

This article on the abolition of wage-labour is part of a series written during 1974-1975. These articles had a clearly pedagogical intention and were intended to provide readers with a clear and succinct point of view on the anarcho-syndicalist 'programme'. They were published in *Solidarité ouvrière*, the monthly magazine of the Alliance syndicaliste révolutionnaire et anarcho-syndicaliste.

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# Abolition of Wage System

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The wage is the sum of money that the capitalist pays for a given amount of time worked, or for a given type of work. It is the result of a sale. The worker's labour power is a commodity like any other, exchanged for the capitalist's commodity: money. The wage is the price of this commodity-labour power.

According to the bosses, this price is determined in the same way as the price of any other commodity, according to the law of supply and demand. When there are a lot of goods, in other words when there is unemployment, the price remains low; when there are few goods – full employment – the price can be high.

More or less acute competition between sellers of labour power – between wage earners – is decisive in setting wages.

If I sell my labour power, i.e. my ability to do a certain job for a boss, that's all I have. That's what we call freedom of labour: I'm free to offer my services to any boss, because I don't own any means of production myself; but the boss is free not to hire me.

Because I'm not the only one looking for work. Many other workers and employees are in the same situation. The boss has plenty

to choose from: he will tend to retain those who agree to work for the lowest salary. This is what we call entrepreneurial freedom.

Who hasn't heard this phrase at least once from a boss, a manager or a foreman: "If you're not satisfied, there are 50 of them waiting at the door." This sentence perfectly sums up one of the essential characteristics of wage-labour: the competition between workers. Competition is at its most intense when workers are completely isolated and unorganised. The boss then has the upper hand. The working class has found ways of reducing this competition. This is essentially trade unionism. The primary function of the union is to bring workers together so that they can stand united before the boss and refuse to work for less than a certain wage. The greater the number of workers who unite, the more the capitalists are forced to bow down.

We can see, therefore, that the very fact that workers join together to refuse to submit to the boss's conditions, and the forms of organisation that workers adopt to achieve this, are the seeds of the demand for the abolition of wage-labour and the means to be used to achieve it.

In the final analysis, what determines the value of wages is class struggle. The essential condition for capitalist profit is to keep wages as low as possible. Wages never exceed what the worker, in his particular sociological context, needs to live: wages never exceed what the capitalist class needs wage earners to earn. This is the average wage for the entire wage-earning class<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, disparities exist, according to industrial sectors and professions. Fluctuations in wages between sectors and occupations are due precisely to competition between employees, the level of organisation of workers and the type of production in which workers are engaged.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, within the limits of the fluctuations in wages resulting from fluctuations in supply and demand, what determines the price of labour power is its production costs, i.e. the costs incurred to keep the worker alive and the costs necessary to train him.

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1 Various groups are opposed to this classification of salaried workers on the one hand and self-employed workers on the other. They argue that CEOs are sometimes employees of their companies. Formally, the argument is valid, but in substance it fails to take into account several factors: 1) The CEO's status as an "employee" is merely a tax trick; 2) The CEO does not sell his workforce; 3) The CEO is a shareholder. A CEO does not owe his position to the fact that he sells his labour force on the labour market, but to the fact that he is a shareholder: he is not exploited. This type of argument is actually used by certain leftist groups to deny

We can see, then, that the wage hierarchy is linked to the capitalist mode of production itself, and that we cannot fight it unless we fight capitalism and wage-labour at the same time. Workers can therefore expect no fundamental change in their situation if they remain within the capitalist system.

Even in trade union action, competition is impossible to eliminate. Even in the event of zero competition, wage increases come up against a barrier: when wages rise faster than productivity, the rate of profit falls. This means that capitalists reduce investment in the sector, which in turn reduces employment or replaces workers with machines.

The whole “social policy” of the bourgeoisie consists of saving on the cost of labour – on wages – in order to maintain profits. The capitalist will therefore tend to reduce the size of the workforce in his company, while at the same time developing, thanks to machine technology, automated work-stations that require no training on the part of the worker. This is what Proudhon writes about it, quoting the words of an English manufacturer:

“The insubordination of our workers made us think about doing without them. We made and provoked every imaginable intelligent effort to replace the service of men with more docile instruments, and we succeeded. Mechanical engineering has freed capital from the oppression of labour. Wherever we still employ men, it is only temporarily, until we invent a way of doing our work without them.

But let us not deduce from this that the bosses are also, in their own way, in favour of the abolition of wage-labour! It is as if, commented Proudhon, “the ministry undertook to free the budget from the oppression of taxpayers”.

The proletariat's struggle to find its place in the wage system has no possible outcome. It can only lead to the creation of whole sectors

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the role and importance of wage-labour as a form of economic exploitation of workers, and to insist on the oppression suffered by individuals, which justifies the alliance with the petty bourgeoisie.

