million in Indonesia. That is nearly 1,500 million

in the four largest countries alone. And even in countries that we might be inclined to think of as undeveloped or still rural, such as Bangladesh and Pakistan, there are 30–40 million people engaged in wage labour, i.e. more than in Britain or France and enormously more than in Russia when the working class took power in 1917 (when it amounted to only about 3 million).

Potential power

What is important about this from a Marxist point of view is the immense potential power it represents. Of course, the emphasis here is on potential. There is a world of difference, as Marx observed, between the working class as a ‘class-in-itself’ and as a ‘class-for-itself’, and the transition from one to the other is neither simple nor smooth. Nevertheless, it a force that if mobilized could sweep away the apparently unassailable fortresses of global capital. If even a significant portion of the immense Chinese working class were to move together, as opposed to numerous localised guerrilla actions, which has been the pattern up to now, it would shake the world.

One of the key characteristics of this contemporary international working class is its concentration in massive cities. The World Bank’s list of countries by degree of urbanisation shows over 30 countries that are more than 80% urban, including Argentina (92%), Australia (89%), Belgium (98%), Brazil (85%), Chile (89%), the Netherlands (90%), Qatar (96%), Saudi Arabia (83%), the UK (82%), the United States (81%) and Uruguay (95%). As with the spread of wage labour, it is in the developing countries that the process of urbanisation is most rapid, and many that were predominantly rural until very recently are now substantially urban, e.g. Algeria (70%), Bolivia (68%), Mongolia (71%), Peru (78%) and Tur-

key (73%). The World Atlas lists 69 cities with a population of over 5 million and 26 of over 10 million.

And, again, China, because of its huge population and massive economic growth, is the most important example. In 2010, China became a predominantly urban society, and it now has more than 60 cities of over a million people, including such giants as Shanghai, with about 24 million, and Beijing, with over 21 million. Perhaps the whole development is best expressed in the example of Guangdong, which has become a vast urban sprawl and the most populous province in China, with a population of 104 million at the 2010 census.

Again, we are talking about unbelievable potential social and political power. Some idea of this can be seen by looking at what happened in the giant cities of Cairo and Alexandria when the people rebelled en masse in January 2011 in the Egyptian Revolution. The numbers who took to the streets were truly immense, and the seemingly impregnable regime of regional strongman, Hosni Mubarak, was destroyed in just 18 days.

Of course, the overthrow of capitalism, nationally and internationally, would require much greater and more sustained mobilization than this, with much greater class consciousness, but the Egyptian Revolution showed what can be done. This class — international, multi-ethnic and involving more women workers than ever before in history — is the hope for the future of humanity.

Test yourself: Discussion questions

- (1) What is the key difference between wage labourers and other groups of exploited workers — does this difference

have any political importance?

- (2) Intellectuals have proclaimed the end of the working class on a number of occasions but what does Marx mean by class and how can his conception be used to prove these theories incorrect?
- (3) Marx made an important distinction between a class-in-itself and a class-for-itself? Can you explain the differences between these two conceptions in your own words? Why is it important?
- (4) Marx predicted that the working class would be capitalism's grave digger. Does the fact that this has not yet happened invalidate Marx's theory of class?

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Topic 3: The Working Day & Rates of Pay

In capitalist societies, the majority of people earn their living by working for others. Workers sell their ability to work for a weekly wage and are subject to employer discipline for a given amount of time each week. For defenders of the system, the capitalist labour contract is freely agreed and fair to everyone. Workers choose to work for their employers, and both parties are made better off at the end of the process.

But workers often have a different opinion. Ask those subjected to production lines or retail shops, and they will tell you that they lose all control of their lives once they enter the workplace. Workers are made to submit to their bosses' demands and rarely get a second to themselves. This creates a major power difference, with one group forced to carry out the orders of another group.

The rewards of this process are not equal either. Workers often give the best years of their lives just to keep their heads above water. At the end of their working life, they may have a house to pass on to their relatives, but little more than that. Their employers do very little productive work but get richer by the minute.

