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Marxism

One question: Class struggle today

- Features -

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One Question is a monthly series in which we ask leading thinkers to give a brief answer to a single question.

This month we ask:

What does class struggle mean today?

Dario Azzellini

Class struggle, that is, the struggle between labour and capital, is not at all a concept that belongs to the past. In a world of growing inequality, it is a reality more pertinent than ever. A recent study has revealed that since 2008 the wealth of the richest 1% has been growing at an average of 6% a year, while the wealth of the remaining 99% of the world's population has been growing by only 3%. By 2030, the world's richest 1% will control nearly two-thirds of the world's wealth.

With the victory of neoliberalism, governments have stopped acting as mediators between capital and labour with the aim of mitigating inequality. Hence, in the Northern hemisphere, unions that are still based on the idea of social partnership are often unable to wage offensive struggles. At best, they fight to maintain the status quo and, even then, more often than not, they are unsuccessful.

This does not mean that offensive struggles are not possible anymore; on the contrary, they are possible and necessary. Some unions, mostly pushed by the rank and file, have come to realise this fact and to radicalise their struggles. Some newer or smaller unions, along with self-organised workers around the world, have waged successful offensive struggles. Moreover, in many countries of the global South, where class compromise has never been an option advanced by capital, unions have always been more militant.

If workers are to become empowered and fight capitalist exploitation, it is fundamental that they avoid the trap of division along national, gender or ethnic lines. Class struggle cannot be successful unless it is transnational and antiracist. To fight transnational and global capital, workers have to coordinate across borders, as they have recently done in strikes at Amazon and Ryanair.

And considering that production and reproduction are two sides of the same medal, women's struggle cannot be separated from class struggle. Working class women all over the world are proving this fact: from the female fast food workers at McDonalds in the US, who last September went on strike against sexual harassment in ten cities, to the five million women that went on strike in Spain on March 8, 2018, International Women's Day, to denounce gender inequality, the wage gap, sexual discrimination and domestic violence.

Last but not least, company takeovers by workers who run their workplaces under self-management also demonstrate how class struggle can point beyond the wage relationship, towards the construction of a new world based on different values. The class strikes back. This is just the beginning.

Cinzia Arruzza

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Marxists have too often tended to take 'class' to indicate a given sociological reality, leading to the separation of class struggle from other social movements (e.g. for civil liberties, for political rights, or against discrimination). While we certainly need to analyse sociological and economic phenomena (such as the division of labour, the distribution of the workforce in various economic and productive sectors, the various forms of organisation of the labour process, rates of employment and unemployment, as well as gender and race demographics), these analyses do not tell us what 'class' means today, because class is not a static sociological or economic object. To use E. P. Thompson's words, class is not the starting point, but the point of arrival of a historical process of self-formation through the struggle against another class.

Class is, therefore, a social and political agent that cannot be analysed solely through the structural factors that situate people in class situations. Hence, in order to answer the question: 'What does class mean today?', we need to first answer another question: 'How is class struggle unfolding and developing today?' Thus, if class is the outcome of a historical process of self-formation through antagonism, then we should be very wary of all-too easy preconceived models about what counts as class struggle and what does not. We should rather look at phenomena of social and political conflict with an open mind, trying to detect possible processes of class formation within them.

This is the approach I am adopting in relation to the new transnational feminist wave. Rather than sticking to the old logic of parallel movements, we should consider whether a process of class formation is taking place within the new feminist wave. I think it is. Not everywhere and not in the totality of the new feminist wave, but I do think that the women's strikes in countries such as Argentina and Spain are directly and straightforwardly class struggle and processes of class formation. This is extremely good news, for it indicates the possibility of a new, more advanced, class subjectivity: a class subjectivity that, from the very process of its self-constitution, is feminist, antiracist and internationalist.

Jeffery R Webber

Class struggle is multidimensional, historical, and processual, rather than static, narrow, and mechanical. Agency is at the heart of class struggle, albeit an agency which is bounded by the logic of a set of class situations that each person enters into involuntarily. If class is a relationship in which the common experiences of real people living in real contexts matter, and which takes place in historical time, it means that we cannot hope to understand the complexity of class if we simply treat it as an observable, static structure.