- 2 For example, workers in the newspaper industry earn much more than those in the textile industry. This is because they also have much greater leverage over their bosses. You can't store a daily newspaper. If it comes out even an hour late, it's a disaster for the boss. Readers will buy competing dailies, and the owner will be deprived of his advertising revenue, which is considerable (100 million old francs

of the working class excluded from the “benefits” of acquired advantages: today the immigrants, the temporary workers, the auxiliaries, tomorrow something else. The very principle of salaried employment tends to pit workers against each other. It is the best weapon of both private and state capitalism against the working class.

Where there is wage-labour, there is capitalism. Wage-labour is the form given to work to enable the exploitation of the proletariat. Wage-labour is a form of stimulation at work in a society based on exploitation: the alternative is to work under the conditions imposed by the boss or not to survive.

### **The effects of wage system**

This situation has consequences for the immediate existence of the salaried worker, which determine his or her living conditions. These conditions can be expressed in three ways: the worker is excluded from the product of his labour, he is excluded from the tools of his labour, and finally, by creating competition and isolating workers, wage-labour constantly tends to exclude them from their class. Understanding the effects of wage-labour on the individual worker and on the proletariat as a class makes it possible both to understand the meaning of the revolutionary struggle to be waged and to grasp the general lines of the society to be built after the destruction of capitalism.

#### **• Excluded from the product of his work**

Throughout history, capitalism was only able to develop when the productivity of human labour reached at a certain level, that is to say, at the moment when men were able to produce enough for there to be a surplus, and at the moment when this surplus could be monopolised by a minority, and exchanged for other products.

The modern proletariat only appears with the large-scale development of mechanisation in industry, i.e. at the moment when small-scale merchant production of the craft type gives way to large-scale industrial production. The craftsman who produces a pair of boots in his shop is master of the product of his work. He bought the leather, he worked it with his own tools, he sells it himself, and he

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a day for *Le Figaro*). Textiles, on the other hand, can be stockpiled, and a week's strike will not immediately affect the boss, as he can sell off his stocks.

lives off the product of his work. He sells his work, in other words the boots he has made.

The salaried worker works on the boss's premises, with the boss's tools, using raw materials bought by the boss. The boots that the worker makes are sold by the boss. The worker does not sell his work, the boots he makes: he sells his labour power, his ability to make boots for his boss, in exchange for a wage. The worker has no control over the product of his labour. The worker's exclusion from the product of his labour is the result of the transformation of labour power into a commodity.

#### • **Excluded from the workplace**

The second aspect of wage-labour is expressed in the exclusion of the worker from the tools of his trade, through division of labour. For there to be exploitation, not only must there be “free” sale of labour, i.e. competition between workers, but each worker must be interchangeable, the first condition implying the second. The division of labour is an indispensable condition for the exploitation of labour.

Wage labour implies, in order to allow workers to compete with each other and to appropriate surplus value, the division of manual and intellectual labour, work made up of repetitive, divided, fragmented gestures, requiring a minimum of training, which allows any worker to be replaced by any other worker.

The individual worker produces nothing completely; he makes only a part of a whole, the finished object of which he may not see. The tool on which he works is not an instrument for the worker; it is the worker who is the instrument of the tool.

#### • **Excluded from his class**

The ultimate effect of wage-labour is unemployment. The unemployed come to see themselves – and to be seen – as a category on its own, “in reserve” from class struggle. They have no direct material means of exerting pressure on the bourgeoisie.

The unions also tend to regard them as separate workers. These are people who do not vote in professional elections. The only prospect left to them by the reformist “left” parties is the ballot paper, in other words, waiting, the essential virtue of the unemployed...

For us, the unemployed are workers like any others. The local unions<sup>3</sup> must constitute a pole of organisation and action for unemployed workers. Thousands of unemployed, united and organised, ready to take direct action, are as great a threat to the bourgeoisie as as many strikers.

## **What will replace the wage system?**

The struggle for the abolition of wage-labour is inseparable from the struggle for the organisation of the proletariat – the workers' association that has to combat competition is only one step, and is not sufficient in itself.

The organised proletariat must aim to destroy the state, abolish private ownership of the means of production and private appropriation of society's resources.

In capitalist society, the worker has to sell his labour power; the proletariat, as a class, is excluded from the means of production. It does not determine: the object of work; the conditions of work; the distribution of the wealth produced.

The aim of a libertarian socialist society will be to organise the workers so that they can intervene at all three levels. Thus, just as we can say that a system of wage-labour is necessarily a capitalist system, we can say that a system which claims to be socialist and in which the proletariat does not intervene at these three levels would *not* be socialist.

### **• Determining the purpose of the work**

What is the purpose of work? Why produce one thing rather than another? Produce according to social needs, not for profit. Eliminate parasitic production.

The determination of the object of work by the working class is the first step towards the abolition of wage-labour. Determining the object of work does not mean that each company can decide what it will produce. It means that the working class will collectively determine the general orientations of production and the measures to be taken to adapt the production of each enterprise to these orientations.

In today's capitalist system, the motivation for production is the pursuit of profit. In a socialist system, production is geared towards

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3 The Labour exchanges.

satisfying needs. Hospitals, crèches, schools, etc. are not built because they are non-productive investments.

