

IDEAS FOR

# *Action*

RELEVANT THEORY FOR

*Radical Change*



*Cynthia Kaufman*

# Capitalism and Class

IT'S FAIRLY COMMON TODAY for a US student to have several jobs while going to school full time. Many people with children are out working at a job when they wish they were home with their families. At the same time, the difference is increasing between the incomes of average people and the very rich. Having a job isn't enough to guarantee a decent life—almost one out of every five homeless people has a job.<sup>1</sup> As the number of service sector jobs grows, more and more people work in boring, poorly paid jobs with no hope of escape. And yet, in television and movies we are represented as a country of well-fed, well-dressed people, concerned about relationships and crime, but not ever about how to pay the rent or get childcare. What we see is a nation without economic problems, without classes.

Dominant ideas about freedom reinforce the idea of classlessness. The poor are seen as people who don't work hard enough, who don't have the discipline to run their lives well, or who use drugs. In addition to the everyday hardships of poverty, the poor in the United States must deal with the humiliation that goes along with other people's view that they have brought their problems upon themselves. And many poor people have internalized this negative view and blame themselves for their plight.

The idea that there are social forces pushing people into poverty and keeping them there, while keeping others wealthy remains foreign to most people in the United States.

## *Class struggle*

When we look at people's relations to the means of production in a capitalist society, we see that most people must work for a wage. When people work, they trade their time and capabilities for money. The owners of the means of production get to set the terms of the relationship and decide what we will do during our working hours. But they don't completely control the situation. In a class-divided society, members of different classes often act in ways that advance the interests of their class.

Marx called that process *class struggle*. He argued that class struggle happens constantly as members of each class jockey to improve its situation. Eventually, he thought, class struggle would get elevated to the level of a revolution in which workers would finally achieve what is ultimately in their highest interest: the abolition of the capitalist system.

In the class struggle that takes place every day, members of the owning class try to get as much profit as they can by controlling labor processes and by cutting back on overhead costs such as health care. They also engage in struggle with society as a whole to improve their situation. Corporations fight for lower taxes; for the government to pay for the infrastructure they need, such as roads; and for the government to discipline the workforce, for example, by making unionization difficult.

Members of the working class will also often work to improve their situation as a class through trying to get higher wages, better working conditions, and by trying to get their governments to provide for social needs.

Labor parties, socialist parties, and unions in Europe worked hard throughout the 20th century to win guarantees from the state for basic protections such as health care for all, livable minimum wages, and time off to take care of children. And whenever members of the ruling class fought to take away those protections, the working class fought hard to protect them, often with massive multi-union strikes.

US working people have often joined forces to gain better conditions. And yet, because the working class in the United States is deeply divided along racial lines, and because many of its members believe so strongly in the ideology of freedom, its gains in the class struggle have not been as strong as they could be in the future.

## *Lack of class mobility*

Belief in class mobility is one of the core ideas that keeps US working people from engaging in struggle for their class. Many people believe that if they work hard enough they can become wealthy, as can anyone in the United States.

If those who are in the working class can move out if we try, then there's no need to improve things for the class as a whole. Our goals become focused instead on improving our own individual situations.

The reality is that most people in the United States work for a wage. While some people do change classes, class situation is largely inherited. The very wealthy pass on their wealth to their children, the professional middle classes pass on education and cultural resources that allow their children to maintain a professional middle-class position. Children of the poor generally go to poorly funded schools, have no resources to start businesses, and don't have the cultural training to easily become members of the professional middle class.

## *The owning class*

For Marx, the basic structure of a capitalist society could be understood as the conflict between the owning class and the working class. The owners, through their ability to control the social resources needed for survival, are in a position of dominance in their relationship with members of the working class. According to Harry Braverman in *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, the owners reap profits when they control the work process in such a way as to get high levels of productivity from the workers.

Labor, like all life processes and bodily functions, is an inalienable property of the human individual. Muscle and brain cannot be separated from the persons possessing them; one cannot endow another with one's own capacity for work, no matter at what price, any more than one can eat, sleep, or perform sex acts for another. Thus, in the exchange, the worker does not surrender to the capitalist his or her capacity for work. The worker retains it, and the capitalist can take advantage of the bargain only by setting the worker to work. It is of course understood that the useful effects or products of labor belong to the capitalist. But what the worker sells, and what the capitalist buys, is *not an agreed amount of labor, but the power to labor over an agreed period of time.*<sup>3</sup>

Thus, it is in the interest of the owners to do what they can to ensure that the workers perform their labor as productively as possible. This often involves the development of time-saving machinery, the development of more efficient ways of doing things, and struggles to get the workers to work harder for the same amount of pay.

In businesses like fast food operations, owners profit by having the production process so efficiently organized that practically every move of the worker is planned by engineers. Because little training is required, workers are easily fit into the process and easily replaced if they become less than optimally productive. Unskilled work means low wages, of course. In higher wage employment, employers profit from the training that goes into the worker, and employers work to make sure people stay on the job and that their skills are put to use. Managers work to make sure each person is working to his or her potential. And managers who don't perform that function usually don't last long on the job.