Understanding class struggle today also means moving beyond the strict confines of the workplace, and stressing the class dynamics of every 'social movement' in motion, as distinct from sometimes thinking in class terms, and otherwise not so much, or not at all. Class struggle, expansively understood, plays out across the complexly organised, mediated, and articulated social relations of oppression and exploitation under capitalism in concrete settings and situations.

These many-sided realities show themselves in a wide array of specific forms of resistance. Seeking out the class dynamics of particular social struggles should not involve bald proclamation of the reducibility of every movement over every oppression to a universal category of class. It should involve a focus on the concrete and complex processes of class formation in political terms, which operate necessarily through particular, embedded social relations of difference along the lines of race, gender, and sexuality, among others social relations of oppression.

Bringing capitalism back into the picture of every particular manifestation of social resistance reorients our entire outlook and draws otherwise invisible connections between superficially disparate local movements. The logic of capitalist accumulation infuses the dynamics of all these movements, and sets limits on their myriad hopes and aspirations. Attention to capitalist totality can help to transcend theoretical and political tendencies toward a fragmentation of subject matter and the abandonment of totalisation. Politically, this is important in terms of strategic

orientation, insofar as it can assist in making visible existing commonalities between distinct movements, and the possibilities of forging new commonalities where none presently exist. The constitution of class is forged in political praxis.

It is an essential part of the task of Marxism to bring to light the hidden linkages between specific issues of contestation, and the specific repertoires of struggle and organisation to which they've given impetus, drawing to the surface their shared imbrication in wider social relations of production and the system of capitalism which they face together, if from particular vantage points. A whole terrain of social struggle, with multiple moving parts, contains endless specificities, but also overlap and interaction. We want to draw together the distinctly oppressed constituent parts of concretely situated working classes into contestational struggle. The multi-layered complexity of capitalist totality and its many determinations is mirrored in the multi-layered complexity of dynamic, situated, concretely universal working-class subjects.

Adam Hanieh

The Communist Manifesto famously states that, 'The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles'. I think there are four important elements that flow from this observation. First, class struggle is a permanent feature of class society, even in periods when overt tension between classes appears muted. Second, class struggle has two sides, which includes capital's constant war against labour. Third, class struggle is not simply about wages and conditions of work – it's also wrapped up in forms of oppression such as those based on gender, race, and national origin. Finally, class struggle needs to be understood from a global perspective; it is permeated with violence, war, and dispossession.

My own work on these themes has focused on the Middle East, where I think Marx's insights around the centrality of class struggle remain essential to understanding the politics of the region. Over the last few decades we have seen an unrelenting class struggle 'from above', with neoliberal transformation generating staggering levels of inequality and marginalisation. These processes have been backed by authoritarian states and the widespread deployment of violence. The resulting class structure is highly polarised, with a tiny layer of the population closely tied to international capital and benefitting from control over accumulation. This class differentiation needs to be placed in a pan-regional context. In particular, leading capitalist groups from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have been major beneficiaries of neoliberal change.

At the same time, these outcomes are contested. Most recently, we saw this in the Arab uprisings that erupted in 2010. These revolts had important precursors in previous waves of struggles, including those by organised labour movements (notably in Tunisia and Egypt). We also see protest movements that are not necessarily organised around formal trade unions – e.g. landless farmers, youth, the unemployed and informal workers. These struggles typically do not present themselves in class terms, yet their grievances are ultimately located in the outcomes of the class struggle from above. The challenge is to make these class dynamics explicit, and draw their linkages with the wider nature of capitalism in the region.

Thinking about questions of class struggle in the Middle East also requires much more attention to the mobility of labour. In the GCC, for example, more than half of the labour force is made up of temporary migrant workers who lack any political rights or route to citizenship. This reliance on migrant labour is foundational to how Gulf rulers maintain and extend their power over society. Migrants in the Gulf are a central part of the region's working classes, yet most political movements typically ignore them.