In Ireland, the top 1% of the population have 150 times the wealth of anyone in the bottom half of the wealth distribution — mostly earned from hiring workers and owning property. Across the world, the eight richest men have more wealth than the bottom 4 billion people combined. How do the owners of capital get what seems to be a free lunch?

To solve this riddle, Marx argues that workers sell their commodity — labour power — for its value each week, before producing more than this value through their work

and effort. The difference is pocketed by capitalists, making them extremely rich. Let's take a numerical example to explain this properly.

Marx assumes that workers are paid the value of the commodity they own — their labour power — calculated on the basis of how much it costs to (re)produce it weekly. Imagine it takes a worker €400 worth of goods and services to feed, clothe and house herself and her family. The full value of her commodity is therefore €400 weekly, or €10 per hour over 40 hours.

Now imagine that in every hour the worker actually produces €20 worth of goods and services. This means that, at the end of the working week, she will have created €800 worth of goods and services for the employer. One half of this goes back to the worker to pay for her labour power, and the other half is pocketed by the boss as surplus value and potential profit. This second €400 is the sole reason for hiring workers, and Marx analyses how employers have historically tried to drive this up.

Guaranteeing surplus value

Forcing workers to produce more value than they receive in wages makes the capitalist labour process inherently exploitative, but the level of this exploitation is decided by the strength of the two classes involved in the struggle. Capitalists demand the right to maximise the use of the commodity they have purchased, whereas workers demand the right to a healthy body that can be hired out again to make a living. Marx insists that in this battle of contending rights, it is force that decides, with the capitalist classes constantly reorganising the labour process to take control and squeeze

out surplus value. Historically, they have used seven main tactics to achieve this aim.

- (1) Controlling the Labour Process. At the outset of capitalism, merchants used to drop raw materials to producers' homes, but they gradually forced working people into purpose-built factories. This period of early manufactory was characterised by a growing division of labour, more intensive work practices and a deskilling of the labour force to reduce their power. Overtime, large-scale industry moved this process onto a whole new level, with modern machinery subordinating workers' actions completely to the will of their bosses. This process reached its logical conclusion with Taylorist 'time and motion studies', designed to make sure every second of the working day was used to produce value and maximise surplus value.
- (2) Reducing the Value of Labour Power. Machines have a second important function in tipping the scales in favour of capital. Although they cannot create surplus value (only labourers can do that) machines can produce the goods and services workers need to constantly reproduce their ability to work. By using the latest machinery, factories can produce food, shelter and clothing in less time, making it cheaper to produce the workers' commodity — labour power — on a weekly basis. This has the potential to reduce the value of labour power in much the same way as new technology that makes smart phones in half the time will reduce their value on the open market. This shifts the balance of the working day away from the necessary labour needed to reproduce the worker and towards surplus value for the employer.

- (3) Intensifying the Labour Process. Capitalists seek to maximise the work effort for every minute and hour of the day. The natural rhythm of work includes periods of downtime interspersed with more intense activity. Capitalists, however, seek to eliminate downtime to maintain high levels of continuous work effort. General Motors, for example, boast that their staff work intensely for 58 seconds of each minute of the day. In other jobs, managers deploy various techniques to intensify work effort — benchmarking one against the other; auditing work time; setting Key Performance Indicators; speeding up conveyor belts etc.
- (4) Extending the Working Day. Capitalists' next trick is to extend the hours worked by their employees. In the early phase of capitalism, manufacturers would expect up to 80 hours weekly from employees, with very few breaks. Capitalists also lobbied parliament to stop workers from organising themselves into unions and chipped away at breaks and home time to squeeze out as much work as possible. Workers had no option but to resist this onslaught, and, from the 1840s onwards, they were able to force reductions to the working day. In modern society, capitalists either try to blur the distinction between work and free time by encouraging workers to stay online or available on their mobile phones. They also try to restructure the working week by getting people to work on Sunday or 'annualised hours' — at times when the most commodities are needed.
- (5) Dividing the Working Classes. Another key ruling class tactic has been to divide workers into various categories. One way to divide working people is on the basis of gender. Historically, women have been paid less than

men throughout the capitalist system, with a gender pay gap still in evidence today. A second key division is between blue collar workers using their hands and white collar workers using their heads. This divide is currently breaking down as all workers face worsening conditions, but it was historically used to make a group of relatively well paid professional workers identify with the capitalist system. Migrants and people of colour are also segregated out and paid less than the white male population.