All this regimentation and specialization makes capitalism an incredible engine for the development of ever more sophisticated ways of producing things. There is profit to be made in developing new machines that automate assembly lines. There is profit to be made in reducing the number of steps from cash register to milkshake machine. And there is profit to be made in prefabricating building trusses. Businesses in a capitalist society are in constant competition with one another, and any business that isn't able to return a reasonable profit loses out in the competition with other businesses.

Members of the working class must also compete in the labor market to survive. If they want to create a situation of security for themselves and their family members, they are coerced to participate in capitalist processes. Linking up in a union allows workers to resist excessive coercion by collectively demanding better conditions. But generally, in a capitalist society, those who do not own enough resources to employ others have little choice but to sell their labor for a wage and compete with other workers for better jobs.

As a class, owners will tend to bond together to protect their interests. They will use their power to get the state, the media, and the educational system to protect their class interests. According to *The New Field Guide to the US Economy*, the wealthiest 10 percent of people in the United States own 88 percent of all stocks and mutual funds, 92 percent of all business equity, and 90 percent of all financial securities.<sup>4</sup>

Edwards, Reich, and Weisskopf write in their book *The Capitalist System*,

The super-rich capitalists associated with the giant corporations constitute the most privileged and politically powerful part of the capitalist class. Through their control of large corporations, they command vast economic, political, legal, and ideological resources. Since they have the most far-flung interests, they are the most likely to perceive the needs of capitalism as a system and to act upon that perception.<sup>5</sup>

While these super-rich capitalists are in competition with one another, most of them also can see the big picture of their common interests. Paul Sweezy, one of the founders of *Monthly Review*, a Marxist theoretical journal, writes,

capitalists can and do fight among themselves to further individual or group interests, and they differ over the best way of coping with the problems which arise from their class position; but overshadowing all these divisions is their common interest in preserving and strengthening a system which guarantees their wealth and privileges.<sup>6</sup>

We can get a glimpse at how this concentration of ownership affects the political world when we look at political contributions. In the United States, individual business people and business-related political actions committees (PACs) contributed \$450 million to political campaigns in 1995-96, while labor contributed a total of \$49 million, and all other groups combined contributed \$71 million.<sup>7</sup> With these figures, it is easy to see why politicians rarely pass legislation that is in the interest of the working class and not in the interest of business.

Besides using the political system to support their class interests, the members of the owning class also use the legal system. In the history of US law, we can see a perpetual struggle over the relationship of the legal system to the class formation. According to Howard Zinn in *A People's History of the United States*,

The Constitution...illustrates the complexity of the American system: that it serves the interests of the wealthy elite, but it also does enough for small property owners, for middle-income mechanics and farmers, to build a broad base of support. The slightly prosperous people who make up this base of support are buffers against the blacks, the Indians, the very poor whites. They enable the elite to keep control with a minimum of coercion, a maximum of law—all made palatable by the fanfare of patriotism and unity.<sup>8</sup>

The legal system largely works to protect the interests of the wealthy. But if it only did this, it would lose its legitimacy. Thus, in

practice, it ends up being a site of contestation—a place where people with different interests make demands. The legal system is slanted heavily toward the interests of the owning class, but it is dynamic enough that it often also serves to protect the interests of the working class. Sometimes US labor unions are able to pressure the government to pass laws that protect the safety of people on the job; unfortunately, the ruling class often weakens these laws either as they are implemented or through repeal.

### *Class and race formations of US capitalism*

US history textbooks tend to focus on the story of the Pilgrims and other Europeans who were fleeing persecution. These stories leave the impression that democracy and religious freedom were the founding principles of the United States. If we look more closely at origins of the colonies, we get a very different picture.

The major impulse that drove people from Europe to the New World in those early years was profit-making. The original purpose of Columbus' first voyage was trade with Asia; once it was realized that that plan wasn't going to work, the next voyages were undertaken to find gold, and then to set up colonial, slave-based plantations.

Columbus' voyages were sponsored by the Spanish monarchy as business ventures, much the same as hundreds of other mercantilist projects launched in that period. Columbus set sail at the time of the beginnings of capitalism. Indeed, if we accept Abu-Lugod's interpretation of the rise of capitalism, Columbus' voyages and the integration of the Americas and the African slave trade were critical chapters in the story of Europe's rise to power and of the development of capitalism.

In a powerful and provocative essay called "Columbus and the Origins of Racism in the Americas," Guyanese novelist Jan Carew writes,

With Columbus' journey to the Americas, the new ethic evolved into full flower. The ideology of the church with its theoretical postulate that all true believers were equal in the sight of God (and this included the new convert as well as the person born into the faith) gave way to the ideology of capitalism which turned human beings, particularly those whose labor was in demand in the newly discovered lands, into commodities, chattels and so many faceless ciphers in a juggernaut of production and profit. Usury, a practice

excoriated by the medieval church for centuries, was transformed, expanded, and legitimized, as feudalism, wilting at its roots, lost ground to an ineluctable and predatory capitalism. This new and seemingly invincible system was sustained by a hitherto unsurpassed greed for gold and a passion for discovery, empire building, slavery, and profit making.<sup>9</sup>

The first non-natives to permanently settle in what is now the United States were "African slaves left in South Carolina in 1526 by Spaniards who abandoned a settlement attempt."<sup>10</sup> Before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock, the Spanish had settled a third of what we now know as the United States.