Likewise, the millions of people displaced through wars in Syria, Yemen, Libya and Iraq raise a further challenge to how we think about class struggle in the region. Although the reasons for why people move vary in multiple ways, the question of how people inevitably become *classed* in the process of their dispossession is crucial. Refugees are

workers too – often precarious, unemployed, or pushed to the shadows of underground economies – and form an increasingly vital part of how working classes are constituted. The Left needs to closely examine the ways in which refugees are integrated into the making of capitalist economies, not treat them simply as passive objects of humanitarian aid.

Shahrzad Mojab

Both ‘class’ and ‘class struggle’ are key, though contested, terms among Marxist scholars and revolutionary activists whose project is to dismantle the power of the bourgeoisie as the dominant class in capitalism. Classes are not accidental or readily shifting aggregates of people stratified along lines of employment, rank, income, or life-chances. Class, in Marxist theory, provides dividing lines not only in the distribution of economic power but also in epistemology, ontology, ideology, philosophy, and politics.

From this perspective, class struggle involves much more than economic conflict between workers and capitalists. It is argued, in fact, that workers’ struggles for economic welfare alone offer nothing more than a perpetuation of capitalism and therefore the (re)production of capitalist social relations. Furthermore, it is imaginable, and to some extent achievable, to gain racial, sexual, or gender equality under capitalism, but it is not conceivable to eradicate racism and sexism without waging a class struggle against the racialised capitalist patriarchy.

Today it is ordinary to read about the extraordinary misery of life. The rise of theocratic fascism, within capitalist imperialism, is experienced globally; from famine, to the reemergence of slavery, to the public rape of women to mass migrations and incarceration. It is common to name such horrors as ‘dispossession,’ ‘expulsion,’ or ‘displacement.’ Naming these conditions, though it is a necessary and crucial step, remains inadequate for explicating *why*, *how*, or *who*, and does not help us to comprehend the entanglement of relations that make the appropriation of wealth, oppression, and exploitation possible.

There is a logic and an order in the capitalist imperialist world order. First, capitalism has to voraciously spread its economic and social relations through modes of being, doing, and thinking world over. Second, in this rapid movement, it intensifies a major contradiction: capitalism *socialises* production, that is, it absorbs the majority of women, men, and children in its perpetual production of profit. But, capitalism also *privatises* the profit produced by the toil of the working class. It is this process that produces class power.

The bourgeoisie, the owners of the means to produce and appropriate wealth is the class in power. The working people, constituting the 99%, are the actual producer of the wealth, but constitute the subordinate class. The question, therefore, if we understand capitalist class formation in this dialectical way, is how should we envision a revolutionary project to dismantle these power relations?

If class was the only source of social inequality, then revolutionary projects would likely be less complicated. Societies are also divided along the lines of gender, race, sexuality, language, religion, nationality, and ethnicity, to name only a few historical cleavages. Even more significant is the interlocking of these contradictions in ways that both threaten and strengthen the (re)production of class power.

Although the trinity of race-gender-class appears in the literature, one strong tendency in recent years has been a ‘retreat from class’ and ‘descent into discourse’, identity, language, desire, or performativity. Today, more than ever, the exclusion of class analysis has obscured the ways in which the social and economic formation of capitalism draws the contours of the struggle for power. In the absence of class perspectives, race and gender theories (best represented in intersectional analysis) make some aspect of capital imperialism endurable but will not be able to bring an end to this nightmare.

Guilherme Leite Gonçalves

Class struggle means today what it has always meant since the rise of capitalism.

One must remember that in the last (and abruptly interrupted) chapter of Vol. III of Capital, Marx understands the three great classes of modern society – wage-labourers, capitalists and land-owners – as a result of the permanent pressure, inner to the development of capitalism, towards a separation between direct producers and means of production, favouring the latter becoming increasingly concentrated. Such pressure emerges in the violent expropriation of large human masses that find themselves forced to sell their labour-power, while the required resources for their survival are gradually turned into capital. Its side effect is the rise of landed property in favour of other (few) individuals.

