

More proletariat and fewer obituaries

from the end of the working class to its reconstruction

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Introduction

For decades, some critical thinkers have argued that the proletariat has ceased to occupy the historical position it held during the long cycle of the labour movement, roughly from the mid-19th century until the crisis of Fordist capitalism in the 1970s. The deindustrialisation of Western economies, the fragmentation of labour, the expansion of the service sector, the precarisation of employment, the individualisation of labour relations, and the increasing integration of social life into the logic of consumption have led some to question the relevance of class politics as a strategic horizon for emancipation.

Within libertarian circles, this debate is particularly intense. Authors such as Tomás Ibáñez and Miquel Amorós argue that the profound transformations of capitalism have eroded the historical conditions that made the classical labour movement possible. The disappearance of working-class culture, the institutional integration of trade unions, the dissolution of the old work and neighbourhood communities, and the increasing commercialisation of life have deprived the proletariat of the political centrality it held for over a century. The issue is no longer simply the defeat of certain organisations, but the exhaustion of a historical cycle in which the working class was able to constitute itself as a revolutionary subject.

This diagnosis contains elements that are difficult to dispute. It is evident that contemporary capitalism has profoundly transformed the conditions of production, the composition of wage labour, and the traditional forms of working-class organisation. It also seems undeniable that the historical experiences of the labour movement—social democrats, communists, council workers, revolutionary syndicalists, and anarchists—belong to a historical context that cannot be mechanically reproduced. Anyone who attempts to reconstruct the organisational forms of the 20th century while ignoring the mutations of global capitalism will inevitably fall into anachronism.

However, these observations do not necessarily lead to the conclusion that the proletariat has ceased to be the potential subject of revolutionary transformation. There is a decisive difference between recognising a historical defeat and asserting a historical impossibility. The fact that the political forms through which the proletariat acted during a given period have entered into crisis does not imply that the social relations that made their emergence possible have disappeared. Even less does it authorise the conclusion that the contradiction between capital and labour has lost its structuring character within contemporary capitalism.

The hypothesis guiding this article is precisely the opposite. The global reorganisation of capitalism that began in the 1970s has not eliminated the material foundation of the proletariat, but rather transformed and expanded it on a scale previously unseen. The relative deindustrialisation of Europe and North America has coincided with an extraordinary expansion of wage labour in Asia, Latin America, Africa, and Eastern Europe; the fragmentation of production processes has been accompanied by increasingly intense integration into the global market; and the diversification of employment forms has not reduced wage dependency, but rather extended it to new sectors of the population.

It is crucial to distinguish between two levels: the crisis of class consciousness, workers' organisations, and historical forms of proletarian politics, on the one hand, and, on the other, the persistence of objective conditions that make possible the existence of a class defined by the need to sell its labour power in order to live.

The purpose of this work, therefore, is not to deny the depth of the defeat suffered by the workers' movement in recent decades, nor to idealise forms of organisation whose crisis is evident. Nor does it seek to defend an essentialist conception of the proletariat as the predestined subject of history. Its objective is more limited, but also more precise: to examine whether the transformations experienced by capitalism truly justify the conclusion that the working class has definitively lost all revolutionary potential, or whether, on the contrary, the crisis primarily affects the historical forms of its organisation and not the structural position it continues to occupy within the relations of production.

Answering this question requires shifting the analysis from the restricted space of Western societies to the realities of existing global capitalism. Only from this perspective is it possible to assess the extent to which the planetary expansion of wage labour, new international migrations, the reorganisation of global production chains, and the emergence of new forms of exploitation modify—or confirm—the classical hypothesis that the contradiction between capital and labour continues to constitute the fundamental axis of capitalist societies.

Late-stage capitalism, obsolete in its promise of general well-being, clings to survival through a drift toward a war economy. When the profitability of civilian production dwindles, cycles of military spending, security prioritisation, and permanent exceptionalism are reactivated, disciplining society and reshaping public priorities. This regime, criminal in its effects, externalises costs—environmental, human, and democratic—while transforming fear and conflict into new niches for accumulation. In this context, the precarisation of labour and the dissolution of the proletariat's role as a political subject are not systemic failures, but rather conditions of possibility for a model that requires a readily available, disorganised, and surveilled population, at the service of a machine that produces value through destruction.

The proletariat as a social relation, not as a historical figure.

The debate on the relevance of the proletariat usually begins with the changes in contemporary capitalism and then draws sociological conclusions. It is important, however, to first define the concept: the proletariat is not a particular historical figure—the Fordist factory worker—but rather a position within the social relations of production.

From this perspective, it is significant that many theories on the crisis of the proletariat take as their point of reference a very specific historical figure: the industrial worker, concentrated in large factories, organised in unions, living in relatively homogeneous working-class neighbourhoods, and possessing a collective culture built over more than a century of social struggles. This figure existed and played a decisive role in the history of the European labour movement. But identifying it with the proletariat as such means transforming a specific historical experience into a universal definition.

