

What is Class Oppression? Who is the Working Class?

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Occupy Wall Street highlighted class inequality in the USA through its talk about the concentration of income and wealth in the hands of “the 1 percent.” This does put a bullseye on the ruling class in our society. But much of the talk about class in recent times has focused on income inequality. The idea is that “the 1 percent” are at the top because they have the highest incomes. But this fails to get to the heart of the matter. The existence of different income levels doesn’t explain why there are classes at all. After all, what explains why there *are* such huge differences in income?

When American union leaders talk about a worker struggle as a “defense of middle class jobs”, you’d think they must lead an organization of lawyers and doctors. Again, this is about income. In the past, unions in some industries were able to use their leverage to secure wage gains that would enable *some* workers to “lead a middle class lifestyle.”

That way of looking at things is a product of the years of the so-called “class truce” after World War 2. By the ‘40s workers had gained major concessions from the capitalist elite in North America and Western Europe.

These concessions didn’t happen because of the election of liberals and “collective bargaining” by “responsible union leaders.” In the period between World War 1 and the 1940s the entire capitalist order was under assault around the world. There were revolutions in numerous countries, widespread factory seizures by workers, general strikes. Throughout Latin American there were large revolutionary syndicalist labor movements. Repressive dictatorships were imposed in many countries to crush radical working class movements.

The capitalist elite were forced to make concessions in the ‘40s because of a threat to the very existence of their system. From that period until the early ’70s real wages in the USA continued to rise for many workers. This happened for two reasons:

1. The employers could provide increasing wages because investment in technology increased output per worker hour, and:
2. Workers engaged in strikes which enabled them to capture a rising share of the revenue created by their labor.

They were helped in doing this by institutional changes won in the ‘30s-40s era — such as wide-spread collective bargaining and a legal baseline of minimum wages. Many at the time thought this was some sort of permanent change in the system.

In fact that era of relative peace in the class war proved to be a brief period in the history of capitalism in North America and Western Europe. Since the ’70s the ruling class has been on the war path to uproot the gains of the ’30s-’40s era, suppress unionism, and keep wages low. In the so-called “neo-liberal” era, the bosses’ system has returned to its more basic “laws of motion.”

Talk of some workers being part of “the middle class” because they have somewhat higher wages than poorer people obscures the reality of class oppression and drives a rhetorical wedge between better paid and lower paid workers.

Who the Classes Are

Class is really about power in the system of production of goods and services. The “1 percent” are at the top because of the power they have due to their vast ownership of capital. But capital

isn't just a pile of physical assets....buildings, machines, stocks, bonds. To own capital is to have a certain form of social power over others — a relation of class domination. This is the power to go out into markets for “factors of production” and pick up whatever they need to run a business: hire workers, experts, managers, buy machines, rent buildings, and so on.

It also includes the legal right to set up a managerial despotism and force workers to submit to it. And it includes the legal right to own the revenue...even though our work generates the goods and services. If they have more revenue than expenses, they have profit.

The wealth of “the 1 percent” comes from two sources: (1) sucking profit out of our labor, and (2) speculative windfalls from changes in asset values (such as real estate and financial speculation). But the capitalist class includes all those whose income and power is based on their ownership of capital. This is not just “the 1 percent” but also entrepreneurs who work with smaller amounts of capital...an owner of a fast food franchise or a small factory. The smaller businesses are often just as ruthless as those at the top. Problems of wage theft and sexual harassment and other oppressive practices are rife in the world of smaller businesses.

Managers and high-end professionals are hired to do the planning and manage us — to make sure there is a profit at the end of the quarter. Like cops and prison guards, managers function as “guard labor.” Throughout the past century the state and the firms have grown to huge dimensions. This means “the 1 percent” have built up a huge bureaucratic control class to keep the masses in line (managers, prosecutors, judges, military brass, corporate lawyers, etc).

The three dominating classes — the dominant owners, the lesser capitalists, and the bureaucratic control class — are less than a fourth of the population in the USA. We might refer to the other three fourths as the “broad working class.” Roughly a fifth of this huge population — so-called “skilled” workers — work jobs that usually require long periods of training or credentials for special skills — such as registered nurses, diesel mechanics, teachers, and programmers.