If wage, profit and ground-rent distinguish the owners of labour power, capital and land, the contradiction between them presupposes the expropriating act. In the occurrence of the compulsory dispossession of livelihoods, the expropriated individuals feel obliged to fight for their physical survival, expropriators to value their capital, and rentiers to assert their right to extract income from their property. As these necessary relations develop, antagonisms also strengthen, which leads to a resurgence of the class struggle itself.

Financialisation is the main characteristic of this advanced stage of capitalism, when the accumulation baseline gives preference to the imperatives of property, increasingly associated with the reproduction of fictitious capital, to the detriment of direct productive revaluation. Capitalism thus becomes essentially rentier. Under such conditions, stockowners claim the rent owed to their property and, thereby, appropriate the increasing share of profits drawn from production.

At the same time, due to the tendency of capital concentration, capitalists are increasingly becoming investment groups associated with funds and trusts. Withdrawn from productive activities, they await comfortably for their gains, taking part of the surplus value created in the economy. If these players delegate the exploitation of wage labour to third parties, they cannot refrain from the production of the surplus that will be appropriated as rent. The result is well known since the 1980s: a decrease in the share of wages in the national income of most countries.

Financialisation releases capitalists from the drawbacks of productive accumulation: extracting surplus value from living force. At the same time, due to the consortium of competing capitals, it needs to enlarge extraction to remunerate such a large amount of concentrated capital. If something is new now, it must only be the pace and scale of expropriation. No matter how distant the force that might be expropriated is from capitalism, it remains as a living force and can rebel. Such risk, together with the aforementioned pace and scale, may explain the degree of political violence with fascist tendencies occurring today.

Still, this violence does not dismiss the use of alienation. On the contrary. In the context of fictitious capital hegemony, Marx has already warned that even capitalists start to recognise themselves as ‘workers’, but the struggle for recognition is only a formal opposition, a mystification of class by difference. Class struggle remains where and as it is.

Immanuel Ness

Today, class struggle is more relevant to global capitalism than at any time in its history. But it is weakened by the global division of labour and the absence of political organisation.

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Class struggle is significant to all societies yet does not manifest itself uniformly throughout the world. Socialists tend to subordinate all workers through a mechanical construction of ownership and control over means of production. While this elementary comprehension accurately describes class within a specific society, it does not address the concrete interests of workers which translate into forms of class struggle. Marxists from Marx to Mao employed the terms labour aristocracy and lumpen-proletariat to explain why workers advanced their immediate fractional interests and failed to congeal as a class. But, this does not mean that workers cannot overcome their proximate interests for broader forms of working class solidarity. On a global level, workers' interests were never uniform.

The degree of class antagonism depends on the concentration of capital in all industries, production, services, and beyond. Today, as in the past, class struggles cut across nations and are rooted in unequal exchange and global imperialism, privileging workers in the metropolitan centre. Consequently, class struggles have become far more prevalent today than in previous eras, as imperialist capitalist investment concentrates in the Global South. Thus, class struggle can be expected to be far more extensive and intensive in countries where the working class is in formation and exposed to the exigencies of the private market.

As Lenin argues, class struggle is not only a reflexive process expressed in the workplace but is highly dependent on the social and political organisation of the working class. In contemporary neoliberal capitalism, trade unions have become almost exclusively transactional organisations seeking concessions from capital rather than class-based actors representing all workers. Autonomist Marxists take comfort in the rise of independent labour organisations which challenge existing trade unions. However, it is unclear how small organisations can challenge the bureaucratic models that have become so remote even to their own members.

The reliance on workers' spontaneity is a utopian vision which denies practical gains. Autonomists draw succour from the fact that oppressed workers struggle against class oppression every day, which exposes an ever-present, disorganised class struggle under capitalism. But we must do more than acknowledge that that workers are still fighting. While autonomism and council communism provide an attractive alternative model for social organisation, they don't demonstrate that fledgling organisations can consolidate the working class.