Marx never proceeded in that way. Throughout *Capital*, the proletarian condition is not characterised by a trade, a branch of industry, or a specific form of work organisation. What defines the proletarian is their position within the social relations of production. The worker is a proletarian because they lack the means to produce and reproduce their existence and, therefore, are forced to sell their labour power to the owner of capital. This definition possesses a sufficient degree of abstraction to encompass extraordinarily diverse forms of work and, precisely for this reason, explains capitalism's enormous capacity to adapt to changing historical contexts.

The distinction is not a simple terminological issue. All subsequent interpretation depends on it. If the proletariat is identified with the large industrial working class that emerged during Fordist capitalism, it is relatively easy to conclude that we are now witnessing its decline. If, on the other hand, the proletariat is understood as a social relation determined by wage dependence and the expropriation of the means of production, then the issue changes completely. The question is no longer whether the old figure of the industrial worker remains the majority, but whether the development of capitalism has reduced or increased the number of people whose existence depends on the sale of their labour power.

The answer seems quite clear. Over the last five decades, capitalism has experienced an extraordinary expansion of wage labour. This is not because it has improved the living conditions of workers, but because it has incorporated entire regions of the planet, previously partially excluded from market production, into the system. The accelerated urbanisation process that has accompanied economic globalisation is probably the greatest proletarianisation movement in all of history.

It is worth pausing for a moment to consider this aspect, because it is often obscured by an overly focused view of the European experience. Since the late 1970s, hundreds of millions of peasants have left rural economies to join capitalist production. China's industrialisation is the best-known example, but not the only one. Similar processes, although less intense, can be observed in Vietnam, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Mexico, and Ethiopia. In all these cases, we witness the formation of enormous concentrations of wage labourers whose social existence corresponds precisely to the classic definition of the proletariat.

What disappears, therefore, is not the proletariat, but a specific industrial geography. Production relocation is often interpreted from a European perspective as a phenomenon of deindustrialisation, when in reality it constitutes an international redistribution of production. Factories that closed in the north of the continent reappeared, often expanded, in the Pearl River Delta, in China's special economic zones, in the industrial corridors of Southeast Asia, or in Central American maquiladoras. Capital abandoned some territories to establish itself in others, but it continued to depend on wage labour as an indispensable condition for its valorisation.

This geographical shift has important consequences for social theory. If the analysis remains confined within European borders, the impression that the proletariat is vanishing is understandable. The old working-class neighbourhoods disappear, large factories reduce their workforce, unions lose members, and industrial employment gives way to service sector activities. However, this picture changes radically when the frame of observation ceases to be national or continental and becomes global. What then appears is not a reduction of the working class, but its extraordinary expansion, accompanied by a profound reorganisation of the international division of labour.

At this point, an important distinction is necessary. Recognising that the proletariat has increased numerically does not mean denying that the conditions under which it can constitute itself as a political subject have changed. It would be absurd to ignore that fragmentation of manufacturing, job insecurity, the individualisation of labour relations, and territorial dispersion greatly hinder the construction of stable organisations and collective identities comparable to those that characterised the classical labour movement. But precisely for this reason, it is necessary to carefully distinguish between the objective existence of a class and the historical forms that its political organisation adopts.

The confusion between these two levels has frequently accompanied discussions in recent decades. Where the old workers' organisations disappear, there is a tendency to conclude that the class that made them possible has also disappeared. However, the relationship can be formulated in exactly the opposite way. Perhaps what has entered into crisis is not the proletariat, but the organisational forms inherited from a particular phase of capitalist development. If this hypothesis were correct, the political problem would no longer consist of finding a new revolutionary subject, but would instead become understanding how a class that continues to exist under profoundly modified conditions can reorganise itself.

This question leads us directly to the heart of the debate. Because, in reality, the discussion doesn't revolve solely around the sociology of contemporary work. What's at stake is the very interpretation of the historical defeat suffered by the labour movement in recent decades. And it is precisely here that Ibáñez and Amorós's theses, in my opinion, reveal their main limitations.

The defeat of the labour movement and the illusion of its disappearance

The issue takes on a different dimension when we move beyond solely considering the evolution of wage labour and examine the historical trajectory of the labour movement. It is here, perhaps, that the origin of the pessimistic diagnosis that pervades much of contemporary critical thought likely lies. For it is difficult to deny that the organisations that for more than a century articulated the political experience of the working class are undergoing a profound crisis. Major unions have become institutionalised, workers' parties have long since abandoned any vision of social transformation, the proletarian culture that characterised vast industrial areas has practically disappeared, and the successive defeats suffered since the late 1970s have weakened confidence in the capacity of social conflict to alter the course of capitalism.

All of this constitutes a historical fact that no serious interpretation can ignore. However, acknowledging this defeat does not necessarily compel us to accept the conclusions that are frequently drawn from it. Between recognising a political defeat and asserting that the proletariat has ceased to occupy a central place in capitalism, there is an argumentative leap that is rarely adequately justified.