The Europeans who colonized the northeastern part of the United States also were engaged mostly in business ventures. Few of the settlements were driven by flight from religious persecution. The London Company and the Plymouth Company were joint-stock ventures that sent settlers to colonize the United States in order to engage in businesses such as logging and trade.<sup>11</sup>

Capitalism has been entwined with issues of race from its very beginnings, but more so in the Americas than in Europe. In England, as capitalism was developing, the working class was almost all white. People of color who were a part of the English economic system lived in faraway colonies. In contrast, as capitalism developed in more racially diverse North America, work and social life were organized along racial lines. Racial formation is such a dominant part of the US historical experience that we often see ourselves more as members of racial groups than as having any class position, a consciousness that often seems strange to Europeans.

In order to have a clear understanding of how class operates in the United States, it is helpful to understand the ways that members of different racial groups have different historical experiences of the workings of capitalism.

African Americans first entered the US economic order as enslaved people. This meant that, while they were doing the work that produced the much of the wealth that the nation's economy was founded on, their work was not based on wage labor.

Once slavery was abolished, many African Americans found themselves in a situation similar to that of slavery. In much of the South, slavery was replaced with sharecropping. In that system, those who worked the land were paid a share of what they had grown; the rest went to the landlords. If the crop was bad, the farmworker ended up

going into debt, needing to pay the landowner for seed, fertilizer, and supplies. This system ended up maintaining many of the economic aspects of slavery long into the 20th century. Many African American women also worked in the households of landowners or professionals, in forms of domestic labor that combined elements of feudal and patriarchal relations along with capitalist ones.

Barriers to equal participation in the system of capitalist labor still exist for African Americans. Labor unions largely excluded them until the 1930s. White Americans came to see African Americans as not really legitimate workers in the wage system. They have continued to be pushed to the margins of the economic system, often still working in low-wage service jobs. The methods of exclusion have been legion and continue to this day.

While African Americans became integrated into the economy of the United States as a super-highly exploited group, Native Americans have generally been pushed out of the economic order altogether. When the colonists first arrived in North America, they often worked closely with indigenous peoples in order to learn how to survive in this new and strange land. After that first period of learning was over, the mistreatment intensified. While Spanish colonists succeeded in enslaving indigenous people in Central and South America, the Caribbean, and in the US Southwest, the English colonists chose extermination and expulsion as their preferred method of expropriating indigenous resources.

At various times, the US government has tried the strategy of forced assimilation for Native Americans. Much of the rhetoric of the ruling class in the first centuries of colonization claimed that indigenous peoples were backward and that their lives would be improved if they could be trained to embrace Christian beliefs and European habits. Rhetoric aside, assimilation campaigns worked exactly as intended by colonial leaders, breaking down the communal structures that had kept communities together and making expulsion of tribes from their land easier for the colonists to accomplish.

The process of coerced assimilation often focused on indigenous women. In most indigenous societies, women did hard agricultural labor and were important parts of the social decision-making processes. One of the tasks the Europeans set for themselves in conquering the Native Americans was to transform their gendered divisions of labor.

In an essay titled "Distinctions in Western Women's Experience: Ethnicity, Class, and Social Change," historian Rosalinda Mendéz González writes that leaders of colonist expansion

recognized that to break down Indian resistance it was necessary to undermine the tribal and clan social organization of the Indians and to enforce upon them the individual nuclear family, with the husband the authority figure over the women and children. This attempt had the multiple purposes of forcing the Indians to alienate their communal tribal lands, breaking their economic and social clan organization, transforming them into individualist and competitive capitalist farmers, and providing the nuclear family institution through which the ideology of private property, individualism and dominant-subordinate relations could be passed on.<sup>12</sup>

Once land was held by private individuals, those individuals could be coerced through violence, starvation, or bribery to give up their land.

Some indigenous groups, such as the Cherokee, did adapt and develop social forms that were hybrids of European and indigenous ways. For a while, the Cherokee thrived and it looked as if some form of coexistence for groups that bent to European ways might be possible. The cruel lesson from this experience was that as soon as colonists were interested in the land occupied by Cherokees, assimilated or not, they were forced to leave it. And the assimilation process made this easier.

While Native Americans today populate every class and economic strata, indigenous culture and many Native Americans continue to exist largely outside the dominant class system. Life on the reservation is based on a combination of traditional communal tribal economic relations and, where the land is so poor or the social relations so destroyed as to not allow subsistence lifestyles to thrive, dependence on government subsidies. While many non-indigenous people today see as tragic what has been done to indigenous Americans, they also believe that the destruction of indigenous cultures was inevitable, that Native American traditions are incompatible with modern life and will eventually disappear. And yet, while the position of Native Americans in the economic structure remains extremely marginal, there is a dramatic resurgence of Native American culture going on.

