

CLASS IN BRITAIN

The question of class is the question of politics of the party, of revolution, of struggle. Class is everything, and without clarity about it we do not know who we are or what we are doing. It is an all-embracing matter. In this pamphlet, however, we shall deal with some particular aspects of class which are of special political importance to us as a party.

FIRST, where did the working class come from? What in history happened to create such a thing, with its own unique characteristics and revolutionary potential?

The working class arose with the bourgeoisie, created by that class to serve its needs.

"The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" -- Communist Manifesto.

"The modern bourgeois society that has sprouted from the ruins of feudal society has not done away with class antagonisms. It has but established new classes, new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in place of the old ones." -- Communist Manifesto.

The bourgeoisie itself had a long struggle to gain political and economic supremacy:-

"We see, therefore, how the modern bourgeoisie is itself the product of a long course of development, of a series of revolutions in the modes of production and of exchange.

"Each step in the development of the bourgeoisie was accompanied by a corresponding political advance of that class. An oppressed class under the sway of the feudal nobility, an armed and self-governing association in the mediaeval commune; here independent urban republic (as in Italy and Germany), there taxable 'third estate' of the monarchy (as in France), afterwards, in the period of manufacture proper, serving either the semi-feudal or the absolute monarchy as a counterpoise against the nobility, and, in fact, cornerstone of the great monarchies in general, the bourgeoisie has at last, since the establishment of Modern Industry and of the world market, conquered for itself, in the modern representative state, exclusive political sway. The executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie." -- Communist Manifesto.

The proletariat developed as the bourgeoisie rose. As the bourgeoisie grew in strength and overcame one antagonistic force -- the remnants of feudalism -- so it also had to create another and greater foe, the proletariat:-

"But not only has the bourgeoisie forged the weapons that bring death to itself, it has also called into existence the men who are to wield those weapons -- the modern working class -- the proletarians.

"In proportion as the bourgeoisie, i.e. capital, is developed, in the same proportion is the proletariat, the modern working class, developed -- a class of labourers, who live only so long as they find work, and who find work only so long as their labour increases capital. These labourers, who must sell themselves piecemeal, are a commodity, like every other article of commerce, and are consequently exposed to all the vicissitudes of competition, to all the fluctuations of the market." -- Communist Manifesto.

The history of capitalism is the history of struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. It is in the origins of class struggle, in the origins of capitalism, that we see the unique hallmarks of the proletariat being stamped.

As Marx says, capitalism needed money to start with. But that seems to be an impossible contradiction, because capitalism makes money by exploitation, not by magic, so where could it get the necessary cash to get off the ground and become self-regenerating.

Marx's answer is primitive accumulation:-

"The whole movement, therefore, seems to turn in a vicious circle, out of which we can get only by supposing a primitive accumulation (previous accumulation of Adam Smith) preceding capitalistic accumulation; an accumulation not the result of the capitalist mode of production, but its starting point." -- Capital.

Marx says this about how primitive accumulation took place:-

"In actual history it is notorious that conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder -- briefly, force -- play the great part." -- Capital.

But he goes on to add:-

"In themselves, money and commodities are no more capital than are the means of production and of subsistence. They want transforming into capital. But this transformation itself can take place only under certain circumstances that centre in this, viz, that two very different kinds of commodity possessors must come face to face and into contact: on the one hand, the owners of money, of means of production, means of subsistence, who are eager to increase the sum of values they possess, by buying other people's labour power; on the other hand, free labourers, the sellers of their own labour power, and therefore the sellers of labour. Free labourers, in the double sense that neither they themselves form part and parcel of the means of production, as in the case of slaves, bondsmen, etc., nor do the means of production belong to them, as in the case of peasant proprietors; they are, therefore, free from, unencumbered by, any means of production of their own. With this polarisation of the market for commodities, the fundamental conditions of capitalist production are given. The capitalist system presupposes the complete separation of the labourers from all property in the means by which they can realise their labour. As soon as capitalist production is once on its own legs it not only maintains this separation, but reproduces it on a continually extending scale. The process, therefore, that clears the way for the capitalist system can be none other than the process which takes away from the labourer the possession of his means of production; a process that transforms, on the one hand, the social means of subsistence and of production into capital; on the other, the immediate producers into wage labourers. The so-called primitive accumulation, therefore, is nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production. It appears as primitive, because it forms the prehistoric stage of capital and of the mode of production corresponding with it." -- Capital.

