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Technology and Class Struggle

Wolfi Landstreicher

The developments in technology over the past sixty years—the nuclear industry, cybernetics and related information techniques, biotechnology and genetic engineering—have produced fundamental changes in the social terrain. The methods of exploitation and domination have changed, and for this reason old ideas about the nature of class and class struggle are not adequate for understanding the present situation. The workerism of the marxists and syndicalists can no longer even be imagined to offer anything useful in developing a revolutionary practice. But simply rejecting the concept of class is not a useful response to this situation either, because in so doing one loses an essential tool for understanding the present reality and how to attack it.

Exploitation not only continues, but has intensified sharply in the wake of the new technology. Cybernetics has permitted the decentralization of production, spreading small units of production across the social terrain. Automation has drastically reduced the number of production workers necessary for any particular manufacturing process. Cybernetics further creates methods for making money without producing anything real, thus allowing capital to expand itself without the expense of labor.

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Furthermore, the new technology demands a specialized knowledge that is not available for most people. This knowledge has come to be the real wealth of the ruling class in the present era. Under the old industrial system, one could look at class struggle as the struggle between workers and owners over the means of production. This no longer makes sense. As the new technology advances, the exploited find themselves driven into increasingly precarious positions. The old life-long skilled factory position has been replaced by day labor, service sector jobs, temporary work, unemployment, the black market, illegality, homelessness and prison. This precariousness guarantees that the wall created by the new technology between the exploiters and the exploited remains unbreachable.

But the nature of the technology itself places it beyond the reach of the exploited. Earlier industrial development had as its primary focus the invention of techniques for the mass manufacturing of standardized goods at low cost for high profit. These new technological developments are not so much aimed at the manufacturing of goods as at the development of means for increasingly thorough and widespread social control and for freeing profit from production. The nuclear industry requires not only specialized knowledge, but also high levels of security that place its development squarely under the control of the state and lead to a military structuring in keeping with its extreme usefulness to the military. Cybernetic technology's ability to process, record, gather and send information nearly instantaneously serves the needs of the state to document and monitor its subjects as well as its need to reduce the real knowledge of those it rules to bits of information-data-hoping, thus, to reduce the real capabilities for understanding of the exploited. Biotechnology gives the state and capital control over the most fundamental processes of life itself; allowing them to decide what sort of plants, animals and—in time—even human beings can exist.

Because these technologies require specialized knowledge and are developed for the purpose of increasing the control of the mas-

ters over the rest of humanity even in our daily lives, the exploited class can now best be understood as those excluded from this specialized knowledge and thus from real participation in the functioning of power. The master class is, thus, made up of those included in participation in the functioning of power and the real use of the specialized technological knowledge. Of course these are processes in course, and the borderlines between the included and excluded can, in some cases, be elusive as increasing numbers of people are proletarianized—losing whatever decision-making power over their own conditions of existence they may have had.

It is important to point out that although these new technologies are intended to give the masters control over the excluded and over the material wealth of the earth, they are themselves beyond any human beings control. Their vastness and the specialization they require combine with the unpredictability of the materials they act upon—atomic and sub-atomic particles, light waves, genes and chromosomes, etc.—to guarantee that no single human being can actually understand completely how they work. This adds a technological aspect to the already existing economic precariousness that most of us suffer from. However, this threat of technological disaster beyond any one's control also serves power in controlling the exploited—the fear of more Chernobyls, genetically engineered monsters or escaped laboratory-made diseases and the like move people to accept the rule of so-called experts who have proven their own limits over and over again. Furthermore, the state—that is responsible for every one of these technological developments through its military—is able to present itself as a check against rampant corporate “abuse” of this technology. So this monstrous, lumbering, uncontrollable juggernaut serves the exploiters very well in maintaining their control over the rest of the population. And what need have they to worry about the possible disasters when their wealth and power has most certainly provided them with contingency plans for their own protection?

Thus, the new technology and the new conditions of exclusion and precariousness it imposes on the exploited undermine the old dream of expropriation of the means of production. This technology—controlling and out of control— cannot serve any truly human purpose and has no place in the development of a world of individuals free to create their lives as they desire. So the illusory utopias of the syndicalists and marxists are of no use to us now. But were they ever? The new technological developments specifically center around control, but all industrial development has taken the necessity of controlling the exploited into account. The factory was created in order to bring producers under one roof to better regulate their activities; the production line mechanized this regulation; every new technological advance in the workings of the factory brought the time and motions of the worker further under control. Thus, the idea that workers could liberate themselves by taking over the means of production has always been a delusion. It was an understandable delusion when technological processes had the manufacture of goods as their primary aim. Now that their primary aim is so clearly social control, the nature of our real struggle should be clear: the destruction of all systems of control—thus of the state, capital and their technological system, the end of our proletarianized condition and the creation of ourselves as free individuals capable of determining how we will live ourselves. Against this technology our best weapon is that which the exploited have used since the beginning of the industrial era: **sabotage**.