Thus, presently, class struggle is unable to challenge monopoly capital and translate discrete forms of class struggle into a workers' political organisation. The absence of a communist international produces a chasm in global class solidarity and exposes the relative advantages of workers in countries in the imperialist core. It becomes far more difficult to construct class alliances between these privileged workers and the highly-exploited majority on the periphery. National chauvinism galvanises workers in advanced capitalist countries around the right to exploit workers in the Third World.

Demet ?ahende Dinler

Class struggle has a rich legacy: participatory and interactive methods of organising are disseminated with the efforts of progressive unions and their global federations; gender, social reproduction and race are no longer side issues which come 'after' class thanks to feminist, LGBT and anti-racist movements; our repertoire of tactics and strategies expands from building transnational solidarity networks in multinational companies to enabling new laws to make visible previously unrecognised types of labour, such as domestic work. Such thinking and practice remain geographically and sectorally very uneven and there is still a long way to go, yet their presence gives us courage and determination.

There are three areas which, I think, remain overlooked. First, we need a utopian vision of how the order of things can be different. For instance, workplace struggles may envisage how the very concept of work can be re-configured (in terms of content, form, space and time) to make it more pleasurable and less alienating. This requires the collaborative efforts of various categories of workers (manual labourers, technicians, industrial designers, engineers)

to imagine and implement, here and now, new products and patterns.

The Lucas Plan of the 1970s in the UK, which envisaged the production of socially useful products rather than serving the defence industry with a view to change the meaning of work, to blur the distinction between manual and intellectual, is an inspirational story in that regard. Such endeavours can engage with the current debates on post-work society to cancel the division between work and leisure. Put differently, class struggle today is a matter of alternative organisational design as much as mass mobilisation, winning campaigns, negotiating rights.

Second, our strategies are not solid enough to tackle the multiple temporalities of capital. Many battles are lost because we wait too long to react and join forces. We need to seriously take time to try and foresee the future and plan ahead in order not to be on the defensive side. We need to identify multiple pressure points at the right moment to destabilise the rival.

Third, it is worth putting more intellectual and practical energies into re-thinking/re-building the everyday life of our labour organisations. If some of the most promising labour movements rapidly fade after periods of uprising, we need to think about why this is the case. For instance, it is high time we took seriously the practices of suspicion, envy, blame and slander that are cultivated by specific institutional structures and undermine them in return. Class struggle is, thus, also about honestly facing up to and struggling against our established habits. We need organisations which arouse pleasure and curiosity for their members, understand and accommodate negative emotions, reward trust and reciprocity, and appeal to heterogeneous desires and aspirations.

Cenk Saraço?lu

A comprehensive answer to the question ‘what class struggle means today’ could be given by combining the definitions and formulations of class struggle at three levels of abstraction: a) at the level of the capitalist mode of production in general; b) at the level of contemporary capitalism (contemporary forms of capital accumulation); c) at the level of different social formations (in each national setting where contemporary capitalism takes divergent concrete forms).

The notion of class struggle at the level of ‘capitalist mode of production’ presupposes an antagonistic relationship between capitalists as the dominant class whose vision and interests predominantly structure the very outlines of the modern social life, and a working class as the privileged agent of an emancipatory transformation through the transcendence of capitalism. Class struggle at this level points to the antagonisms and confrontations that emanate from the universal logic of capitalism as a mode of production.

The notion of class struggle at the level of ‘contemporary capitalism’ points to how the composition of classes changes as capitalism takes different forms under different historical regimes of capital accumulation. At the current crisis-ridden neoliberal and global stage of capitalism, the composition of the working class is much more heterogeneous and fragmented than before, while the capitalist class is more decentred and impalpable. Class struggle under contemporary capitalism is the struggle of different segments of workers subjected to different forms of exploitation (from wage-workers in factories to temporary migrant farm workers, informally employed sweatshop workers or precarious urban white-collar workers) against capitalists. A vital question arises here: how is it possible to build a class bloc from such differentiated sections of society with different and even sometimes conflicting priorities, agendas and demands? This question can be only answered at the third, most concrete level of abstraction, the level of social formation.