There is incredible work going on to reclaim lands, to protect languages and cultural traditions, and to develop economic resources that will lift people out of poverty.<sup>13</sup> In addition to traditional economic

activities, many tribes have used their semi-sovereign status to create commercial gambling businesses, which have generated resources needed to run autonomous cultural, educational, and economic systems. With the development of the casino economy, a new hybrid system seems to be emerging, with the tribal governments collectively owning economic resources that are administered in traditional capitalist ways, exploiting the wage labor of those who work in them.

Asians and Latinos have been largely concentrated at the lower end of the working class for much of US history. Interestingly, when the United States annexed half of Mexico in 1848, members of the Mexican ruling class came along with the poor and the Native Americans. Some of them were absorbed into the US owning class, but most had their land expropriated through complex legal maneuvers. This part of our history is largely ignored, and all Latinos are often assumed to be foreigners and recent immigrants.

Many of the Asians and Latinos who came to the United States in the 19th century came as single men working in jobs highly segregated by race and gender. Women from these groups were generally not allowed to immigrate. When the work was completed, the men were expected to leave. The image of these ethnicities as outsiders has persisted, and it remains one of the core racist concepts used against them. They are often seen as not belonging, as unloyal to the country.

The role of these groups as outsiders and not as full members of the capitalist economic order was developed in the 19th century in ways that helped consolidate whites into a coherent racial group. According to Tomás Almaguer, at that time the ideology of "free labor" unified the interests of whites of different classes.

White Americans of all classes—the European American working class, petite bourgeoisie, and self-employed propertied class—accepted the social world this ideology promoted: an expanding capitalist society based on free labor, individualism, market relations, and private property.<sup>14</sup>

"Free labor" was free in the sense that workers were neither enslaved nor indentured; at least hypothetically they could bargain with owners for the terms of their employment. And while it wasn't really free, workers were led to believe that they were free under it.

This racist labor division was the foundation of US capitalist class relations. And while it exploited the white working class, it provided whites a sense of dignity and superiority in comparison to people of

color who were forced to participate in feudal and slave-based economic systems. While many Latinos and Asians were petit-bourgeois shopkeepers, traders, and independent miners, in the popular consciousness they were still associated with semi-feudal farm labor and the slave-like conditions of contract labor.

There emerged during this period a strong symbolic association between different minority groups, on the one hand, and various pre-capitalist economic formations on the other. White antipathy toward Mexicans, Native Americans, and Chinese and Japanese immigrants was typically couched within the rubric of this "free white labor"/"unfree nonwhite labor" dichotomy: Mexicans became inimically associated with the "unproductive," semi-feudal rancho economy that European Americans rapidly undermined after [California's] statehood; Indians with a "primitive" communal mode of existence that white settlers ruthlessly eradicated through violence and forced segregation; and Asian immigrants with a "degraded" unfree labor systems unfairly competing with and fettering white labor.<sup>15</sup>

Blacks were associated with slavery and with the virtual slavery of sharecropping.

The hostility of the white working class towards including people of color in their organizations—and in their sense of solidarity as a working class—helped to keep these racist "pre-capitalist" systems of labor in existence. When the Federal Wage and Hours law was passed as part of New Deal legislation in 1938, it specifically excluded farm labor from its protections.<sup>16</sup> Farm labor was instead regulated under the Farm Labor Standards Act, which was much weaker. This separation continues in some forms to the present day and partially accounts for horrendous working and living conditions for farm laborers, most of whom are people of color. The legal standards for working hours, health, and safety in farm labor are all much lower than for the rest of the working class.

### *White racial unity and the lack of class consciousness*

Racist ideology, promoted by socially conservative and pro-capitalist groups, leaves many whites believing that they are more deserving of the benefits of society than people of color, and that people of color are given social benefits that come out of the pockets of

whites. These beliefs lead to a white unity that tends to blunt the edge of class divisions.

The mid-19th century—when there were large immigrations from Europe and the non-white population expanded with the annexation of the western states and Asian immigration—was also a time of expansion and consolidation of the concept of the white race. The concept of the white race expanded to include immigrant groups, such as the Irish, Germans, Jews, and Slavic people, who had previously been excluded from the definition of white. Before that time, each of those groups had been discriminated against by the dominant English and Protestant groups. Conflict with Mexico, and to some extent the rise of Chinese immigration, made it possible in the 1840s and 1850s for leading Democrats to develop racial schemes that gathered all European settlers together as whites against the “colored” races.

The idea of white unity also helped bridge the differences between whites of different classes. This consolidation of the white race has had very important implications for the development of the class structure of the contemporary United States. There has been some degree of unity among people who see themselves as white, and this unity crosses class lines. This racial unity among whites has ended up helping the ruling class keep many white people loyal to the capitalist system as privileged workers within it.

Historically, many radicals have argued that attention to race divides the working class. They claim that the most important conflict in a capitalist society is between the owners of the means of production and the workers. They argue that the path to class liberation is unity, and unity is achieved by focusing on what working people from different races have in common.

Eugene Debs was the very successful leader of the Socialist Party toward the end of the 19th century. He was imprisoned for speaking out against US involvement in World War I and received almost a million votes when he campaigned from his prison cell to be elected US president. In discussions of race, Debs shared the view of many radicals of his time.<sup>17</sup> He argued that attention to race was unnecessary.