On the other hand, if hundreds of scientists have spent more than ten years working on the problem of making a Polaroid camera, it's because it's profitable. Of course, it's nice to have a Polaroid, but in terms of the real social needs of workers, it's a waste. The law of profit means that in the capitalist system fundamental needs – health, housing, transport, etc. – are not satisfied or are sabotaged, while needs are artificially created, the satisfaction of which generates considerable profits.

Controlling the object of labour, i.e. the collective determination by the working class of the direction of production in order to satisfy its own needs, is therefore an essential point in the struggle against wage-labour, exploitation and for socialism.

But let's be clear: the partial control that workers could obtain in certain enterprises under the capitalist regime does not constitute a 'socialist' measure. Determining the objectives of production is revolutionary only after the expropriation of the bourgeoisie. Let's add that it only makes sense if the debate takes place within workers' associations: it's therefore a question of excluding the determination made by inter-class groups who would act by substituting powers, who would decide "in the name of the working class", by serving interests other than their own, of course.

We can't say in what organisational framework this will happen, but we can say in what framework it could happen: syndicalism. In fact, the syndicalist organisation, a proletarian grouping by definition, extends its ramifications industrially to all companies, and geographically to all localities.

If it can unify the action of the proletariat, which is scattered all over the country, it can also, by taking stock, decentralising debate and unifying decisions, organise control over production and its direction.

To sum up, a regime in which the worker does not have the possibility of freely determining what he works for cannot be called socialist. A regime where a minority of political professionals alone decide what the worker works for is not a socialist regime.

- **Determining working conditions**

In a capitalist system, the worker is obliged to accept working

under the conditions set by the boss. Adjustments to this principle have always been the result of struggle, of a balance of power in which the working class has forced the boss to take a step backwards. Paid holidays, the eight-hour day, etc., were not given to us willingly. But whatever we do, under the system of profit, there is always a point beyond which we cannot go: when the capitalist's profit is threatened, he has, as we have seen, indirect means to turn against the workers.

It is therefore by questioning the whole system of production that we can achieve a real improvement in working conditions. If a capitalist buys machines, it's because the cost of these machines is lower than the cost of the labour needed to ensure the same production: he doesn't take into account the economy in fatigue.

This demand is also an important point in the struggle for the abolition of wage-labour. It is closely linked to the previous one. The workers who worked on dangerous machines did not initially have a safety system. Faced with workers' demands following repeated accidents, the bosses found a solution by installing safety systems. But this slowed down the pace of work, and therefore reduced the worker's pay. So workers tend not to use the safety system. This is the capitalist organisation of work, which would never dream of doing away with piecework, let alone dangerous workstations.

Control over the purpose of work, control over working conditions, workers still have to win the most important one: control over the allocation of resources.

### • **Control of resource allocation**

Capitalism is defined not only by private ownership of the means of production, but also by the fact that the boss has the freedom to allocate the surplus product according to his own interests. The product of the labour of millions of men and women, minus what they need to subsist, is appropriated by proportionately few individuals. The capitalists use this appropriated wealth not to satisfy the needs of society but to satisfy their own needs. The “socialists” who intend to expropriate the capitalists in order to hand over the allocation of social resources to an uncontrolled apparatus are merely proposing a change in the system of exploitation. The working class must give itself every guarantee of retaining control of the decision-making process: it must not copy the bourgeois organisation of society by changing only the heads, it must transfer all the decision-



making centres to its class organisations.

It is within these class organisations that choices will have to be made about the general direction of production, investment, development, etc. It is not a question of a utopian “take from the heap”. It's not a question of redistributing the entire social product, because that would be tantamount to returning to small-scale artisanal production.

Deductions will have to be made from the social product before the individual distribution is made:

- To replace used production equipment;
- To increase production while reducing working hours;
- To build up a reserve fund.

From what remains of the social product, we still have to deduct:

- General administrative expense ;
- The Community Needs Investment Fund;
- A fund for the non-productive: children, schoolchildren, the sick, the elderly, etc.

Budget items are common to all developed industrial societies, even if the socialist regime will create others. But capitalism is characterised by the fact that, on the one hand, the working class has no control over them and, on the other hand, everything is done to obscure them, to complicate the matter for them, and to prevent them from even wanting to take an interest in the question.

Socialism does not consist in taking a worker at random and putting him in charge of drawing up the national accounts; it will consist in simplifying the general accounts, in raising the level of knowledge of workers to an understanding of the environment around them. Controlling the allocation of social resources is a collective problem; it begins with control at the level that the worker is most familiar with – his living environment, the company and the locality – and then extends to a more global level.

The abolition of wage-labour does not consist in changing the way in which labour is remunerated, or even in claiming to abolish the very notion of remuneration: it consists, after having abolished private ownership of the means of production, in *abolishing the material*

*conditions* which are responsible for the existence of wage-labour, and in putting in place the collective determination of the object of work, the collective determination of working conditions and the socialised control of the allocation of resources.

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