Marx dates the start of the capitalist era from the 16th century, and says that some of the most critical points of its development are:-

"In the history of primitive accumulation all revolutions are epoch-making that act as levers for the capitalist class in course of formation; but, above all, those moments when great masses of men are suddenly and forcibly torn from their means of subsistence and hurled as free and 'unattached' proletarians on the labour market. The expropriation of the agricultural producer, of the peasant, from the soil is the basis of the whole process." -- Capital.

In this most industrialised of countries we can see how far this process has gone, for all of us excepting the bourgeoisie are in the same situation when we finish our education or training. We are in the same situation as those early wage labourers who served the needs of young capitalism. We are monks expelled from our monasteries, peasants driven from our lands, private armies broken up -- men and women with nothing to live by other than the sale of our labour-power.

From these times dates pauperism, and the need for poor relief, now sophisticated into the dole -- a means whereby capitalism keeps its slaves alive for the time when it needs to exploit them.

The growth of strength in the bourgeoisie was marked by a change from illegal violence to legalised violence. Where once common land and church and state lands were seized by force, it became the fashion to pass a law to legalise such seizure. As the AUEW knows, the bourgeoisie has remained consistent in this policy from enclosure to sequestration.

Other incidentals indicating the dialectical relationship between proletariat and bourgeoisie are things like the creation of the National Debt. The Bank of England, at that time a group of private speculators, lent money to the Government at 8% interest. The Government guaranteed repayment of the interest and introduced heavy taxes to make this possible. This simple device ensured a constant flow of money from the poor to the rich, giving wealth directly to financiers and so to business and industry. This provided the bases on the one hand for the modern system of taxation, and on the other for the development of the joint-stock companies and all consequent forms of industrial-financial developments.

Certain basic facts emerge from this glance at the origins of our class. Firstly, the thing that made a proletarian different from others who worked for their living at that time was the fact that he had no way of living other than selling his labour. He was not a peasant, for he had no land to support himself. He was not a handicraft worker, for he could not survive by making things in his own house on his own simple machines and selling them. He was a commodity, a wage-labourer at the mercy of the anarchic and violent forces of the young bourgeoisie.

That fundamental condition of wage-labourer has in no way changed, but has extended to include the vast majority of the population, sweeping away peasants and all other classes in a massive simplification.

The bourgeoisie, from the beginning, showed itself to be dynamic and utterly ruthless. The second characteristic still remains. It combined open violence with legal oppression, all on the basis of a new form of exploitation.

Engels puts it all in this way:-

"Then came the concentration of the means of production and of the producers in large workshops and manufactories, their transformation into actual socialised means of production and socialised producers. But the socialised producers and means of production and their products were still treated, after this change, just as they had been before, i.e. as the means of production and the products of individuals. Hitherto the owner of the instruments of labour had himself appropriated the product because, as a rule, it was his own product and the assistance of others was the exception. Now the owner of the instruments of labour always appropriated to himself the product, although it was no longer his product, but exclusively the product of the labour of others. Thus the products now produced socially were not appropriated by those

who had actually set in motion the means of production and actually produced the commodities, but by the capitalists. The means of production, and production itself, had become in essence socialised. But they were subjected to a form of appropriation which presupposes the private production of individuals, under which, therefore, everyone owns his own product and brings it to market. The mode of production is subjected to this form of appropriation, although it abolishes the conditions upon which the latter rests.

"This contradiction, which gives to the new mode of production its capitalistic character, contains the germ of the whole of the social antagonisms of today. The greater the mastery obtained by the new mode of production over all important fields of production and in all manufacturing countries, the more it reduced individual production to an insignificant residuum the more clearly was brought out the incompatibility of socialised production with capitalistic appropriation." -- Socialism: Utopian and Scientific.

"The separation was made complete between the means of production, concentrated in the hands of the capitalists, on the one side, and the producers, possessing nothing but their labour power, on the other. The contradiction between socialised production and capitalistic appropriation manifested itself as the antagonism of proletariat and bourgeoisie." -- Socialism: Utopian and Scientific.

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THE SECOND QUESTION concerns the growth and relationship of the two classes -- the bourgeoisie and proletariat -- which are the special product and feature of capitalism.