We have simply to open the eyes of as many Negroes as we can and do battle for emancipation from wage slavery, and when the working class have triumphed in the class struggle and stand forth economic as well as political free men, the race problem will disappear.<sup>18</sup>

Others have attempted to build class unity between the races by teaching whites about the ways that racism is bad for the white working class. Keeping African Americans out of unions, for example, meant that Blacks were available to be used as strike breakers. Their exclusion kept them from feeling solidarity with the striking workers. This lack of multiracial unity leads to an inability of the working class to advocate for its interests as a whole.

In 1948, Black communist organizer Harry Haywood wrote,

It is not accidental that where the Negroes are most oppressed, the position of whites is also most degraded.... “[K]eeping the Negro down” spells for the entire South the nation’s lowest wage and living standards.... Sharecropping has drawn into its orbit tens of thousands of white workers.... Political controls which are aimed primarily at the disenfranchisement of the Negro have also resulted in depriving the mass of the poor whites of their right to a ballot.<sup>19</sup>

Presently, there are many ways racism keeps the white working class from acting in ways that are in the interest of the working class as a whole. Politicians are able to mobilize white workers’ resentments against “undeserving poor people who sponge off the system.” In the debate over welfare that took place in 1996, an image was created of the undeserving welfare cheat. In popular consciousness, this person was typically a Black female, even though the majority of people on welfare at that time were white. Anti-Black racism was mobilized in ways that hurt poor whites as well as poor people of color.

Similarly, racism has been used to mobilize resentments against undocumented immigrants in ways that hurt the working class. Arguing that US citizen workers have a “right to jobs” and undocumented people don’t, the government uses these distinctions to crack down on undocumented people when they attempt to unionize and count on racist resentments to prevent white workers from coming to the aid of immigrants. And yet the presence of large numbers of non-unionized workers in any given industry drives down wages, hurting all people in those sectors, no matter what their race or nationality.

When US auto makers were beginning to develop their global approach to manufacturing, anti-Asian racism developed among white, African American, and Latino workers. The mainstream media deflected blame for the loss of jobs from the actions of the US-based manufacturers and focused on the rise of Asian manufacturers. A violent wave of anti-Asian hysteria hit the country, and little attention

was paid to the failure of the US manufacturers to anticipate North Americans' desire for smaller, more fuel-efficient cars. It was in the midst of this hysteria that Vincent Chin was murdered in Detroit in 1982 by two white men angered at the loss of jobs in the US car industry.

While not challenging the claim that racism divides the working class, the white historian David Roediger adds a twist to this analysis. In his book *The Wages of Whiteness*, Roediger asks: If racism has no positive benefits for the white working class, why is it so persistent? He points out that while whites may lose in some basic economic ways, they also gain. There is a social wage paid to white workers for their whiteness.

As a case study, Roediger traces the history of the Irish in the United States as they moved from being considered members of an inferior race to being included as white. As this transformation took place, their social status and access to political power increased dramatically. Roediger argues that the white working class has historically used its position of power to keep ahead of people of color. Roediger argues that working people in the United States must take racism very seriously and uproot it from their consciousness, for it is only through concerted efforts at anti-racism among whites that a real unity can develop among members of the working class.

### *Gender and class*

While people of different races are woven into the class formation in different ways, each of those racial groups also includes gender differences. Women and men are positioned differently in the class formation. The main forms of gender difference that are built into the US class formation have their roots in the gender ideology that the dominant European groups brought with them to the Americas. Men were to be in business and government, and women were to be the wardens of the home. While the early white settlers in the northeastern part of the United States lived in societies where women and men worked together without a distinct separation of spheres, according to Jean Boydston, the roots of a gendered separation between public and private came with the colonists from England.

A largely subsistence oriented people, the New England Puritans defined the household as "the economical society" and understood that family survival required the wife's work. In the garden, the barnyard, and the larder as much as it required the husband's work in

the fields and meadows and barn.... At the same time, colonial society contained the ideological foundations for later denial of the economic worth of wives' labor. As ministers reminded women, husbands—not wives—were the public representatives of the household.... Wives' subordination was embedded in the English common law that the Puritans brought with them to New England. As *femme covert* a wife's legal identity was subsumed under that of her husband, who was recognized as the owner of her labor-time.<sup>20</sup>

As the industrial economy developed, men's labor increasingly subsumed women's and made it invisible. In working-class families, men worked for a wage in capitalist enterprises. Women of all races often did too, but they also did much work that was unpaid. Boydston argues that women contributed as much as men to the economic survival of working-class white families of the 19th century. We can only see their full contribution when we take into account not only their wage labor, but also their unpaid efforts such as childrearing, housework, gardening, nursing the old and sick, scavenging, bargaining, and bartering with neighbors.