The core part of the working class — close to 60 percent of the population — work jobs that do not require these long periods of training as a condition of employment. (Or they would work such a job if they could find one.)

The working class majority is made up of those who must seek work from employers to make a living, and whose work is not managing workers or controlling us. (Classes are made up of families, so the working class also includes dependents and people who are retired from working class jobs.) This is a very heterogeneous group of people — women and men, black and white and others, gay and straight.

There are also small numbers of people who are self-employed but have no employees. Such as a plumber who owns his own truck and tools. If he owns his own business he could become a small-time capitalist by hiring employees. But he's not yet a capitalist if he's working on his own. He's in sort of a no man's land — outside the class struggle. This is true also for workers who form a collectively run worker cooperative.

Some Marxist sociologists (such as Michael Zweig in *The Working Class Majority*) put lower level professional employees such as teachers and librarians in “the middle class” because they have traditionally had more discretion in their work. But in an earlier era skilled blue collar workers often had more discretion in their work (and some still do) but were still considered to be part of the working class. It's not having some area of control in their own work that puts a group into a dominating class. It's having control over the working class that is key. And today there is a widespread assault on teachers, attempting to de-skill their job — reducing them to administrators of tests and implementers of a pre-cooked curriculum.

There is an unavoidably antagonistic relationship between capital and labor. If we work harder and are paid less, they make more profit. If they make more profit, they can hire more managers to control us or design new technology to get rid of our jobs.

Businesses make profit by shifting costs onto others. This happens when a power plant emits exhaust that is damaging to our lungs, or if agribusiness uses pesticides that poison farm workers and the rivers. Forcing people to work harder causes stress, which is damaging to our health. This is another form of cost-shifting.

But there is also an antagonistic relation between workers and the bureaucratic control class. They are the bosses who control us day to day. Their higher incomes, their prestige and their power are based on their control over us. The bureaucratic control class tend to use the ideology of meritocracy to justify their power: They have credentials and positions of authority. They see this as justifying their right to call the shots. About 80 percent of managers in USA have four-year or higher college degrees. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, managers in the USA are about 15 percent of the workforce. Their class position is based on the concentration of decision-making authority and information needed in planning and control in the system.

Although the bureaucratic control class are subordinate to “the 1 percent” in American capitalism, this class does have the ability to be a ruling class, and develop their own system. This is in fact what happened in the wake of the Russian revolution of 1917, as the party apparatchiks, elite planners, industrial managers and military brass formed a new bureaucratic ruling class.

Why Workers Are an Oppressed and Exploited Class

Libertarian syndicalists agree with the slogan, “the emancipation of the working class must be the work of the workers themselves.” Workers need to fight for their liberation from capitalism because workers as a class are an oppressed group under capitalism. Why are workers an oppressed class?

One idea we can put aside here is the idea that “classism” is what class oppression is. “Classism” was a term coined in the university world. “Classism” is prejudice against the poor, or against those who are worse off. But working class liberation won’t come from being treated more politely by bosses, media pundits and social workers.

Oppression and freedom are opposites. The form of freedom that is relevant here is what is sometimes called *positive* freedom. Positive freedom consists of two things:

- Controlling the decisions that affect you or govern your own activity. This is also called *self-management*.
- Developing and sustaining your abilities, your skills and your human potential. To be self-managing in your life you need to maintain your health, learn things and develop your abilities.