The social formation, as the third level of abstraction, is the specific spatio-temporal context where labour-capital contradiction is actually ‘experienced’ and concretely observed. Because a system of exploitation could not be

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sustained without political and ideological domination, contemporary capitalism can take different forms across nations depending on the context-specific elements and mechanisms. This means that class struggle at the level of social formation is not only an economic but also a political and ideological struggle. At this level, class struggle means an unending search, in each conjuncture, for common ideological and political ground that would position and mobilise diverse sections of the working class against capital and its incarnations.

Combining these three levels of abstraction, my answer to the question would be as follows: 1) Class struggle today is still a struggle between capital and labour (mode of production); 2) Class struggle today is not a struggle between industrial proletariat and industrialists; but between a highly fragmented and heterogeneous working class and highly 'amorphous' capitalists (contemporary capitalism); 3) Class struggle is and has always been a political and ideological struggle, and the trajectory of class struggle today is dependent on the capacity of progressive social forces to fulfill the difficult task of interpellating different components of the working class under a common political and ideological agenda (social formation).

Justin Akers Chacón

Displaced peoples comprise a floating global population that numbers about a quarter billion. Economically dispossessed Mexicans comprise the single largest national share, with most moving north and into the US and reconstituting communities along agricultural corridors.

Many are indigenous people from southern Mexico. Once-sacred land guarantees, protected markets, and government subsidies – the last vestiges of the revolution-era Constitution – have been systematically liquidated in favour of foreign capital with the full implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement.

Carrying their political ideologies, class and ethnic affiliations, and collective experiences with them across the border, these indigenous workers have positioned themselves at the forefront of class struggle spanning the North American Pacific coast. With the additional burdens of a deadly militarised border zone, the threat of detention and deportation, and being linguistically and culturally marginalised, this generation is piecing together a militant, transnational farmworker movement from below.

In March 2015, 30,000 mostly itinerant and indigenous farmworkers from Oaxaca carried out one of the single largest agricultural strikes in Mexican history in the massive 50-mile agro-industrial complex in the San Quintán Valley of Baja California, Mexico. The target was a collection of corporate berry-growers called BerryMex, who produce for the US-based company Driscoll's Berries, the largest berry distributor in the world.

The *Alianza de Organizaciones Por La Justicia Social*, a network of grassroots groups, including indigenous networks, neighbourhood associations, and left-wing political parties, served as the organisational infrastructure for the strike mobilisation. Amidst the strike, workers blocked major transport hubs, had running battles with police during violent episodes of repression, and faced targeted arrests. The three-month shutdown disrupted berry markets across North America and forced the landowners and the Mexican government to the negotiating table.

The newly formed *Sindicato Independiente Nacional Democrático de Jornaleros Agrícolas* (SINDJA) ultimately won significant gains in the form of a government-brokered, 14-point labour agreement that set new benchmark standards for wages, benefits, and housing rights. Nevertheless, the growers and government immediately backtracked on full implementation of the accords, leading the union to call for an international boycott of Driscoll's Berries. Boycott campaigns against the purchase of berries are being conducted from Ensenada to Seattle. Meanwhile, SINDJA union-organised drives have extended into several other Mexican states.

The indigenous Mexican farmworker diaspora in Washington has taken on another Driscoll's supplier, Sakuma Brothers Farms. In 2013, 300 indigenous families formed a network among the larger migrant workforce, calling themselves Familias Unidas por la Justicia (FUJ). After painstaking organising efforts over four years, including successful boycotts, lawsuits, and walkouts over wages and working conditions; the FUJ constituted itself into an independent union and won a contract in 2017. It has established a new benchmark standards for pay, working conditions, and collective bargaining rights in agriculture in the state. Like in San Quint n, they are now spreading their model, showing a path of advance for transnational class struggle.

Mar a P a Lara

I think the best answer to that question must begin by realising that, historically, capitalism is not only a system of economy and social action, but also a set of social institutions. If we depart from here, one must clarify that, if the private accumulation of capital is in the hands of a few, the whole society is shaped by those same principles of capital accumulation that have ended up separating social reproduction from commodity production. Capitalism is a set of social, political and economic relations that impact on all of our practices, relations, and even imaginations.

