

Why We Still Talk about the Working Class

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The Diagnosis

Why do socialists constantly focus on the working class as a strategic factor in society?

One, a diagnosis of what's wrong in modern society, and two, a prognosis of what to do to make things better. Both of these point in the same direction.

So let's start with the diagnosis.

The diagnosis focuses on what kinds of things people need in their life to have a decent shot at happiness, at decent social relations with others — all the things that go into what we call justice and fairness.

One is certain basic minimum material goods. People cannot live decent lives if they are constantly worried about having enough to eat or where to live.

Secondly, autonomy, or freedom from domination. Being dominated by somebody else means that the priorities by which you live are not going to be your own. You don't get to set your own agenda.

Therefore, if people lack these basic material goods, and they lack autonomy, they experience domination.

Justice is very hard to achieve.

Warring Interests

Capitalism is a social system which **systematically deprives people of both the material goods that they need and their autonomy**. The reason is simple: capitalism runs on the principle of profit maximization — it puts profits over people.

Most people in a capitalist society have to work for a living, and they go to work for somebody else. Their employer's priorities are not set by what is good for the employees. They're set by the firm's goal of maximizing profits.

The flip side of profit maximization is cost minimization. But cost minimization has an immediate impact on workers' lives, because what they take as their wage is their employer's cost. So cost

minimization means that every employer tries to pay as little as he can get away with. That's issue number one.

Issue number two: while they're at work, they have to **surrender their autonomy** to their employer.

The wage contract essentially says, "I'll come work and work for you. You give me some money, and for the duration that I'm working for you, I am under your authority. What I do with my time, who I talk to, how many bathroom breaks I take, how fast I work, all this is at the discretion of you, the employer."

Therefore, for both of these reasons, it is **built into the structure of capitalism** that the fundamental preconditions for a just society are systematically undermined by the rules of the system itself.

Who Has the Power

The problem is: every time the poor have tried to ask for or plead for these things, they've come up against the resistance of their employers.

Within the workplace, if they ask for higher wages, if they ask for more control over the workplace, if they ask for more authority over investment decisions, every time they come up against the recalcitrance of

the employers. If they make those demands outside the workplace, they come up against employers' greater social power. Not only do employers get to set the agenda within the workplace, they also have the power to set the agenda for society at large, because of their control of the state, their ability to buy politicians.

The Prognosis: the Workers' Opportunity

This leads to the prognosis of how to fix things.

The prognosis is, in order to have a better chance at life for the vast majority of the people, and since power centers are not going to give that up voluntarily, you're going to have to extract it from them.

This is where the strategic and practical importance of the working class comes in.

The working class is unlike any other social grouping in the non-capitalist section of modern society. However penurious it is, however dominated it is, however atomized it is, it is the goose that lays the golden egg. **It is the source of profits**, because unless

workers show up to do their work every day, profit maximization cannot be carried out.

Workers, therefore, are important for a strategic reason, which is that they are the agent, and the only agent, that has a structural place within the society that can bring the power centers to their knees.

They also have an **interest** in using their capacity. All of those constraints which are in the way of moving toward a more just society are most keenly felt by the working class. They are the vast majority of modern society. They are the ones who every day suffer the indignities, the deprivation, the loss of autonomy, the backbreaking work pace, and the insecurity. Hence they have an interest in struggling towards more just social arrangements.

From the Margins to the Center

Now, there's an important implication.

Among progressives the key category in the last 25 years has been the margins: embracing the margins, advocating for the margins, being the margins. If it's marginal, it's good.

Not that there's anything wrong with the margins. But the reason the working class is important is because it's *not* marginal. You have to get over your love of the margins if you want to do effective politics.

This doesn't mean that you consign other socially oppressed groups to insignificance. Quite the contrary: anybody fighting for a just society has to take every form of oppression as incredibly important.

But understand that **politics is not just about moral advocacy**. It is also about the **practicalities of achieving power**.

The reason to pay attention to the working class is because of its centrality to the system, not because of its marginality.

Who are the central and the key players in this society that can bring the changes we need?

The agenda for the Left is to figure out how to get out of the margins and into the nerve centers of capitalism.

Because that's where the power is.

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