Boydston argues that this invisibility of women's work was to the advantage of the industrial employers. Marx had noted that a worker needs to be paid at least the amount it takes to keep him or her alive. Boydston expands on this by pointing out that if a wage earner is living off of the unpaid labor of a wife, the owner benefits along with the husband in the exploitation of her labor.<sup>21</sup>

Along with capitalist forms of appropriation, there has existed a patriarchal form of appropriation. We will look at this in depth in Chapter 6. For now it is worth mentioning that much of the important work that women of all races have done traditionally has been done in the household. Even when they have worked in wage labor, women have done a vastly disproportionate amount of household labor. The concepts we use to analyze economic activity have been developed with capitalist production in mind and largely do not account for the productive activity that takes place in households. Thus, the work done to take care of people's basic personal, emotional, and childcare needs is largely economically invisible.

Domestic labor is not considered real work when it is not paid. When it is paid, as with much of the work that has traditionally been done by women of color working as laundry women, nannies, housekeepers, and cooks, it often takes place at the margins of capitalist labor. Paid domestic work rarely ends up being counted in the official

economy as productive labor because much of it isn't taxed, and therefore isn't tallied by government institutions. This "informal" labor is thus done without the basic protections that have come to be associated with capitalist labor relations, such as time off, health benefits, pensions, and the like.

As capitalist industrialization developed, the idealized role for a white woman was that of homemaker. She was supposed to provide for the personal maintenance of the worker and the reproduction of the working class. Marxist feminists have argued that in the dominant ideology of capitalism, the man is responsible for production, while the woman is responsible for reproduction—reproducing the workforce.

The trade union movement in the 20th century fought hard for the ability of male workers to support their wives and children at home. They demanded a "family wage," meaning a wage large enough to support a whole family. For much of the 20th century, the idea that a worker's wages were supposed to be enough to support a family was an assumption built into most union contracts.

Beginning in the 1970s, demands for a family wage became harder to win. As real wages (that is, wages adjusted for inflation) began to go down dramatically, fewer families were able to maintain their former standard of living on one income.

Modern capitalist societies are based upon the norm of the heterosexual nuclear family. Nuclear families are more compatible with capitalism than are extended family structures. As opportunities for work move geographically, nuclear families can uproot and settle down someplace else far more easily and quickly than can extended families. The idealization of the romantic heterosexual couple is a part of the social glue that holds this family structure together.

In reality, the ideal of the heterosexual nuclear family with a female at home accurately reflects only wealthier whites. Relatively few white working-class men have been able to "provide for their families" in this way; likewise, since men of color have systematically been denied work that paid a family wage, only a small percentage of women of color have the luxury of being stay-at-home wives and mothers. The connection between women and the household has meant that women have been excluded or marginalized from the better paying forms of capitalist labor. Jobs that have traditionally been women's jobs typically pay less than traditionally male fields, and when women work in the same jobs as men, they are often paid less.

In the early part of the 20th century, people advocating for the interests of working-class women have pursued two completely different strategies. Some argued for women's greater and more equal inclusion in wage labor, while others fought for the family wage—the idea that women should be able to stay home and raise their children. This has often been an important demand for women of color, who have traditionally worked in wage labor but at very low wages. The trade union movement has taken both of these positions as well, sometimes arguing for equality and sometimes arguing for a family wage.

While Emma Goldman and other anarchists have advocated strongly for workplace equality for women and criticized the nuclear family, many Marxists in the early part of the 20th century favored the ideal of the family wage.

### *Trade unions*

The struggles over racism among sectors of the working class and the complex positions of women in a capitalist economic structure raise challenges for organizing among the working class. One of the main organizing strategies that members of the working class have used to challenge capitalism is the trade union. In Chapter 4, we will look at other ways of challenging capitalism. For now, we will look at the complex and often contradictory roles played by unions.

As the industrial capitalist economy developed, so did trade unions. Early trade unions were modeled after the craft guilds of the Middle Ages in Europe. In these, skilled workers controlled the conditions of their labor, trained new members of the guild, and restricted entry into the guild. The early unions were organized by “craft” rather than by workplace. Craft unions attempted to protect the benefits that come from having specialized skills. These craft unions usually worked to improve the conditions of a “labor aristocracy” made up of skilled white men, and to protect their members’ jobs and status from the rest of the working class. A more progressive tendency also developed that attempted to unify the working class, including people of all races, immigrants, women, and the unskilled.

Trade unions have sometimes been organized with the specific goal of challenging the existence of capitalism. At other times in history, they have been used to tame the working class and make it easier for capital to extract a profit without too much strife.

Around the turn of the last century, one in 14 workers was in a union and 80 percent of those workers were in unions affiliated with the American Federation of Labor (AFL).<sup>22</sup> According to Howard Zinn,

The AFL was an exclusive union—almost all male, almost all white, almost all skilled workers. Although the number of women workers kept growing—it doubled from 4 million in 1890 to 8 million in 1910, and women were one-fifth of the labor force—only one in a hundred belonged to a union.<sup>23</sup>

One way to understand the strategy of the AFL was that it was trying to match the monopoly that owners had over the means of production with a monopoly on labor.<sup>24</sup> By being exclusive, the unions could keep wage levels high for an elite group of workers.

This strategy of the AFL was challenged beginning in 1905 by the more radical approach of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW, also called Wobblies). The original founders of the IWW were anarchists, socialists, and radical trade unionists.<sup>25</sup> They challenged the narrowness of the AFL's approach. They were interested in organizing everyone, including unskilled workers, women, immigrants, and people of color, into "one big union."