Capital came into the hands of the capitalist firstly in the form of usurer and merchant capital, which was in existence before the era of capitalism. It came through blood and violence in the slave trade, and the looting of precious raw materials from the Americans and the East Indies.

The capitalism which funded itself through such enterprises was pre-industrial, and in the 17th century, the time of Britain's bourgeois revolutionary war, the main capitalist nation was Holland, as Marx says:-

"Holland, which first fully developed the colonial system, in 1648 stood already in the acme of its commercial greatness. It was, says Gûlich, 'in almost exclusive possession of the East Indian trade and the commerce between the south-east and north-west of Europe. Its fisheries, marine manufactures surpassed those of any other country. The total capital of the Republic was probably more important than that of all the rest of Europe put together.' Gûlich forgets to add that, by 1648, the people of Holland were more overworked, poorer, and more brutally oppressed than those of all the rest of Europe put together." -- Capital.

But during the following century one of Holland's main businesses was lending money to its great rival, England, and it was in England that the industrial revolution first took place. From the position of commercial supremacy the British bourgeoisie built an early lead in the industrial field. The industrial revolution can be dated from the late 18th century, and still well into the 19th century the pattern was one of individual masters, combining functions of both owner and manager, owning factories

and dealing with their employees. They continued and refined the replacement of the domestic system by the factory system. A weaver's household might have half a dozen people to do fairly unspecialised work with £2 or £3 worth of equipment. A factory might have scores or even a few hundred specialised workers, each with about £40 or £50 of capital invested in him. The scale of things was increasing, and one consequence of this was the creation by the bourgeoisie of salaried managers. But the entrepreneur, the individual owner-manager-capitalist, was the typical business man of the new industrial system until the development of new forms of finance and organisation in the second half of the 19th century. This development foreshadows the transformation by the end of the 19th century of capitalism into its final stage, imperialism. In Stalin's words:-

"Imperialism is the omnipotence of the monopolist trusts and syndicates, of the banks and the financial oligarchy, in the industrial countries." -- Foundations of Leninism.

Imperialism marks another stage in the increasing scale of the operations of capitalism, in which the growth of methods of internal exchange is matched by growth of international exchange, with the powerful imperialist states and concerns seizing control of the economic affairs of other nations.

These developments on the part of the bourgeoisie are marked by wars for the division of spoils among the imperialist nations, the looting and oppression of foreign countries, the subjection of colonies and neo-colonies. Internally we have a history of laws to create new financial opportunities and controls, and to control and suppress the struggles of the working class.

Of the recognition of unions by Parliament in 1871 Marx says:-

We see that only against its will and under pressure of the masses did the English Parliament give up the laws against Strikes and Trades Unions, after it had itself, for 500 years, held, with shameless egoism, the position of a permanent Trades Union of the capitalists against the labourers." -- Capital.

But corresponding to the growth of the bourgeoisie was a massive growth of the proletariat. The decisive change was not just a matter of numbers, but of grouping together workers in large-scale factories, in large towns.

In the words of Marx:-

"The proletariat goes through various stages of development. With its birth begins its struggle with the bourgeoisie."

That sentence, "With its birth begins its struggle with the bourgeoisie", implies centuries of unending struggle, from the fights put up by individual labourers through to the era of revolution.

Organised struggle though arose first in the towns:-

"The cities first saw the rise of the workers and the middle classes into opposing social groups. It was in the towns that the trade union movement, Chartism and Socialism all had their origin." --Engels, Condition of the Working Class in England.

From an unorganised state, to a partially and spasmodically organised state, the working class embarked on a long struggle to defend itself, and to win acceptance of its right to defend itself. This they had to do for many years in secret and against the law -- though the law itself changed under pressure from the proletariat, notably in 1825 and 1871. But as Marx points out at the same time that legal recog-

tion was accepted in 1825, the state introduced new legislation relating to threats, violence, and molestation, and so retained substantially their own old powers.

As today, the law was an entirely flexible instrument in the hands of the bourgeoisie, to be used or ignored, amended or twisted according to simply how the relative strengths of the classes were at the time.

The working class has never ceased to struggle. No year has gone by without fierce class battles, and this has now held true for centuries. Struggle has grown and faded, flared up in one sector and faded away in another.

