

Wobblies & Work

Special section intro

Fifth Estate Collective

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This special section, announcing itself with the above headline, contains more of a critical and theoretical tension than may be immediately obvious at first reading. Imbedded in it is the difference between the clarion call proposed by Marxists to the international proletariat, “Workers of the World, Unite,” and another slogan, introduced in these pages some three decades ago—“Workers of the World, Relax!”

During those thirty years, not only have we refused to take Marx’s view of the means of production and the civilization it has engendered as a starting point for our vision of a different world, but we have also looked critically at the nature of both work and the social structures that evolved from wage labor, including the state and capitalism.

Our question, the one the hunter-gatherer Hadza people ask of their agrarian neighbors in the Marshal Sahlins reprint below, “Why farm when there are so many mongo mongo nuts?” Or, better put for the modern era of the last 4,000 years, why build pyramids and ziggurats, shopping malls and skyscrapers, automobiles and freeways, when there are so many mongo mongo nuts?

In other words, why did we exchange the low-technology, low-impact, mostly egalitarian societies, which marked the majority of our species time on the planet, for authoritarian rule, hierarchical class structures, mass technics and destructive environmental patterns that guarantee that vast sections of the world’s population during any given era, and perhaps even more so today, are relegated to lives of misery, penury, war and disease?

Actually, there was little choice involved. The first state societies, which arose millennia ago, were rackets to assure the unequal distribution of the first accumulated agricultural surpluses and the power over others that came with it. Whole sectors of the population were press-ganged into slavery to build towers of praise to the emergent rulers to mystify the ruled, and huge public works projects, such as irrigation systems, to assure the maintenance of sources of wealth for the elite.

Since then, the modern era has been defined by institutionalized systems of slavery—labor extracted unwillingly from a subordinate class—and from the systematic looting of people, land resources for the enrichment of those occupying the upper strata of a social pyramid marked by intense privilege at the top with increasing misery as one descends toward the bottom of the class structure. This process is only escalating today.

The question we should examine is: what would have been possible and what is possible today without the coercion of labor? Formal chattel slavery has been replaced in the modern era with wage work, or what the old workers movement called wage slavery. Isn’t it likely, that if it wasn’t for a subordinate class forced to work at horrible tasks (think building the pyramid of Cheops, rowing in a Roman galley, working in a coal mine, an auto paint shop, at a blast furnace, in a metal forge department, wiring chip boards, etc.) maybe we’d all be chomping on mongo mongo nuts. It is only class society and the coercion of wage slavery that has allowed any of what we conceive of as modern civilization to be constructed.

Heretofore, most Marxists, anarchists and syndicalists, viewed wresting control of the administration of the instruments of production as the solution to the misery capitalism brings to so many, rather than questioning the entire industrial system. Reformist slogans like, “A fair day’s wage for a fair day’s work,” predominated during the

nineteenth century, but the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), whose centenary we celebrate this issue, realizing that formulation still left workers as a subordinate class, issued the demand, "Abolition of the wage system."

The IWW, however, never confronted the implications of their call beyond the fundamentally decent demand for the end of a system of cruelty and exploitation. The assumption was that with their One Big Union replacing the capitalist wage system and its control apparatus, the state, we'll all live happily ever after in a modern and democratically administered society where scarcity has been abolished along with oppressive institutions.

At a point where people all across the world are experiencing intensified immiseration, but a seemingly simultaneous submissiveness, I applaud every report in the IWW's monthly newspaper that the union has organized eight Starbucks baristas in New York City. Even such a small blip of rebellion seems heartening. But if we extrapolate from a particular vision of another world, shouldn't we ask questions about what it will look like and how fundamentally it will change?

For instance, who will volunteer (no more coercion) to do the worst, deadly, mind-numbing jobs that make this system go? You can't split up the nastiest work; you can't have part-time coal or steel workers. Any society, even a revolutionary one, based on petro-chemical-industrial-nuclear assumptions, demands not only a subordinate class, but a sacrifice class, comprised of people who have their life stunted by terrible work and their health dreadfully harmed. Take away the assumptions of capitalist production and what is left of the modern world?

Since there are probably those, upon reading this, who are already thinking of ingenious ways to allow the gadgets of modernity to remain after a revolution, the question should be asked of them, what if everything the privileged classes of the Northern tier countries take for granted were suddenly available to everyone everywhere? American suburban life would become universalized among five billion people with a resulting massive production, consumption and waste increase. How long could the planet take this? Also, how can we create decentralized, egalitarian, communal villages and maintain centralized production and distribution?

Ultimately, there are more questions to pose than can be currently answered. In the meantime, I think it is appropriate to give congratulations and support to the Wobblies on their hundredth anniversary and to realize they, like everything else, is in process. When we can answer the many questions confronting us, perhaps then we will be ready to bring down the Leviathan.

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