- (6) Reducing Workers' Terms and Conditions. Another strategy adopted by bosses is to periodically cut workers' terms and conditions. This tactic is particularly prevalent in periods of economic crisis, but it can also become a longer-term strategy, as the period of neoliberalism proves. Over the last 35 years, workers in the advanced countries have seen their wages attacked on every level. Labour markets have been made more flexible, trade union rights have been curtailed, and workers have lost pensions rights and basic conditions. This has become the new normal in capitalism as the ruling classes do everything in their power to sustain their rates of profitability.
- (7) Cutting the Social Wage. After World War 2 there was a form of class compromise in most of Europe. In return for ending an ambition of labour movements to overthrow the system, capitalists agreed to higher taxes on profits to pay for a social wage. The social wage included pension rights, sick pay schemes and wider social insurance against accidents and misfortunes. Today, capitalists have torn up this compromise. Between 1985 and 2018, the average global corporation tax rate has fallen

from 49% to 24%. Corporations no longer want to pay for defined benefit pension schemes. They have also cut back on sick pay schemes, and insecurity has been imposed on workers.

Workers' resistance

Workers have always resisted these attacks, with varying degrees of success. In the most advanced parts of the system, for example, workers have achieved a major reduction in the working week. During the early part of the 18th century, the working week was six days and up to 80 hours. This came down rapidly throughout the century, however, as workers engaged in mass strikes, culminating in a General Strike in Britain in 1842. Within five years, the British ruling classes had introduced a Factory Act to restrict the working day to a 10-hour maximum. By the 1860s, workers were also getting organised into trade unions, and by the middle of the 20th century, five days and 40 hours became the norm throughout Europe and North America. This is perhaps the most important victory for working people over the last two hundred years, but the battle continues. Today, working time is increasing again in many sectors thanks to the use of email, smart phones etc. Workers are also increasingly forced to accept precarious contracts and to work on Sundays without extra pay.

The battle to avoid the intensification of work has been less successful, with employees increasingly forced to submit to a pace set by employers. Capitalism constantly strives to deskill workers by forcing them to submit to the power of machinery. This proletarianisation of the work force is powerfully described by Harry Braverman in his classic work 'Labour and Monopoly Capital — The Degradation of

Work in the 20th Century'.

In the traditional blue collar sector (car plants, production lines etc.), employers have used scientific management techniques to break tasks into simple repetitive motions and 'time and motion' studies to make work as intensive as possible. They have also altered the 9–5 working norm by structuring work around the clock albeit with different workers on different shifts.

This process is now being mirrored in offices too, with smart technology used to track how many pieces of work an average bank or insurance employee gets through daily. Software engineers and computer programmers working for Google or Facebook are currently better protected than Tesco workers. But this is not because their bosses support them as living, breathing human beings — it is because they have the skills needed for capital to be successful at making profits. Over time, the bosses will look to deskill these roles and eventually make these jobs more precarious. The better capital is able to deskill labour, the worse the outcome for workers.

Reflecting on the capitalist labour process, Marx was at pains to point out that workers had to hold onto skills and organise in trade unions, but he also insisted that this was little more than a defensive strategy on terrain that was structured in favour of employers. Capitalists have a virtual monopoly on employment and the power to 'hire and fire' working people who need access to jobs to feed themselves and their families. This gives employers incredible power in the capitalist system no matter how organised workers become.