The activities of Ludd and Swing were replaced by more orthodox but equally bitter struggles of organised workers. In the early 1800's the industrial working class first felt its power, and it had always felt the need to fight on its own behalf. In accounts of the strikes of the times the arguments are remarkably similar to those used today. Even the novels of the day were devoted to class struggle, in which workers were earnestly advised by vicars to abandon strikes and so put national interest before class interest. Since those years of raw struggle between masters and men it has become fashionable on the part of bourgeois historians to say that even if classes do exist in the Marxist sense, class struggle is conflict within limit, an institutionalised ritual within the framework of capitalism. That is one question that we must have an answer for -- it is the question, "Why hasn't there been a revolution yet in Britain?"

But the struggle has continued, and it is one feature of our Party that we do not merely applaud the dramatic moments in the struggle of our class, but look at the whole struggle, whether past or present. We see an ebb and flow, and through the creation of the Party and its theory and practice aim to build on the existing rich experience and understanding of our class.

THIRDLY: How many classes?

So far only the proletariat and bourgeoisie have been referred to, but elsewhere a variety of social divisions are made. Looking at one or two texts we notice the following alternatives:-

Society divided as follows:-

1885	Millionaires and very rich	1%
	Rich	2.2%
	Middle Class	10.7%
	Struggling and poor	86.9%
1955	Well to do	4%
	Middle class	8%
	Lower middle class	17%
	Working class	64%
	The poor	7%
1961	Upper class	4%
	Middle class	8%
	Lower middle class	20%
	Skilled labour	35%
	Semi-skilled labour	25%
	Unskilled	8%

This does not seem to have any connection with the Marxist or any other idea of class, and indeed sociologists on the whole have abandoned the term "class" except when talking about Marx, and use phrases like "socio-economic status group".

In contrast to all this we, in our Party programme, say that there are only two classes -- "those who sell their labour power and those who exploit the labour of others" -- i.e. a brief description of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. This is in line with what the Communist Manifesto has to say:-

"Our epoch, the epoch of the bourgeoisie, possesses however, this distinctive feature; it has simplified the class antagonisms. Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat." -- Communist Manifesto.

And of all the people who would fall into one or other of those middle-class categories which were outlined above Marx and Engels have this to say:-

"The bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honoured and looked up to with reverent awe. It has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage-labourers." -- Communist Manifesto.

Nobody escapes the net of capitalism. The peasantry fell an early victim to the bourgeoisie, and the inevitable tendency was for all other strata to be proletarianised. No petit-bourgeoisie exists, with interests separate from that of the bourgeoisie, and so we are left with a simple two-class division.

This is not to dismiss the many differences which exist in the working class. They exist, and are used in a divide-and-conquer way. The ideology which says, for example, that teachers or doctors are middle class is an ideology which disarms teachers and doctors by telling them that they have nothing to fight for -- (but also saying that they have status to preserve).

Nor, even though we say that managers and foremen are working class, do we say that managers are the leading force of proletarian revolution. Capitalism is sustained by those who produce, and it is the producers, the industrial working class, who make up the vital core of the revolutionary effort.

The line for guerrilla struggle, too, is one which takes account of all the strengths and weaknesses of the working class in different sectors, places and times.

Our line is one of great clarity, and should be put forward and defended with no hint of liberalism. Social-democracy revels in confusion and false targets, and we are the only ones to have got past this stumbling block. The theory has moreover been justified in practice, both of the class and the Party, in the actions of white-collar workers over the past few years.

As Marx says:-

"The other classes decay and finally disappear in the face of Modern Industry; the proletariat is its special and essential product." -- Communist Manifesto.

CLASS, POLITICS, AND REVOLUTION

"Of all the classes that stand face to face with the bourgeoisie today, the proletariat alone is a really revolutionary class." -- Communist Manifesto.

The words are those of Marx. If we examine them closely, we see that they raise certain questions. Firstly, "Of all the classes..." --

to clear this one up, we have already come to the conclusion that now in this country there is only one other class apart from the bourgeoisie.