Perhaps it's worth recalling a basic truth. Social classes don't disappear simply because they are defeated. If that were the case, we would have to conclude that the bourgeoisie ceased to exist every time it lost political power in a revolutionary process, or that the aristocracy vanished immediately after liberal revolutions. Classes are not defined by the success or failure of their organisations, but by the position they occupy within the social relations of production. Defeats modify the balance of power, destroy institutions, interrupt political traditions, and even profoundly alter the collective consciousness, but they do not, in themselves, transform the fundamental structure of social relations.

This observation is particularly relevant when analysing the evolution of capitalism since the 1970s. The neoliberal offensive did not consist solely of a series of economic reforms. It was, above all, a massive political operation aimed at breaking the power accumulated by the labour movement during the period following the Second World War. The defeats of the British miners, the industrial restructuring across much of Europe, the deregulation of the labour market, the offshoring of production, and the growing subservience of the economy to finance were not

independent processes. They formed part of a strategy to reorganise capitalism, the objective of which was precisely to weaken the bargaining power and resistance of the working class.

It is paradoxical that the success of this offensive has sometimes been interpreted as proof that the proletariat has ceased to exist or has lost all historical relevance. In reality, the exact opposite argument could be made. If capital deployed such an effort to transform the organisation of labour, shift production to other regions of the world, fragment workforces, and make employment more precarious, it was precisely because it continued to consider worker concentration as one of the main limitations to its accumulation process. The reorganisation of capitalism does not demonstrate the disappearance of the conflict between capital and labour; it constitutes a response to that conflict.

At this point, it is worth pausing for a moment to consider the implications of the very concept of capitalist reorganisation. Capitalism does not continually modify its modes of production simply out of a desire for technological innovation. Each major transformation responds, at least in part, to the need to overcome obstacles that arose during the previous cycle of accumulation. Mechanisation responded to the need to increase productivity; Fordism made it possible to organise mass production; offshoring facilitated the reduction of labour costs; global logistics made it possible to coordinate geographically dispersed production processes. None of these transformations eliminates wage labour. They all seek to reorganise it in a way that is more favourable to capital accumulation.

Perhaps for this reason, it is more appropriate to speak of a crisis of the historical forms of the labour movement than of a crisis of the proletariat as a class. The organisations that arose around large-scale Fordist industry responded to very specific conditions: relative job stability, the concentration of thousands of workers in the same production space, continuity of labour relations, and the existence of relatively cohesive working-class communities. When these conditions disappear or are profoundly altered, the inherited organisational forms cease to function with the same effectiveness. But it does not follow from this that the class whose existence gave rise to these organisations disappears.

History offers numerous examples of this difference. The revolutionary syndicalism of the early 20th century was not identical to English Chartism, nor did Chartism coincide with the forms of artisanal organisation prior to the Industrial Revolution. Each transformation of capitalism produced new forms of conflict and demanded new organisational responses. No one would have concluded, therefore, that the working class ceased to exist each time one of these historical forms entered into crisis. It is strange that such a conclusion is accepted so easily today.

All of this compels us to reconsider the initial question. Perhaps the pertinent question is not whether the proletariat remains identical to the one that led the great workers' struggles of the 20th century. Clearly, it does not. Nor does contemporary capitalism resemble the capitalism analysed by Marx in Victorian England. The real question is whether the transformations experienced during the last few decades have altered the fundamental relationship between capital and labour or whether, on the contrary, they have merely modified the forms under which that relationship continues to reproduce itself.

Answering this question requires abandoning a Eurocentric perspective and examining the development of capitalism as a global system. Only then is it possible to assess to what extent the apparent disappearance of the proletariat constitutes a real phenomenon or, rather, a perspective effect derived from observing only one part of the process. ****The class does not die: capital rebuilds it.**

However, recognising the depth of this transformation does not compel us to conclude that the very possibility of class politics has disappeared. Rather, it means that the conditions under which such politics must be remade are radically different from those that existed for much of the 20th century. This difference is important because it shifts the focus of the problem. It is no longer a question of whether the proletariat exists or not, but of understanding why an objectively larger class finds it so difficult to recognise itself as such and to establish stable forms of organisation.

In reality, this question should not be surprising. The history of capitalism can be read, to a large extent, as a history of the efforts made by capital to prevent the association imposed in the production process from transforming into political collaboration against capital itself. Every major advance of the workers' movement has been followed by attempts to reorganise production in such a way as to hinder new forms of solidarity. The introduction of machinery, the scientific division of labour, decentralisation of production, automation, outsourcing, and the digital platform economy do not respond solely to technical requirements. They also constitute forms of work organisation that modify the ability of workers to act collectively.

From this perspective, the contemporary fragmentation of labour takes on a different meaning. It does not express the end of the contradiction between capital and labour, but rather a specific way of managing it. Capital does not fragment labour because it has ceased to be combative; it fragments it precisely because it remains so. The dispersion of workforces, the proliferation of subcontracting companies, temporary contracts, and the individualisation of labour relations reduce the bargaining power of workers and hinder the construction of collective identities. Fragmentation does not constitute proof that the proletariat has disappeared, but rather a strategy of domination over a proletariat whose potential capacity for resistance continues to be perceived as a problem by capital itself.