This, they hoped, would lead to real solidarity among members of the working class. And, unlike the AFL, they were interested in challenging capitalism at its foundation. Thus, IWW leader Big Bill Haywood argued in a speech,

We are here to confederate the workers of this country into a working-class movement that shall have for its purpose the emancipation of the working-class from the slave bondage of capitalism.... The aims and objects of this organization shall be to put the working-class in possession of the economic power, the means of life, in control of the machinery of production and distribution, without regard to the capitalist masters.<sup>26</sup>

The working conditions that these people were challenging were horrendous. In 1914, 35,000 US workers were killed on the job.<sup>27</sup> There were no legal limits on how many hours a day or how many days a week employees could be required to work, so 18-hour days and six-day weeks were common. There were no limits on the employment of children, so many children worked alongside their parents, under the same unhealthy conditions and for the same long hours.

In the early years of the 20th century, there were thousands of strikes each year. Many were successful and resulted in better pay, shorter working hours, and healthier conditions. Still, according to Zinn, "Law and military force again and again took the side of the rich. It was a time when hundreds of thousands of Americans began to think of socialism."<sup>28</sup> The American Socialist Party was founded in 1901 and grew quickly.

With the coming of World War I, the rise of socialism in the United States was challenged dramatically. In 1917, Congress passed the Espionage Act, which threatened with 20-year prison terms "whoever, when the United States is at war, shall wilfully cause or attempt to cause insubordination, disloyalty or mutiny, or refusal to do duty in the military or naval forces of the United States."<sup>29</sup> This law was used to imprison many IWW and Socialist leaders. Under the cover of keeping the country united at a time of war, the government launched an all-out war on those who challenged the status quo.

Paradoxically, because the government wanted labor peace and unity within the country, important concessions around wages and working conditions were granted to labor during this period.

Many unions won new contracts with employers and also won the eight-hour day, a goal since the Civil War. During the First World War, 49 percent of workers gained a forty-eight-hour workweek, partly through the efforts of the War Labor Board.... Wartime progressivism also had a repressive side.... Union leaders pledged to cooperate with the pro-labor government by opposing strikes.<sup>30</sup>

With the IWW and the socialist movement virtually crushed, the AFL resumed its position of centrality in the trade union movement, and women, immigrants, people of color, and the unskilled began to lose their places in the movement.

During the Great Depression in the 1930s, another wave of radical labor activity took off. In 1934 and 1935, hundreds of thousands of workers, excluded from tightly controlled, exclusive unions of the American Federation of Labor, began organizing in the new mass production industries—auto, rubber, meatpacking. The AFL could not ignore them; it set up a committee to organize these workers by industry instead of by craft, so that all workers in a plant would belong to one union. This committee, headed by John Lewis, then broke away and became the CIO: the Congress of Industrial Organizations.<sup>31</sup>

In the early days of the CIO, the Communist Party influenced many of its unions. At that time, the Communist Party was committed to organizing Black workers, and it brought that perspective to the CIO. As labor militancy rose again, the government responded again in a more conciliatory fashion. The Wagner Act, passed in 1935 largely as a result of this militancy, set up the National Labor Relations Board and

finally gave federal recognition to the rights workers had been asserting for more than a century: the right to engage in collective bargaining, the right to free speech in advocating unionism, the right to freely elect a representative union, the right to protest unfair labor practices and to seek redress of grievances.<sup>32</sup>

This was also the period that saw a massive increase in the number of people of color in trade unions. During this period, the Communist Party worked hard to fight racial exclusion in trade unions. As the country geared up for World War II, the March on Washington Movement, under the leadership of A. Phillip Randolph of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, threatened a massive march of African Americans protesting their exclusion from defense industries. Wanting to avoid the international embarrassment of fronting for democracy abroad while being challenged on racism at home, the government responded. In 1941, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802, which banned racial discrimination in the defense industry.<sup>33</sup>

During World War II, patriotism and the demands for national unity once again set a stage for the government to be able to challenge labor. The development of the Cold War, after World War II, led to a general anti-communism that was used to challenge the loyalty of the CIO unions. In 1947, Congress passed the Taft-Hartley Act, which largely brought an end to this long period of gains by the working class through labor organizing. Taft-Hartley

dramatically restricted the workers' right to strike. It permitted employers to sue unions for breach of contract in strikes taking place during the term of a collective-bargaining agreement.... The Act also outlawed secondary boycotts, thus restricting sympathy actions by unions.... It empowered the President to create a fact-finding board to inquire into any strike affecting the national health and safety and to act on the board's request to seek federal court injunctions and restraining orders that would make a strike "illegal" for a 90-day

cooling off period.... [T]he NLRB could now be used against unions as well as against employers.<sup>34</sup>

Today, US labor activism remains profoundly constrained by Taft-Hartley. A very narrow labor agenda, often referred to as *business unionism*, predominates. Under business unionism, many unions forego organizing new workers in lieu of the less risky role of re-negotiating and administering existing contracts with the simple goal of keeping wages relatively steady. Many of these unions have lost touch with their members. They do not put much of their resources into organizing, corruption and cronyism are problems, and larger issues, such as the power of workers to have some say over how work is organized, are ignored. Little is done to challenge employers, let alone the foundations of capitalism.