Next, "a really revolutionary class". What does this mean? Are all proletarians revolutionaries? Obviously not. We are not discussing a question of ideology, but of class nature. The proletariat exists to be exploited. As it struggles to defend or improve its position it is in constant conflict with its exploiters. Oppression must increase either when the demands of the working class become more insistent or when the problems of the bourgeoisie become more acute. This is happening now on the legal-political-economic front. There is no possibility of ending this exploitation and oppression except by the overthrow of the bourgeoisie. The proletariat can do without the bourgeoisie; can create conditions for the ending of oppression and exploitation. The bourgeoisie by its very nature of existence is incapable of doing this.

and yet the proletariat has not made a revolution. It has fought endlessly, but it has not made revolution. This raises the question of ideology. The working class has no choice but constant struggle -- and yet the struggle is all in bits and pieces, basically defensive, based in part on an attitude of subjugation, and in part on the belief that fighting the employer to get a bit more is enough. This lends itself easily to social-democracy, and yet is not itself social-democracy. It is the action of men and women who know that they cannot live at peace with the bourgeoisie, and yet do not want to see or accept the necessity for revolution.

In this context our task is three-fold:

- a) to fight the alternative ideology, social-democracy, whether in the form of the Labour Party, the "ultra-left", the Tories or whoever.
- b) to join in the existing class struggle of exploited against exploiters.
- c) to provide the perspective of revolution in all our work in the class struggle, especially the building of the party.

We have a mighty opponent. Speaking of the great power of imperialism, Stalin said:

"In the fight against this omnipotence, the customary methods of the working class -- trades unions and co-operatives, parliamentary parties and parliamentary struggle -- have proved to be totally inadequate." -- Foundations of Leninism.

He goes on to say that the working class has to adopt a new weapon, and finishes by saying,

"Imperialism brings the working class to revolution."

In this country this party must be the new weapon in the hands of the working class -- enabling it to evade the nets of social-democracy and overthrow the exploiters.

The proletariat struggled from its inception against the bourgeoisie, without the benefit of either Marx or organisation. Unionisation was a great step forward in class organisation, and has sustained the working class for almost two centuries. But the highest form of class organisation for the proletariat is the proletarian party. With no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole, we are the advanced detachment of the working class, the political leader, the general staff, organised detachment. None of those words are original but two points must be stressed. Firstly, as

an organised and ideological section we are a separate and distinct entity within the working class, and so detached in that sense. Secondly, however, we are of the working class, with no separate interest, and in that sense must never be detached from it, except at all our perils.

Classes in Britain cannot be treated without considering the Party. We are not a third force wandering with our banners in the no-mans-land between the Proletariat and Bourgeoisie, to be ignored by the one and picked off by the other. We are of and in the proletariat, and our task is to guide the revolutionary class in revolution.

DOCUMENTS

How do the party's publications relate to these ideas about class. To summarise the points made above :-

1. The basic nature of the proletariat is that it is:-
 - a) dependent entirely on wage-labour for survival and
 - b) therefore in continuous unavoidable conflict with the bourgeoisie, which appropriates to itself the social product of the proletariat.
2. The proletariat has never ceased to struggle against the bourgeoisie.
3. There are only two classes -- proletariat and bourgeoisie -- in Britain today.
4. The proletariat has no choice but revolution.
5. The unions and the Party are the defensive and offensive weapons of the proletariat -- whose struggle against the bourgeoisie is a matter of its nature and not its politics.

The Party's Second Congress document spells out the two class line (though we read in Marx of three basic classes--landlord; capitalist; proletariat, and elsewhere of a "lower middle class") and also deals with another divisive idea about class in Britain, outlined in Lenin's "Imperialism", that a large section of workers is bought off, corrupted, bribed by the bourgeoisie with the fruits of colonial exploitation. Both of these ideas, the one now out-dated and the other incorrect, are dealt with in this document. The question of class organisation, the unions and the Party, is also raised. The Party line here is sometimes attacked for being economist, for being concerned with bread and butter and not with politics. That criticism is dealt with in the document "Burning Questions for Our Party", as well as in all other work of the Party. It is also really answered in the pamphlet "G errilla Struggle" which outlines both immediate tactics and future strategy for proletarian struggle in this country.

Complete clarity and conviction on these basic points is essential for all party members, for it is on the question of class that all our programme depends. Without clarity and conviction, mistaken understanding will lead to wrong practice, to the development of non-party lines, to divisions and mistakes. There should by this stage be no mistakes on these questions, and all that I have said should be superfluous except to newer members who can only know what the Party tells them or else learn by making mistakes.