At this point, a difference in approach becomes clear, one that runs throughout the entire debate. Where some analyses view the fragmentation of labour as the death certificate of the proletariat, it could be interpreted, on the contrary, as a historical response of capitalism to the persistence of class conflict. In the first case, the conclusion is inevitably pessimistic: with the subject gone, only scattered resistance and partial struggles remain. In the second, the problem takes on a very different character. The issue ceases to be the non-existence of the class and becomes the search for new forms of organisation capable of responding to the conditions created by capitalist restructuring.

This difference is not merely theoretical. It directly affects political practice. The categories used to interpret reality also condition the possibilities considered open. If one starts from the premise that the proletariat definitively belongs to the past, it is logical to direct attention toward other social actors and abandon the perspective of class politics. If, on the contrary, one understands that the working class continues to constitute the material foundation of contemporary capitalism, albeit profoundly transformed, the strategic question changes completely. The challenge no longer consists of replacing the proletariat with new historical subjects or actors, but rather in understanding how a collective consciousness can be rebuilt where capital has done everything possible to prevent it.

This observation allows us to return, finally, to the article's starting point. The decisive issue is not denying the profound transformations undergone by capitalism since the 1970s. These transformations are real and have radically altered the social landscape upon which the classical labour movement operated. What is debatable is turning these changes into proof that the fundamental relations of capitalism have ceased to exist. Because, precisely when wage labour

reaches an unprecedented global extent, declaring the category of proletariat exhausted seems to describe less the objective reality of capitalism than the historical experience of a political defeat whose importance no one should underestimate, but whose explanation cannot be sought in the supposed disappearance of the class that has suffered it.

This hypothesis is not merely abstract. The experiences of workers' autonomy in Italy between the late 1960s and 1970s—from the “hot autumn” to diffuse self-organisation in factories and communities—and the assembly-based and anarcho-syndicalist cycles in Spain during the Transition showed that the association imposed in production can become political participation without party mediation, through grassroots organisation in workshops, neighbourhoods, and supply chains.

The political consequences of this diagnosis

Up to this point, it has been argued that the transformations experienced by capitalism since the 1970s do not justify speaking of the disappearance of the proletariat as a social class. The global expansion of wage labour, the geographical reorganisation of production, and the persistence of the capital-labour relationship seem to point, rather, in the opposite direction. However, the importance of this discussion does not lie solely in a matter of conceptual accuracy. What is truly relevant are the political consequences that derive from one diagnosis or another.

Theoretical categories are never neutral. They are not mere descriptive tools, but rather ways of ordering historical experience and, therefore, of defining the horizon of what is politically possible. When the way of understanding a social reality changes, the strategies considered reasonable for intervening in it also change. In this sense, the discussion about the proletariat extends far beyond the field of sociology and is situated squarely within that of political theory.

If we accept that the proletariat has ceased to play a structural role in contemporary capitalism, the logical consequence is to abandon any strategy based on class organisation. Emancipation then ceases to be conceived as the result of a conflict arising from the relations of production themselves and becomes dependent on a plurality of resistances whose articulation always appears as an open problem. Revolutionary politics thus loses the foothold that had historically guided the workers' movement and tends to shift toward a multiplicity of partial struggles, undoubtedly valuable in themselves, but whose convergence no longer finds an evident material basis.

This is not to question the legitimacy or importance of these struggles. Feminism, environmentalism, anti-racist mobilisations, housing conflicts, and the defense of public services express real contradictions of contemporary capitalism and have significantly enriched the horizon of social critique. The problem arises when these struggles are conceived as substitutes for the conflict between capital and labour, and not as specific dimensions of a society whose structure continues to be organised around the process of capital accumulation.

In reality, capitalism is not simply a sum of independent forms of domination. The exploitation of labour remains the mechanism through which the entire system reproduces itself. This does not mean that all forms of oppression can be mechanically reduced to economic exploitation, but it does imply recognising that the accumulation of capital continues to organise the space within which these forms acquire their concrete historical expressions. Ignoring this relationship risks

analysing the various manifestations of domination as if they existed independently of the mode of production that shapes them.

Perhaps this is one of the main differences between a critique of capitalism and a critique of certain consequences of capitalism. The former attempts to understand the logic that organises all social relations; the latter risks limiting itself to combating some of its most visible effects without grasping the underlying principle. The problem, therefore, lies not in broadening the scope of emancipatory struggles, but in preventing this broadening from dissolving the analysis of class relations into a plurality of disconnected conflicts.

From this perspective, the theoretical shift that can be observed in a part of libertarian thought during recent decades acquires a particular meaning. The crisis of the traditional labour movement has fostered an understandable distrust towards the organisational forms inherited from the 20th century. This distrust has stimulated a constant search for new subjects, new practices and new modalities of political intervention. However, sometimes this search seems to have been accompanied by a progressive distancing from the analysis of production relations. The critique of work has ended up replacing the critique of capital, and reflection on the cultural transformations of capitalism has taken the place that previously belonged to the study of its economic structure.