So the answer is yes, we should conceive 'class' as the grammar of social conflicts. Classes are fundamental to understanding the conflicts of today, and there are many dimensions that can be thematised with this kind of grammar. Acknowledging this will allow us to understand that what has been institutionalised as 'the functional imperatives' of the so-called efficient economy is (and always has been) contested by those who are on the other side of the spectrum. And if capitalism is actually a way of life, or an institutional order, class conflicts are about all kinds of social and political relationships interconnected through the institutional orders of capitalism. Class struggle gives us an account of those conflicts that allows us to see how the structural struggles between market forces, the imperatives of social regulation, and struggles over social protection have been unleashed in the different historical stages of capitalism.

In my view, our most important concern should be to focus on how the concept of class has become intertwined with certain types of consumption and how consumers' needs are imagined, transformed, or constructed (through their dreams, desires, promises) by commodity producers. In accordance with our view and with growing literature on the subject about how class struggles reflect today's conflicts, we must pay attention to processes of imagining new possibilities for less consumerist societies. We need to reimagine a more comprehensive view of how market measures have impacted ecology and the radical separation of production from social reproduction, and how workers' relationships to their jobs have become so unstable and insecure that their future is precarious.

We also need to consider the 'under-classes': the people who have no work, or those who have lost their jobs and have no future, or those who cannot have a job because they have been displaced or left their countries due to violence or economic reasons. Marx thought about the concept of the 'lumpen-proletariat' in a way that focused on some of the negative connotations, since he thought that such people are or can be easily manipulated. He had a glimpse of how those people who have nothing in today's world can be used politically by the elites. These displaced people, who are 'persons without jobs, or papers, or studies', can be exploited in the informal markets. Or, in countries such as mine (Mexico), where they lack any kind of choice and are thus trapped in a void, they are more likely to be lured into working for the Cartels.

Terrell Carver

Class struggle is both a 'thing' and a perspective. Or in other words, the 'thing' doesn't emerge to observation unless the perspective tells you to look for it. Moreover the perspective is itself a historical one, that is, what could count as struggle has taken many different forms, much as Marx and Engels indicate in the famous opening lines of the Communist Manifesto (1848): 'Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and

journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another.' And they continue to sketch in a complicated picture: 'In the earlier epochs of history, we find almost everywhere a complicated arrangement of society into various orders, a manifold gradation of social rank. In ancient Rome we have patricians, knights, plebeians, slaves; in the Middle Ages, feudal lords, vassals, guild-masters, journeymen, apprentices, serfs; in almost all of these classes, again, subordinate gradations.'

Two important points emerge here. One is that there are competing accounts as to what is going on within and between these generally agreed historical categories, which are pretty much the ones through which people at the time described themselves. These competing explanations were typically religious ('the poor you will always have with you', so live with it) or organic ('society has just grown naturally in that way and can't be disturbed').

The second important point is that, as Marx and Engels say, this 'fight' is 'now hidden, now open.' Thus the people involved do not necessarily see the situation as a 'struggle' at all, nor do those describing and explaining the situation necessarily see it as a 'fight,' either. But conversely, at the time and now, some people involved have done the fighting and struggling, because they see it that way, even if their perspective is not 'officially' recorded.

Thus class struggle, then and now, is a political project! Having looked for struggles, readers will find classes – even if participants and commentators disagree.

Charles Umney

I suppose that 'class struggle' is the opposite of 'class compromise'. The latter is when societies create institutions (such as a welfare state or collective bargaining systems) intended to embed labour-capital relationships in some kind of stable, mutually-acceptable framework. Class struggle, then, is what you ought to do if you think these institutional compromises are generally unsustainable. There is ample evidence that capital in the UK and elsewhere does not want to be bound by these kinds of systems any more.