Added to this, capitalism creates what Marx defined as a reserve army of labour, with a surplus of potential workers acting as a permanent drag on terms and conditions. Together, these two aspects of the system ensure that it is the success or otherwise of capital accumulation that is the primary driver of wages and conditions over the long term. During periods of capitalist expansion, the reserve army of labour shrinks, forcing bosses to compete for workers and helping to (momentarily) push up wages. When the economy is working at full tilt, there is upward pressure on wages and conditions, but when it turns down again, the employers go on the offensive — throwing workers out of jobs and/or reducing their pay. As long as the accumulation process is the primary driver of economic activity, workers' wages and conditions will always be vulnerable.

This was Marx's assessment of the system and it has been tragically born out over the last thirty-five years. After the post war boom, capitalism entered a period of long-run stagnation, with profit rates falling across most of the system. In response, the ruling classes rolled out neoliberalism as a class-based assault on workers and their unions from the late 1970s onwards.

Neoliberal states attacked trade unions through a combination of anti-union legislation, attacks on workers' terms and conditions and a hollowing out of unionised sectors in both the public and private sector. This has led to reductions in workers' terms and conditions across most of the capitalist system.

The economic crisis was undoubtedly a factor in accelerating this process, but even as the western economies have begun to recover, workers' pay has failed to keep pace. The

wage share is down in many countries with more and more of the economic output flowing to capital.

Despite this, profit rates have failed to recover, leaving the outlook for working people very bleak as long as they stick to the logic of capital. Trade union density has also fallen, but such have been the attacks on workers that a revival of the left has begun to happen. Across most of the West, a new form of radical left reformism is emerging, with some tentative support from trade union leaders and the backing of major parts of the grassroots labour movement.

This is an extremely positive development, but it remains vitally important to remember that capitalism is not the terrain upon which to liberate humanity. Only a revolt against the system can finally end the onslaught of capital and provide the material conditions for the whole of humanity to thrive.

Test yourself: Discussion questions

- (1) Why is the capitalist labour process inherently exploitative?
- (2) What are the key ways that capital tries to take control of the labour process to squeeze out value and surplus value?
- (3) How have workers historically resisted this process?
- (4) Marx argues that capital accumulation is the ultimate driver of wages and conditions — what does he mean by this?

- (5) Why do workers ultimately need a revolutionary strategy if they are to have genuine control of their lives?

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Topic 4: The Role of Trade Unions in Capitalism

Strikes go back to time immemorial: there is a record of one in ancient Egypt. The organised trade union movement dates from the industrial revolution and the emergence of the modern working class in Britain at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th century.

Since then, trade unionism has spread around the world. In every country where there is a working class, a portion of it organises into trade unions in order to defend its interests against the bosses — the only exception being those countries where a totalitarian dictatorship (Hitler, Stalin etc.) is able to outlaw unions, and even in those cases, the regime usually has to create phoney unions, while illegal unions also emerge.

This is because trade unionism is an elemental expression of the class struggle, the conflict of interest between capital and labour, and trade unions are the basic mass organisations of the working class. For this reason, it makes sense for revolutionary socialists to support trade unions, join the appropriate union for their workplace and actively engage in trade union struggles.

Socialists have not always understood the importance of unions. Some early socialists viewed them with disdain, seeing them either as pointless or ineffective or as a distraction from the task of abolishing capitalism. In the US, for example, James Connolly had to challenge the ideas of Daniel DeLeon, who claimed that unions could not achieve anything because there was an ‘iron law’ which prevented real wages rising under capitalism. Marx and Engels always supported trade unionism, however. This was because they saw the revolution and socialism as the acts of the workers themselves and they understood that to emancipate itself,

the working class has to learn and develop through all sorts of day-to-day struggles. And Marx wrote one of his most important pamphlets, *Wages, Prices and Profit*, to prove that it is possible for workers to improve their wages and conditions, even under capitalism, by collective action.

Another classic socialist text, Rosa Luxemburg's *The Mass Strike*, written in response to the Russian Revolution of 1905, argued that mass strikes, both economic and political, play a vital role in workers' revolutions. The experience of all major working class challenges to capitalism since that time, from the Dublin Lockout and the strikes during the Irish Revolution to the Italian Red Years in 1919–20 and May '68 in France, have confirmed the truth of this.