It is still paradoxical that this displacement occurs precisely when capital reaches a degree of concentration and centralisation unknown until now. Never have large corporations accumulated so much economic power, never have production chains acquired such a global dimension and never has wage dependency affected such a large part of the world's population. Under these conditions, renouncing class analysis is equivalent, in a certain way, to accepting as definitive one of the main ideological victories of neoliberalism: **the idea that capitalism has stopped organising society around the conflict between those who own the means of production and those who only possess their ability to work.**

It seems no coincidence that this interpretation spread precisely after the historic defeat suffered by the Western labour movement. Every major defeat inevitably produces a crisis of the categories with which the vanquished had interpreted the world. The history of revolutionary thought offers numerous examples of this phenomenon. After every great failure, the temptation arises to attribute the defeat not to the historical correlation of forces, but to the inadequacy of the very subject that perpetrated it. However, such an explanation transforms a historical event into a supposed structural necessity and turns a contingent defeat into a permanent theoretical conclusion.

Perhaps this is the point at which a final reflection is warranted. No social class is guaranteed a historical mission beforehand. The existence of the proletariat does not in itself ensure revolution, just as the existence of the bourgeoisie did not automatically guarantee the triumph of liberal revolutions. History knows no providential agents. But recognising this fact does not oblige us to deny that certain classes occupy structural positions from which they can challenge the existing order. Revolutionary capacity does not arise from a metaphysical essence attributed to the proletariat, but from the objective contradiction that pits capital against those who produce social wealth and yet remain separated from the means that make it possible.

Therefore, the central problem of our time is not finding a subject to replace the proletariat, but understanding the concrete ways in which the 21st-century proletariat can rebuild its capacity for collective action. The strategic question has not changed as much as is sometimes claimed. What has changed are the historical conditions in which that strategy must be developed.

International migrations and the production of a new global proletariat

There is one phenomenon that, in itself, is enough to call into question the theories about the supposed disappearance of the proletariat: the large-scale international migrations of workers that characterise contemporary capitalism. If the proletariat had ceased to be the foundation of the economic system, it would be difficult to explain why hundreds of millions of people leave their countries to join, almost always under the most precarious conditions, the labour markets of the most developed economies or the new centres of accumulation.

Current migrations are not a marginal phenomenon nor a mere humanitarian consequence of wars or natural disasters. They are part of the very functioning of global capitalism. The free movement of goods, capital, and investments coexists with strict control over the mobility of the workforce. This contradiction is not accidental. Capital needs mobile workers, but not necessarily workers with rights. The existence of a large mass of migrant population subjected to permanent legal insecurity constitutes one of the fundamental mechanisms through which wages are pressured downwards and the bargaining power of the working class as a whole is weakened.

Since the late 20th century, Western Europe, the United States, and Canada have received successive waves of migration from Latin America, the Maghreb, sub-Saharan Africa, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. These workers are predominantly concentrated in sectors characterised by high labour intensity, low wages, and limited labour protections: intensive agriculture, construction, hospitality, cleaning, care work, home delivery, logistics, domestic work, and certain branches of the food and manufacturing industries.

The choice of these sectors is not due to cultural preference or a supposed lack of skills. It stems from the structural position that capitalism assigns to a workforce whose legal vulnerability facilitates far more intense forms of exploitation than those endured by other workers. Administrative irregularity, the dependence of residence permits on employment contracts, the constant fear of deportation, and the ever-present threat of unemployment make migrant workers a particularly disciplined workforce.

In this sense, the figure of the undocumented worker represents one of the most complete expressions of the contemporary proletariat. In many cases, they lack not only ownership of the means of production, but even the most basic civil rights that allow them to negotiate the sale of their labour power on minimally equal terms. Their situation reveals with particular clarity the inherent asymmetry of the wage relationship under capitalism.

The United States offers a particularly significant example. Millions of workers from Mexico, Central America, and other Latin American countries sustain entire sectors of agriculture, construction, restaurants, and the meatpacking industry. However, these same workers live under the constant threat of deportation. Periodic campaigns against irregular immigration, the militarisation of the border with Mexico, police raids, and the tightening of immigration laws do not eliminate this workforce. On the contrary, they contribute to maintaining it in a vulnerable situation that directly benefits numerous business sectors. The criminalisation of immigrants thus fulfils an economic as well as a political function: producing easily exploitable workers through the constant fear of losing the very right to remain in the country.

A similar logic can be observed across much of Europe. The European Union's external borders have become increasingly militarised, while numerous economic sectors are structurally

dependent on migrant labour. Intensive agriculture in southern Spain and Italy, greenhouses, fruit picking, construction, domestic work, and care for dependent individuals could hardly be sustained without that workforce from Africa, Latin America, Eastern Europe, or Asia.