If we do accept the idea of class struggle, it means recognising where the battle lines are. It means totally rejecting artificial and counterproductive divisions between people who ultimately have common interests. For several years, politicians have sought to construct a self-serving and racially-loaded understanding of the 'traditional working class' through various arguments which are usually empirically wrong: for instance, that immigrants undermine 'native' workers' wages and security, or that the unemployed are a burden on those with jobs. Anyone who claims to be waging a class struggle through calling for new restrictions on immigration or tougher rules for welfare recipients is a charlatan.

When people take this conservative-class-warrior position they often make reference to things like labour market supply and demand. This is to miss the much larger point which has to be central to any concept of class struggle: we should be working to ensure that labour is not subject to the laws of supply and demand in the first place. This requires various things. A stronger and unconditional welfare system which means unemployment is no longer a life-ruining threat, alongside the decommodification of critical services like health, education and housing. It also means strengthening forms of trade unionism which mobilise new groups of workers in hitherto-unorganised areas, particularly among migrants and young people who are currently less represented by organised labour.

Finally, it also means ditching tired and misleading ways of talking about class; such as the necrotic cliché of 'traditional working class' versus 'liberal elites' which still has suffocating currency. Professionals and 'knowledge workers', for instance, are no longer sheltered from problems such as stagnating pay and conditions, insecure work, and the weakening of common resources like health and education. Everyone who depends on being able to sell their labour power in order to earn a living has a shared interest in fighting these things.

Raju J Das

The property-owning class engages in its struggle against the masses. This takes the form of various strategies of exploitation and dispossession and political-ideological subjugation. The response to this is the class-struggle-from-below, which is my focus. It involves struggle *against* capitalism's adverse *effects*. It includes trade-union struggle, the struggle against austerity and dispossession of small-scale producers, and the struggle against environmental damage (e.g. global warming). It also includes the fight for the defense of democratic rights, including of racial minorities, women, and victims of fascistic reaction. It includes the fight against imperialist assault on the South, in its economic, cultural and military forms.

The struggle for reforms is necessary as it can stop the conditions of the masses from getting worse. It can contribute to their politicisation. However, it can also remain satisfied with making capitalism slightly better (e.g. less 'neoliberal'). Ultimately, it can only produce limited benefits; and concessions granted today can be withdrawn tomorrow.

Therefore, workers must go beyond the struggle for reforms to seize state power. They must bring their struggle to its highest point: revolution. Revolution is necessary partly because the ruling class will not surrender its economic and political power in any other way (e.g. electoral majority). The proletariat must become the new ruling class: they must acquire political hegemony to expropriate capitalists and landowners.

Class struggle to seize power requires that the working class has its own party that is independent of (petty) bourgeois influences and is constituted by class-conscious workers of different socio-cultural backgrounds in terms of race, gender, etc. The working class is the most revolutionary class, but only potentially. Specific workers can be chauvinistic/nationalistic, racist, patriarchal, conservative, and reformist. So a party is needed to raise, through education and coordinated concrete struggles, the masses' level of consciousness to class consciousness proper – i.e. they must be conscious of the fact that *their* basic interests are fundamentally *incompatible* with those of the property-owning classes.

Class struggle must be permanent until all the exploiting propertied classes (pre-capitalist and capitalist; domestic and foreign; non-monopolies and monopolies) are dispossessed. Its ultimate aim is to abolish private property based on exploitation, and not to make it more tolerable. Class struggle has to eliminate the need for class struggle: it must eliminate the need for masses to constantly struggle for crumbs.

Class struggle may start locally. But to succeed, it must occur nationally, and internationally, given the global nature of capitalism and its law of value. Proletarian parties and groups who engage, and who must engage, in polemical-political struggles over differences of how to explain and change the world, must work with one another, and sometimes, with non-revolutionary-progressive (non-party) entities, on the basis of what is common to them all. Class struggle must be extra-electoral, without ignoring electoral struggle, and it must be as legal and non-violent as conditions allow.

To conclude, the masses (workers, in alliance with small-scale producers) must fight for democratic rights and for economic and ecological gains (as a part of, and within the framework of, the fight for socialism).

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