The limits of trade unionism

However, the necessity of trade unionism for the defence of workers' basic interests and the key role of mass strikes in the class struggle as a whole don't change the fact that trade unionism has serious limitations. Trade unions play a role in the struggle and even in revolutions, but they are far from being enough by themselves.

Trade unions essentially exist to bargain over the terms of sale of workers' labour power, i.e. their wages and conditions, within capitalism, rather than to overthrow capitalism as such. And this remains the case in practice even if they pass resolutions in favour of socialism at their Annual Conference. To be effective in this bargaining, unions must try to organise all the workers in any given workplace, industry or occupation regardless of their political consciousness (apart from out and out scabs and fascists) and this seriously limits their capacities for revolutionary action.

Moreover, unions often reflect the labour market arrangements under capitalism and organise on a sectional basis. Teachers organise with teachers, nurses with nurses but not with dockers or plumbers — even when these categories belong to the same general union.

In addition to trade unions, there is always a need for other forms of working class organisation: campaigns, political parties and workers' councils (soviets). Workers' councils emerge in periods of significant crisis to organise the working class as a whole and to start taking control over how society functions on a day-to-day basis. Lastly, there is the very serious problem of trade union officials, or the trade union bureaucracy, as they are often called.

The trade union bureaucracy

There is a well established pattern, over more than a century and in many different countries, of trade union officials betraying workers' struggles. Union leaders who didn't sell out, like Jim Larkin and Arthur Scargill, have been the exception rather than the rule. In 1913, the Dublin Lockout was badly let down by the British trade union leaders. In 1926, those same leaders sold out the British General Strike, abruptly calling off the strike after nine days just when it was gaining strength. The US saw the development of business unionism where union bosses did deals with employers and the mafia over the heads of the rank-and-file. In 1968 in France, the union leaders sold out a strike of 10 million workers. In 1984–5 the British TUC sold out the great Miners' Strike.

In South Africa, the new President, Cyril Ramaphosa, is a billionaire and former member of the Board of Lonmin, the

company responsible for the massacre of miners at Marikana; Ramaphosa started out as a trade union leader. In Ireland, union leaders like David Begg sat on the Board of the Central Bank and turned a blind eye to their speculative activities before the Celtic Tiger crash.

Why does this keep happening? It is far too consistent a pattern to be explained by individual corruption or badness. The Marxist explanation, developed particularly by Tony Cliff in the 1960s and 1970s, is that trade union officials constitute a distinct social layer standing above the workers they are meant to represent. Marxism explains their behaviour by the social position and role they fulfil.

First, the wages of union officials are generally much higher — sometimes enormously higher — than those of the rank-and-file. Second, their conditions of work are much more favourable in terms of hours, holidays, health and safety, job security and so on. Third, they often spend more time mixing with management (and on government committees etc.) than they do in the company of other workers. Fourth, their objective role is to mediate between the workers and the bosses: they come to see disputes and strikes as ‘problems to be solved’, not battles to be won, and, crucially, when they negotiate a reduction in wages or tea breaks or an increase in hours or a certain number of redundancies, it is not their wages, tea breaks, or jobs that are cut.

As a result of this social position, trade union leaders typically vacillate. On the one hand, they often make fiery speeches and present themselves as champions of workers’ rights — after all, if workers didn’t pay their dues, the officials would be out of a job. On the other, they are usually looking for a way to confine any dispute and bring it to an

end, for the minimum deal they can sell to workers, saying nothing better is possible.

This is why revolutionary socialists always warn against uncritical reliance on union officials, no matter how radical they may sound.

The Irish trade union leaders

Within this general framework, the Irish trade union leaders have played a particularly dismal role. In the South, they engaged in 'social partnership' with the employers (IBEC etc.) and the government from 1987 onwards. This was a sustained attempt to paper over the conflict of interest between workers and bosses through a long series of negotiations and deals at the top. The effect, as with a boxer who never enters the ring, was to gravely weaken trade union organisation at grassroots level.