The contradiction is evident. The same states that build walls, outsource border control, and develop policies of persecution against irregular immigration simultaneously need to incorporate hundreds of thousands of workers to sustain entire sectors of their economies. Immigration is officially presented as a security issue, while in reality it functions as an essential component of the labour market.

The situation is even more extreme in the Persian Gulf countries. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and Bahrain have built a significant portion of their economic growth on the labour of millions of migrants from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka. For decades, the sponsorship system known as *kafala* legally subordinated workers to their employers to the point of preventing them from freely changing jobs or leaving the country without authorisation. Although some states have introduced partial reforms in recent years, numerous international organisations and unions continue to document gruelling workdays, unpaid wages, confiscation of passports, substandard housing, and severe restrictions on rights that place many workers in conditions akin to debt bondage or contemporary forms of forced labour.

The preparations for the Qatar World Cup brought this reality into the international spotlight. Thousands of migrant workers participated in the construction of stadiums, roads, subway lines, and major infrastructure projects under extremely harsh conditions. What is relevant to the argument developed here is not only the seriousness of these abuses, but what they reveal about the functioning of global capitalism: the great works of the 21st century continue to rest on enormous masses of workers deprived of the effective capacity to negotiate the conditions of sale of their labour power.

Asian migrations offer another example of this same dynamic. Millions of workers move each year from rural areas of China to the major industrial centres on the coast; from Indonesia, the Philippines, or Vietnam to the more developed economies of East Asia; or from Bangladesh and Nepal to the oil monarchies of the Gulf. In all these cases, the movability of labour is a central element of contemporary capitalist accumulation.

Nor can we forget the situation of the Palestinian people. Occupation, territorial fragmentation, and the systematic destruction of a large part of the Palestinian economy have produced, for decades, a mass of workers deeply dependent on the Israeli labour market or on precarious employment in the occupied territories. The deprivation of national rights is combined here with intense economic subordination, demonstrating once again how political domination and labour exploitation can reinforce each other.

Taken together, these processes allow us to understand that contemporary capitalism not only continually reproduces new forms of the proletariat, but also internationalises them. The mass mobility of workers constitutes a structural condition of the accumulation process. Wherever capital needs to reduce labour costs, it finds in the migrant population a particularly vulnerable workforce whose legal precarity facilitates intensified forms of exploitation.

Therefore, international migrations do not disprove the theory of social division into antagonistic classes; they confirm it with particular force. Capitalism is not replacing wage labour with another form of social organisation. It is expanding the global labour market, continually incor-

porating new contingents of workers and deliberately producing situations of legal inequality that allow for an increased rate of exploitation.

The figure of the undocumented migrant, the seasonal farm worker, the foreign domestic worker, the digital platform delivery driver, the Asian construction worker, or the Palestinian worker subjected to occupation express perhaps better than any other the proletarian condition of the 21st century. They do not represent an exception to the normal functioning of capitalism; they represent one of its most characteristic manifestations. Their existence constitutes, precisely for this reason, one of the most solid empirical refutations of the thesis that the proletariat has disappeared. If global capitalism demonstrates anything, it is exactly the opposite: it has never before needed to mobilise, displace, and exploit such an immense mass of wage labourers on a planetary scale.

Action program: twelve lines for the recomposition of the proletariat

If the proletariat has not disappeared, but rather been dispersed, made precarious, and internationalised, the strategic question is how to rebuild its capacity for autonomous organisation. This requires abandoning both nostalgia for past forms and the defeatist resignation that declares all class politics impossible. There is no single model, but some fundamental guidelines can be identified.

1. Rebuilding proletarian sociability.

The first task is to recover spaces for encounter, debate, and solidarity in neighbourhoods, workplaces, educational institutions, and communities. Without permanent social relations, there is no collective consciousness, and without this, no organisation can withstand capital.

2. Organise where the majority of workers are employed today.

The new workers' movement must prioritise its establishment in logistics, transportation, digital platforms, healthcare, education, hospitality, retail, care work, intensive agriculture, industrial subcontracting, and large distribution centres. Organisation must follow the actual movement of capital.

3. Overcome labour fragmentation.

The division between permanent and temporary workers, nationals and migrants, salaried and bogus self-employed workers, public and private sector employees, constitutes one of the main instruments of corporate control. Class organisation must be rebuilt on shared material reality, not on administrative categories imposed by the market or the state.

4. Fully integrate the migrant proletariat.

Equal labour, social, union, and political rights for native and migrant workers are essential to prevent capital from using legal inequality as a permanent mechanism for wage reduction and the imposition of collective discipline.

5. Revive direct action unionism.

Unionism must once again become a tool for everyday struggle, not an apparatus of institutional management. The assembly, the recall of delegates, federalism, autonomy from the state, and direct action remain fully valid principles.

6. Build our own mutual support institutions.

Strength funds, consumer cooperatives, labour advisory services, athaeneums, community libraries, care networks, cultural centres, community schools, and community spaces constitute the essential material infrastructure for sustaining protracted struggles and strengthening class autonomy.