Humans have by nature the capacity to be self-managing, to learn things, pick up skills and govern their own activity. The capitalist organization of production denies us our birthright to be self-managing. It tramples our positive freedom. This is why it is a system of class oppression. The capitalist organization of the economy tramples our positive freedom in at least the following ways:

- **Forced to work for bosses.** The working class are those who have no independent means of making a living. If taking a job offer is your only option for avoiding dire consequences like eviction or having no income, then, as we say, “you have no choice.” And that means we are forced to accept the conditions that go with the job offer and submit to the employer’s managerial despotism.
- **Managerial Coercion.** Because management can threaten to fire you or cut your hours if you challenge their decisions, they have coercive authority over you. The employers have also gotten various repressive laws passed that enable them to call on the police and courts in certain circumstances if workers engage in actions such as strikes and boycotts.
- **Denial of control over decisions that affect us.** Managers monitor us and make the decisions about what we are to do. They define the jobs. The corporate and state hierarchies make decisions about what technologies to use, what chemicals we are exposed to, how our jobs are organized, what products we make, and what is done with the revenue. We are denied control over how our own capacities are used. We are expected to simply “do as you’re told.”
- **Failure to sustain our abilities.** From stress to chemical exposures, the capitalist workplace is often dangerous to our health. But sustaining your health and physical abilities is necessary to your ability to pursue your chosen path in life.
- **Preventing us from developing our potential.** For more than a century capital has systematically re-designed work in ways that reduce worker discretion, skill and control on the job. This is done both to have tighter managerial control and also to avoid having to pay higher wages for skills. The effect of de-skilling and concentrating decision-making into a managerial hierarchy is to reduce our chances for developing our own knowledge and skill through work. But workers would need to have access to the means to develop our skills and knowledge if we were to have the power to be self-managing in work.
- **Restraints on sub-groups of the working class.** Some groups in the working class are subject to specific forms of discrimination or abuse, such as race discrimination in hiring or sexual harassment in the workplace. If particular groups have worse options in society, with fewer job prospects and forms of greater vulnerability, employers can benefit from paying them less and treating them worse. The class structure exploits oppression based on racial or gender status.

Because the working class is forced to submit to the employer’s despotic regime, the ability of employers to suck down the revenue and profits from the products and services we create is exploitation. “To exploit” means to take advantage of somebody’s vulnerability to secure an illegitimate gain. In this case it means that the income of the owner class is illegitimate since it is based on their illegitimate power over the working class. The power and incomes of the bureaucratic control class are also based on exploitation as well.

They Have a Weakness

The bosses do have a weakness. They need our cooperation. They need us to do the work.

Their vulnerability becomes plain when workers stop work and go on strike. If we bring work to a halt, we can cut off the flow of profits. When workers organize and act in this independent way, they are creating a kind of *counter-power* to the power of the dominating classes.

The capitalist regime is not the only possible way for society to be arranged to produce goods and services for each other. Workers in fact have the potential to control their own work, work cooperatively with each other, and learn the skills and knowledge needed to manage the economy and run the society. We don't need the dominating classes. We can run social production without them.

The working class majority can't be free and can't ultimately ensure well-being for itself unless it can find a way to take control of the system of social production — from food production and transportation to social services. Workers need to become masters of production, in control of our own work, and in control of technological development. If workers are not in control of the workplaces, then some other class will be — and then we won't be free. This is really very basic.

This could only happen through an active, society-wide takeover of the economy by workers.

This would mean re-framing the basic institutions of society. We'd have to dump overboard the institutional power of both the managerial and owning classes so that workers are not subordinate to any dominating class. As Ralph Chaplin put it in *Solidarity Forever*:

All the world that's owned by idle drones is ours and ours alone.
We have laid the wide foundations; built it skyward stone by stone.
It is ours, not to slave in, but to master and to own.

The idea of a society-wide worker takeover of social production is what syndicalists have called an "expropriating general strike." The idea is that this should develop as a multi-national process, based on revolutionary working class movements in various countries. Although the Spanish revolution of 1936 was defeated before it could break out of isolation, the worker seizure of 18,000 companies and 14 million acres of farm land is perhaps the clearest historical example of an "expropriating general strike." This was a process organized from below, mainly on the initiative of local unions and militants of the anarcho-syndicalist CNT.