Even when, with the economic crash of 2007/8, social partnership broke down, essentially to enable the bosses to go on the offensive, the union leaders — above all Jack O'Connor of SIPTU and the Labour Party — still negotiated and fought to impose a series of rotten deals on public sector pay (the Croke Park, Lansdowne Rd and Haddington Rd agreements), which had the effect of taking trade unions out of all the battles over austerity. This was combined with being highly ineffective at mobilising support for such disputes as did occur or at defending even individual union members against victimisation.

In the North, the relationship of the union leaders to the state creates similar passivity — where officials see their role as encouraging stability in politics by encouraging the

big parties to cut deals with each other (even when those damage workers, like the Fresh Start Agreement), rather than acting to defend their members. During protests against austerity, for example, union leaders repeatedly implore Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party to make deals to 'stop the cuts', rather than placing the emphasis on worker's action from below.

The tendency of union leaders to see themselves as managers of the political peace also leads to hesitation when it comes to criticising the big parties in the North. Even when union rallies are called against austerity, rarely will speakers actually point to the role of SF or the DUP in cuts – lessening the pressure on them to act. This is often justified by a crude perspective that says you cannot criticise the DUP, for example, unless you can find equivalence with SF.

As a result of this, there has been considerable alienation of workers from the trade union movement, as was evident in the South at the beginning of the household charges and water charges movements. Union density has also declined dramatically, with just over a quarter of workers being a member of a union North or South.

Socialist strategy today

Given the rotten record of the bureaucrats, it might be tempting for socialists to ignore or dismiss the unions. This would be a serious mistake. Faced with this argument from 'left wingers' inside the newly founded Communist International, Lenin argued strongly against it in his 1920 book *Left-Wing Communism – an Infantile Disorder*. Instead, Lenin insisted on the need for revolutionaries to work in reactionary trade unions. To refuse to work in the reaction-

ary trade unions means leaving the insufficiently developed masses of workers under the influence of the reactionary leaders, the agents of the bourgeoisie, the labour aristocrats.

This argument is still valid today. Walking away from a union like SIPTU actually helps the Jack O'Connors and the Labour Party who effectively control it. Moreover, we have seen in the last couple of years a number of important strikes at Greyhound, Rhattigans, the LUAS drivers, Bus Eireann, Irish Rail, Tesco, Ryanair, Irish Life and others, where it was essential that socialists were involved and delivering solidarity.

The task for socialists is to be the best trade union members and activists while not sowing illusions in the union officials and developing the confidence and independence of the rank-and-file. This involves bringing together and organising our members and supporters within their relevant unions. The likelihood is that this area of our work will become ever more important in the future.

We seek to form grassroots networks to promote the idea of a fighting union where members do not rely on bureaucrats.

To this end,

- We will support union leaders when they talk of leading struggles – but always encourage workers to rely on their own strength and dictate to union officials how to conduct those struggles.
- We are for regular open mass meeting of members in

workplaces so that the union does not get reduced to being ‘the committee’.

- We call for the election of all union leaders and officials. We press for them to be put on the average industrial wage.
- We seek the disaffiliation of unions from the Labour Party and call for more open ties with parties of the left who support workers in struggle.

Test yourself: Discussion questions

- (1) Why is workplace struggle important?
- (2) If it is so important to be a member of a union, why not focus exclusively on this arena of struggle?
- (3) Why not break away from the old rotten trade unions and form new and better ones?
- (4) What can be done about sell-out union leaders? How can we reclaim our unions?
- (5) Should we become shop stewards and union reps and/or run candidates for union office?

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Topic 5: Precarious Work: What Is to Be Done?