7. Coordinate struggles internationally.

Faced with globally organised capital, purely national responses are insufficient. Cooperation among workers in the same supply or production chain, international campaigns, and effective solidarity must become permanent practices.

8. Link social struggles without diluting the class question.

The defence of housing, public healthcare, education, feminism, social ecology, anti-racism, and opposition to militarism are all part of the same historical conflict when they are articulated around a critique of capitalism, and not as isolated demands.

9. Reclaim political education and historical memory.

Amnesia is one of neoliberalism's main victories. It is essential to rebuild a critical culture through ongoing education, the study of the historical experiences of the labour and libertarian movements, and the intergenerational transmission of organisational knowledge.

10. Combat the war economy and authoritarianism.

Increasing militarisation, rising defence spending, the expansion of surveillance mechanisms, and the normalisation of states of emergency are also instruments designed to discipline labour. Opposition to militarism and the war economy is an inseparable part of the struggle against capital. Only class warfare can counter the wars of capital.

11. Democratise production and social reproduction.

The libertarian perspective cannot be limited to improving the conditions for selling labour power. It must be oriented toward direct control of production by those who work, the collective management of common goods, the socialisation of care work, and the development of cooperative and federal forms of economic organisation.

12. Building popular power from below.

The strategic objective is not to conquer the State in order to administer capitalism with other managers, but to develop a growing network of autonomous organisations capable of challenging capital for economic, social, cultural, and political functions. Self-organisation, cooperativism, federalism, direct democracy, and mutual aid are not merely ethical principles; they also represent the material conditions for a revolutionary transformation of society.

These twelve guidelines do not constitute a closed program or an exhaustive catalogue of demands. They aim to point to a strategic direction. Twenty-first-century capitalism has profoundly altered the composition of the proletariat, but it has not eliminated **the fundamental contradiction between those who own the means of production and those who only possess their capacity to work**. If this contradiction continues to structure society, the task of the libertarian movement is not to seek an alternative subject, but to contribute to the conscious, autonomous, federal, and internationalist recomposition of the working class. Less obituaries and more organisation.

Conclusions: The defeat of the workers' movement and the limits of defeatism

The journey undertaken throughout these pages leads to a conclusion that, while simple in its formulation, has significant theoretical and political consequences. The profound transformations experienced by capitalism since the 1970s do not, in themselves, justify concluding that the proletariat has ceased to be the potential subject of revolutionary transformation. What these transformations reveal is, above all, the crisis of the historical forms through which the working class managed to organise itself during the long cycle of the workers' movement.

This is a distinction that should be carefully preserved. The defeat of the European labour movement, the disintegration of traditional working-class culture, the institutional integration of much of the trade union movement, the fragmentation of production processes, and the increasing individualisation of social relations are all well-documented historical facts. To deny them would be to ignore half a century of capitalist evolution. However, this observation does not necessarily imply that the social relations that made the emergence of the proletariat as a class possible have disappeared, nor, much less, that all possibility of a politics based on the conflict between capital and labour has been extinguished.

This is precisely where the disagreement between this article and a segment of contemporary libertarian thought lies. Authors such as Tomás Ibáñez and Miquel Amorós have described with remarkable clarity the depth of the defeat suffered by the labour movement and capitalism's capacity to dismantle the forms of sociability that nurtured class consciousness. Their analyses contain valuable observations on the commodification of daily life, the crisis of traditional organisations, the disappearance of old working-class neighbourhoods, and the integration of social conflict into the system's management mechanisms. All of this constitutes an essential contribution to understanding the present.

The discrepancy arises when this historical diagnosis becomes a strategic conclusion. It is one thing to assert that the proletariat has, to date, lost the political centrality it once held during a particular stage of capitalist development, and quite another to maintain that this loss constitutes an irreversible transformation or that capitalism has ceased to produce the material conditions upon which a class-based politics could be rebuilt. Between these two assertions lies a theoretical leap that the facts examined in this work do not appear to justify.

The global reorganisation of capitalism, on the contrary, reveals a more complex reality. Never before has there been such a large, internationalised, and integrated working class within a single global market. The expansion of industrial production in Asia, the growth of global logistics, the proletarianisation of broad sectors of the service industry, the spread of precarious work and

digital platforms, as well as the large-scale labour migrations that crisscross the globe, indicate that capitalism continues to massively reproduce the proletarian condition. What has changed is not the existence of this class, but rather its composition, the spaces where it concentrates, its shared experiences, and the conditions under which it can develop a collective consciousness.

International migration is precisely one of the clearest expressions of this process. Millions of workers cross borders each year to enter labour markets where they occupy the most precarious and lowest-paid jobs. From agricultural labourers in Southern Europe to Latin American workers persecuted and criminalised in the United States; from migrant domestic workers to Asian labourers subjected for years to the patronage system of the Gulf monarchies; from Palestinian workers subjected to the occupation to those who sustain the vast global logistics and distribution networks, contemporary capitalism continues to produce new forms of proletariat whose legal vulnerability becomes, precisely, an additional source of exploitation. **Far from heralding the end of the proletarian condition, these realities demonstrate its expansion and diversification on a planetary scale.**

Precarious legal status, a state tool for disciplining labour, confirms that the class struggle is inseparable from the struggle against borders, institutional racism, and the policing of labour.