As a result of this, the relationship between the left and the trade union movement is often strained. Some radicals see the labor movement as an important site for the struggle against capitalism. But for many, the exclusive nature of so much of the tradition has left them hostile to trade unionism.

This situation began to shift in the 1990s. Beginning in the early 1990s, there was a major shake-up in the AFL-CIO. Movements for democracy and more radical approaches, such as a focus on organizing the unorganized, developed within many unions. In recent years, there has been a dramatic rise in organizing by AFL-CIO unions, and that organizing has once again focused on people of color, women, and the unskilled.

One of the more exciting examples of this has been the Justice for Janitors campaign, which is a project of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). In this campaign, the union focused on building coalitions with community organizations in areas where a labor dispute was going on. SEIU developed materials in the diverse languages of their members and took a multi-issue approach. These coalitions then used a variety of tactics to bring attention to their cause, often engaging in civil disobedience. Organizers often went after the corporations that hired janitorial services, arguing that the strategy of subcontracting out to a janitorial company was just a way for a big company to avoid paying its janitors well. Workers in this field have largely been people of color and are often immigrants.

The Justice for Janitors campaign challenges some of the more insidious practices developing in the economy at the present time. More and more companies are using subcontracting as a way to avoid

labor law. Also, as the US economy shifts to being more service-based, more and more jobs are in those sectors that have never had strong unionization. Thus, unions are feeling a push to branch out into areas that were never organized before.

### *Class consciousness*

Many radicals take the position that the way to unify the working class is to focus on the things that working people have in common. This view, usually taken by white males working on labor issues, has been criticized for not being sensitive to the different interests of members of subordinated social groups.

Since the 1960s, many radicals, people of color, women, gays, lesbians, and immigrants have argued that it is crucial to focus on differences. Members of each group are interested in coming to some understanding of their specific situation and do not want to have to ignore the ways that their experiences of oppression are sometimes different from, and sometimes caused by their relationships with, members of other subordinated groups. This view is often criticized as leading to a fragmentation of movements for social change.

While followers of each path continue to criticize one another, there are lessons to be learned from the debate. One of the most powerful ones is that we can only reach a deep form of unity when we are aware of our differences and take them into account. If we don't, then the unity we create will most likely reflect the interests of members of more privileged groups. Hopefully, we are learning ways to create unity out of difference, in order to be able to build a foundation for demands that are in the interest of all members of the working class.

One hopeful sign that this lesson has been learned is that the AFL-CIO has made a radical reversal of its position on immigration. In the past, the AFL-CIO has argued that undocumented immigrants take jobs from legal workers, and it supported several pieces of federal legislation in the 1980s and 1990s that punished the undocumented. The executive council of the AFL-CIO reversed this position in February, 2000, and came out in favor of improved conditions for all workers, including immigrants—even the undocumented. It opposed employer sanctions against hiring the undocumented and instead argued for criminalizing employers who exploited immigrants. It argued for full workplace rights, such as the right to unionize for the

undocumented and legalization of all undocumented workers in the country.

This new position broadens the scope of who gets to count as a legitimate member of the working class. While making the lines dividing workers blurrier, it makes the lines dividing the working class from the owning class more clear. With a clear sense of class solidarity, it is much easier for the working class to advocate for its needs.

- 1 Ehrenreich (2001), page 26.
- 2 Resnick and Wolff (1987).
- 3 Braverman in Edwards, Reich, and Weisskopf (1986), page 93.
- 4 Heintz and Folbre (2000), page 16.
- 5 Edwards, Reich, and Weisskopf (1986), page 168.
- 6 Edwards, Reich, and Weisskopf (1986), page 173.
- 7 Heintz and Folbre (2000), page 24.
- 8 Zinn (1980), pages 98-9.
- 9 Carew (1988), page 23.
- 10 Loewen (1996), page 76.
- 11 Loewen (1996), page 76.
- 12 González (1997), page 13.
- 13 Laduke (1999).
- 14 Almaguer (1994), page 33.
- 15 Almaguer (1994), page 14.
- 16 Zinn (1980), page 394.
- 17 Molloy (1992), page 186.
- 18 Debs in West (1988), page 19.
- 19 Haywood in Roediger (1998), pages 127-8.
- 20 Boydston (1994), page 46.
- 21 Boydston (1994), page 54.
- 22 Zinn (1980), page 320.
- 23 Zinn (1980), page 320.
- 24 Zinn (1980), page 321.
- 25 Zinn (1980), page 322.
- 26 Haywood in Zinn (1980), page 322.
- 27 Zinn (1980), page 320.
- 28 Zinn (1980), page 331.
- 29 Zinn (1980), page 356.
- 30 Green (1980), page 92.
- 31 Zinn (1980), page 390.
- 32 Green (1980), page 150.
- 33 Zinn (1980), page 395.
- 34 Green (1980), page 198.