Capitalism is a dynamic system with two contending classes fighting for a share of the economic output. The more precarious working people can be made, the more power capital has over their lives and the more likely that profits will be forthcoming. Over the last 40 years, capital has been successful in eroding workers' terms and conditions through the tactics and strategy of neoliberalism (more freedom for the owners of capital). This has made work more precarious for large numbers of people, with Ireland often at the forefront. Indeed, there has been a huge increase in insecure work in Ireland, particularly during the so-called recovery. By making workers feel vulnerable, employers have been able to use the crash to erode conditions that workers had previously won. These are some of the findings of a new ICTU report on precarious work:

- There are 109,000 fewer permanent jobs now than in 2008. A full 7% of the workforce are now in temporary employment.
- There has been a huge increase in bogus self employment. Part-time self employment without employees has grown by 34%.
- There are 163,000 people in a job where their usual hours vary from week to week.

Spokespersons for employers' organisations refer to these patterns as 'flexibility'. They pretend that both the boss and the worker 'choose' this style of work. But the figures show that half of those in temporary employment took it because they cannot find permanent work.

One shocking feature of the study is that public sector work-

ers in health and education account for two fifths of those in temporary full-time work. This is a direct result of the embargo on recruitment that has been used by both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael to cut back on public sector jobs.

To understand how we fight this attack, we need to understand why it is happening and in whose interests. This means tackling a false but fashionable academic theory that there has been a rise of a new class: the precariat.

This was developed by Guy Standing, a Professor of Economic Security. The precariat, according to Standing, are people who lack forms of labour security. They do not have adequate income earning opportunities because of the return of mass unemployment; they have no protection against arbitrary dismissals; they do not have defined job descriptions; they have no work security in terms of proper health and safety regulations or limits on working time or unsocial hours; they have no career path or opportunities to upskill; their wages are not protected by minimum wage legislation or indexed against inflation; they have no collective voice.

This is a description of the conditions facing millions of people today — particularly those who are migrants, young or the elderly who are forced to return to work because of inadequate pensions. Standing's purpose, however, is not simply to describe but to theorise.

The key implication of using the term 'precariat' is that this class has distinct interests to those of the 'proletariat'. He assumes that the 'proletariat' has long-term, stable, fixed-hour jobs with established routes of advancement and collective agreements.

He also suggests that there is another class — the 'salarariat' — by which he means white collar workers who he thinks have gained vastly more income without evidence of working harder. But this picture is untrue for both manual and white collar workers.

Manual workers in most advanced economies have been losing out on pension security, employment security with the rise of mass unemployment and job description security with the constant pressure for flexibility. In Ireland, for example, the number of defined benefit pension schemes has declined from 2,500 in 1990 to only 800 today. In the last four years alone, 400 of these schemes have closed, impacting 65,000 workers.

One recent study in Europe found that only 32% of all workers thought they had good employability prospects, i.e. that they could get another job at similar pay and conditions if their own one closed, while 23% of industrial workers feared for their job security in the next six months. The same story applies to white collar workers. Currently, Ireland has an extremely high number of people with third level qualifications in the 25–34 age bracket. These amount to 48% of this age cohort, compared to 33% in the wider EU. Most young people enter college with a traditional aspiration — that a degree gives a chance of a better life and a 'career' that accords some security.

Many indeed assume that it is a ticket into the 'middle class'. Yet the reality is very different. With the rise of mass third level education, the salaries of routine white collar workers have often fallen. Before taking up work, many graduates will spend months on unpaid internships. After that, they will most probably go through a series of tempo-

rary contracts before getting a permanent job. According to the ASTI, the secondary teachers' union, newly qualified teachers will spend an average of eight years on temporary contracts. Moreover, as they enter the labour force, they will experience lower pay and lower pension rights because trade union leaders have sold these young workers out.

So insecurity — or precariousness — is a condition that does not just characterise one group but is a condition affecting the wider working class in varying degrees. The general picture now is one of declining security for all workers as capital seeks to compensate for declining rates of profit by increasing the rate of exploitation.

Once we locate precariousness within the dynamic of capitalism, it becomes clear that it is not a category that applies to a particular social group, but to the working class as a whole. To understand how to oppose precariousness, we need to know the impact that reformism has had on labour organisation.