Therefore, the central problem is no longer whether the proletariat exists. That question largely belongs to the realm of empirical evidence. The real question is different: Why does a class that is objectively larger than ever appear politically fragmented, and what historical conditions might make possible a new recomposition of its capacity for collective action?

Answering this question requires abandoning two opposing simplifications. The first is to imagine that it would suffice to reconstruct the organisational forms of the classic workers' movement. History does not go backwards, and 21st-century capitalism does not reproduce the social conditions under which the revolutionary organisations of the past grew. The second is to conclude that, since those historical forms have been defeated, the possibility of a proletarian politics has also been definitively defeated. This second simplification **transforms a historical defeat into a structural impossibility** and turns a conjuncture, however profound, into a law of history.

However, the history of capitalism teaches precisely the opposite. The forms of organisation of the working class have never remained unchanged. Resistance unionism, workers' councils, revolutionary collectives, affinity groups, anarcho-syndicalist organisations, recallable workers' commissions, workers' athenaeums, cooperatives, revolutionary or defence or supply committees, rationalist schools, mutual aid societies, and workers' coordinating bodies have always emerged as specific responses to particular historical conditions. None of them were derived from a pre-existing theory nor did they conform to a universal model. All were born from the encounter between an objective structure of exploitation and the capacity of the workers themselves to build institutions adapted to their time.

There is no reason to think that this historical process has definitively concluded. What the defeat of the labour movement forces us to recognise is not the exhaustion of the contradiction between capital and labour, but the need to rethink the ways in which this contradiction can once again be translated into organisation, solidarity, and an emancipatory project. Capitalism has profoundly transformed labour; it would be strange if the forms of resistance did not also have to be transformed.

In this sense, philosophical defeatism is an understandable temptation, but politically sterile. Every major defeat leads one to think that the enemy has definitively resolved the contradictions

that previously fueled resistance. However, capitalism continues to depend, today as yesterday, on living labour; it continues to organise production through wage relations; it continues to concentrate wealth at one pole and economic dependence at the other; it continues to displace millions of workers wherever accumulation requires; and it continues to resort to precarity, fragmentation, and legal inequality as instruments to discipline the workforce. None of these tendencies points to the disappearance of the social question. Rather, they indicate that it is taking on new, more complex, and more international forms than those known to the classical labour movement.

From a libertarian perspective, this dispersion demands flexible forms of organisation: Neighbourhood-workplace mutual support networks, non-bureaucratized union sections, workers' autonomy groups that are not substitutes for the class, and federal coordination between logistics nodes, gig economy employees, outsourced labourers, and care workers.

The task of critical theory, therefore, is not to certify the end of the proletariat as a historical subject, but to understand the metamorphoses that capitalism itself imposes on the composition of the working class and its possibilities for organisation. The decisive question is no longer whether the proletariat of the 21st century resembles that of a hundred years ago. Clearly, it does not. The question is to ascertain what forms of consciousness, solidarity, and organisation can emerge from the specific conditions created by global capitalism.

Far from closing off the prospect of class politics, contemporary capitalism compels us to rethink it on new foundations. The defeat of the workers' movement belongs to history. The contradiction between capital and labour still belongs to the present. To confuse the two is to transform a historical experience, however dramatic, into a theoretical conclusion that the facts do not support. And perhaps this very confusion is one of the main obstacles when considering the emancipatory possibilities of our time.

Recent historical examples support this approach. The Italian Workers' Autonomy movement (1969–1977) and the assembly-based and anarcho-sindicalist experiences in Spain during the Transition demonstrated that the working class can rebuild itself outside the tutelage of parties and states: Self-organisation at the points of production and reproduction, territorial and federal coordination, and the politicisation of workers without vanguards.

The task is not to replace the proletariat with a new providential subject, nor to subordinate it to parties or states, but to rebuild its autonomous, horizontal, and federal power to overwhelm capital in all spheres of life. If capital is global and total, our organisation must be so as well.

Nothing in the above confers upon the proletariat a guaranteed "historical mission." The existence of the class does not ensure its victory; it merely indicates the terrain on which the struggle can be waged. The alternative to defeatism is not to promise insurrection, but to rebuild the conditions of possibility: Social networks, infrastructures of conflict, revocable coordination, effective internationalism, communities of struggle. This is what it means today to maintain a libertarian perspective of the working class: Not just to announce its existence, but to prepare it. And that seems to be the role of Liza, Embat, Batzac, and so many others, claiming a more prominent role for the proletariat and fewer defeatist obituaries.

"Revolution or barbarism" is no longer a slogan: It is a real alternative, and in the medium term, a choice between two antagonistic futures.

Agustín Guillamón
Barcelona, July 2026

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from the end of the working class to its reconstruction
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