The Situation Today

Looking around today some people say this syndicalist vision is obsolete. "There is no production left to take over," they say. Our society is supposedly "post-industrial." Even if we look only at the USA, and do not consider the way production takes place on a global scale, this is not an accurate picture. In 1980 about 20 percent of all manufactured goods in the world were produced in the USA. Today the USA still produces 19 percent of global manufactured output. China has only recently surpassed the USA — producing 21 percent of world output. Most manufactured goods sold in the USA are made here. Of course millions of manufacturing jobs *were* shipped overseas and some kinds of goods are now mainly made outside the USA, such as garments and consumer electronics. On the other hand, some manufacturing industries (such as oil refining and meat processing) are less susceptible to this relocation threat.

Within the global factory, the whole transport and warehouse chain that moves these goods to stores is also a part of "industry" — an extension of the global factory. About a fourth of the

workforce in the USA works in “basic industry”: manufacturing, construction, transportation and public utilities.

Most jobs were not lost in manufacturing due to relocation overseas but due to constant changes in technology and work organization — to reduce labor. For example, the steel industry still makes about as much steel in USA as it did in the ‘70s (mainly at 75 mini-mills that make steel from scrap) but it now takes only one-third as many worker hours to produce a ton of steel. If firms can reduce the number of worker hours to produce something, they can reduce their costs, and thus beef up their profits.

It has been harder for the employers to figure out ways to increase “labor productivity” as rapidly in retail, services and construction...although they’re trying. Tactics such as de-skilling, time scheduling software, self-serve in banking and supermarkets, and closer monitoring show that the same process is at work in services. The slower growth of “labor productivity” in services means the proportion of the workforce employed in retail and services has greatly expanded over many years. This is not the “elimination” of the proletarian class, but a shifting around of the mix of jobs.

Employers have used various tactics to reduce worker leverage.

Many factories were relocated to small rural towns. Wage rates are often lower in rural areas and workers do not have a large urban labor movement to back them up in struggles. The south has become a huge low-wage non-union zone for exploitation by European, East Asian and American manufacturers.

To deny workers organizing rights won in the 1930s, employers create schemes where people are hired on temporary contracts or as “independent contractors” — to deny them status as a “bargaining unit” under the National Labor Relations Board. This has been used in industries like taxis and port trucking to cut wages and benefits.

Although the Wagner Act (AKA National Labor Relations Act) nominally recognized our legal right to “concerted action,” the Supreme Court over the years has narrowed our rights. Moreover, the Wagner Act was a compromise. It contained a poison pill. Workers had previously built unionism from the ground up, through direct organizing. Concessions were often won only through strikes that took on the character of pitched battles.

These union-building moments were also a learning process. Workers developed solidarity by reaching out to others for support. People learned about the nature of the system. The media, courts, politicians and police usually came to the aid of the employer in strikes. The class nature of the dominant institutions is revealed in these moments. This is part of the process that Marxists call *class formation*: Workers developing solidarity, knowledge about the system, organizational capacity, and aspiration for change. This is the process of working class people “forming” themselves into an effective oppositional force.

Class formation is undermined when self-organized activities of working people are replaced by voting for politicians or activities controlled by the bureaucracies of “service agency” unions and non-profits. These reformist practices tend to take control over struggles away from the rank and file and place them in the hands of paid officials, professional “representatives”, party leaders, and lobbyists. This undermines the process of building confidence, capacity, and aspiration for liberation.

The Wagner Act regime replaced strikes with relatively passive “Yes” votes in a government-run election. This fit with the top-down paid hierarchies that became entrenched in the unions after World War 2. In the decades since World War 2 people often came to view “the union” as

a distant bureaucracy, like an insurance agent. In an NLRB election you are typically asked to vote for a kind of service agency to “represent” you. Since the ‘80s “service agency” unionism has been unable to reverse the long slide in union membership and collective worker clout.

When we examine labor history, we find that unionism in the USA has only ever grown in periods of wide-spread worker strikes and growing class-wide solidarity. However, the paid hierarchies in the “international” unions are allergic to the disruptive action that has built unionism in the past. They view disruptive confrontation as too risky, threatening fines or destruction of the organizations their jobs are based on. Rather, they insist that they want “partnership” with management. This tendency undermines unionism. Workers will need to build new forms of association and collective action outside the control of the paid hierarchies of the “international” unions.