How reformism hinders working class struggle

Reformist influences first became deeply rooted in the Western labour movement in the late 19th and early 20th century with the rise of German Social Democracy and the British Labour Party and then, again, during 'the Golden Age' of capitalist expansion from 1948 to the early 1970s. The hegemony of these ideas affects every aspect of working class life. It leads to the separation of 'industrial relations' from political struggle; the rise of a professional union bureaucracy whose primary purpose is to bargain rather than

lead struggle; the subtle patronage structures that co-opt some working class fighters; and, crucially, the implicit acceptance of divisions between workers created by the market as the price to be paid for conforming to the system. Today, we have entered a new phase of capitalism, and the reformist politics which dominated labour movements are in crisis.

The mass of workers who suffer exploitation and growing insecurity are left in a contradictory position. Many want to fight — as most ballots that are taken for industrial action in Ireland testify. But they often lack confidence and still expect others to represent or fight for them. More broadly, a new revolutionary alternative has not yet emerged that can give voice to the common interest of workers. An insight into how a different type of fighting union can help overcome precariousness can be seen in the activities of Connolly and Larkin.

They set out to build class-struggle unions that placed a premium on working-class solidarity as distinct from any respect for the rules of industrial relations. Mass pickets and blacking scabs were the tactics that welded together a casualised work-force into a fighting force that terrified the employers. We can take a lesson from this for today.

A strategy

First, we should support mass unionisation drives that organise workers in sections of the economy which rely more on temporary and zero hour-contracts, such as the fast food industry and the retail trade. This will involve a break with the current 'organising model' that is promoted by many unions. This model, which has been imported from unions

like the SEIU (Service Employees International Union) in the US, is based on more tokenistic forms of struggle in order to reach partnership agreements with employers when sufficient union density has been achieved.

The reality is that the only union that will be able to organise the mass of young workers who face the brunt of insecurity is a fighting union that is willing to break laws and engage in the most militant tactics to defeat ruthless employers.

The current model of trade unionism is totally inadequate for the struggles ahead. It is based on organisational structures that are divorced from the workplace. It relies on a professional ethos, which promises casework and advocacy within official industrial relations structures. It decorates itself with a fake tokenistic leftism that is a cover for its abject passivity. Such a model of trade unionism is entering a period of crisis whose outcome is still unknown.

What is required is a different form of class-struggle trade unionism based on grassroots initiatives.

Second, we need stronger socialist networks to promote the common interests of workers in resisting austerity and capitalism. That means opposing union agreements that sacrifice one group of workers to 'red circle' conditions for others. The reality is that once conditions are reduced for temporary workers, they eventually become the norm for all later on. When there is a small cohort of intimidated and abused workers, it will act as a break on any union advance. Opposing these divide and rule tactics will necessarily involve socialists in opposing business unionism and social partnership.

Third, an aspect of the crisis of reformism is that social movements can emerge on the streets, which are far more militant, more anti-capitalist, than anything occurring in the work place. Socialists should be unreservedly enthusiastic about such movements. We want to link their militancy to the power of organised workers. One way to do this is to encourage them to focus on the conditions that many now face in their workplace. Movements like the Fight for \$15 in the US is an example of how social movement activists link up with unions to fight low pay. This type of activity involves novel approaches to struggle that involve street meetings, community organising, naming and shaming and occupations as tactics to defeat employers. We want to bring that style of organising to Ireland.

Fourth, while focussing on grassroots activity we also push for legislative changes that assist workers. This is why People Before Profit wants to:

- Ban government contracts for any construction company that puts workers on bogus self employment.
- Legislate for banded hours. A worker should be told how many hours are available for work and must be given a band of fixed hours.
- End the jobs embargo in the public sector. Create permanent jobs and end the practice of forcing new entrants onto temporary contracts.

Test yourself: Discussion questions

- (1) Precarious work is now a reality for countless workers. Can you give examples of this in the modern economy?
- (2) Why is the concept of a precariat unhelpful for theorising the modern workforce?
- (3) Does the idea of a precariat help workers to win better pay and conditions? If not, why not?
- (4) How is reformism linked to neoliberal attacks on pay and conditions?
- (5) What are the best tactics for workers today?

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