Although there is still a long way to go to rebuild class solidarity, workers in recent years have been gradually figuring out ways to increase their leverage and rebuild militancy. We can see this in various tactics:

- **Taking advantage of chokepoints in the logistics chain.** In recent decades movement of parts and finished products over large distances has made “logistics” a vulnerable point in the corporate profit plan. Under the “lean production” model, all slack is to be removed from the system. “Just-in-time” delivery of goods to stores or parts to factories is arranged to cut warehousing costs. But it creates vulnerability. In the last couple years workers at small auto parts factories have won union recognition or other concessions through brief strikes that brought down a larger auto assembly process.
- **“Non-majority unionism.”** Prior to the ‘40s, people built organizing groups in the workplace to create resistance to the employer. When these were still a minority of the workforce, they were sometimes called “organizing unions.” Nowadays this is called “non-majority unionism” because it isn’t based on simply trying to win a majority in an NLRB election. The IWW Starbucks Workers Union and the Carolina Automobile, Aerospace and Machine Workers union (a UE affiliate) are examples of grassroots “non-majority” unions trying to build direct resistance in the workplace in the past decade. Organized originally by people from Black Workers for Justice, CAAMWU exists at Cummins Diesel and a Bosch plant in North Carolina. There had been numerous attempts in the auto parts industry in North Carolina to win NLRB elections in the early ‘90s. But these were always defeated. CAAMWU has been able to persist and build resistance by not going the NLRB election route.
More recently the top-down corporate unions have borrowed the idea of “concerted action” by minorities at a company, as in the UFCW-funded OUR Walmart campaign and the SEIU-funded “Fight for \$15 an hour and a union” campaign among fast food workers. As the CAAMWU and SWU examples show, this tactic can be developed in a more independent way, by workers “acting in union.” This tactic does have its limits. Workers need to eventually build their movements into a majority force that can shut down production.
- **“Acting as a union.”** Taxi drivers and port truckers are groups who have been denied legal recognition as potential union groups under the Wagner Act framework. In this case workers can still form their own union and engage in work stoppages and protests, and try

to use direct collective action to secure concessions and agreements. The original meaning of the word “union” is workers “acting in union” with each other. When workers “act as a union” they create a collective counter-power. The New York Taxi Workers Alliance is an example of an organization that was built on this method, carrying out strikes and building a large membership. This tactic has also spread to some port truckers as well as taxi drivers in several cities. This tactic has also been used in the current wave of organizing by college instructors on part-time or temporary contracts.

- **Solidarity networks.** The solidarity network model was developed by a group of IWW members in Seattle about seven years ago. Mobilizing working people from the community to defend groups of organized workers has a long history in the USA — such as mass picketing by the unemployed in strikes of the early ‘30s. But workers mostly face employers without any workplace organization today. The idea of the solidarity network is to mobilize working people from the community to take direct action to defend workers who are isolated, such as someone whose wages are stolen or unjustly fired. When there is no organization in the workplace the person can turn to, the solidarity network brings solidarity to bear from outside. When the Seattle network’s organizing committee decides to take on a person’s case, they require them to join the organization and agree to support others. The organization typically uses an escalating series of actions to bring pressure to bear on an employer. Similar tactics are used to back up demands of tenants, against problems of mold and poor maintenance or stolen rent deposits.

Brighton Hospitality Network in England is sort of a cross between a minority union and a solidarity network in the restaurant industry. If a worker committee or organization is not present in a workplace, workers whose wages are stolen or have other beefs with employers can join up with a functioning network in their industry. This network or proto-union will pressure the employer from outside using tactics similar to a solidarity network.

- **Building on the personal connection to the customer or client.** Service workers do have a form of potential leverage that “basic industry” workers often do not have. People in service work have personal contact with the customer or client who is the direct beneficiary. Earlier this year a group of 250 UPS drivers in New York City were able to use this connection to the customer to force UPS to rehire them. A worker had been fired in Queens for showing up too early. The firing was a violation of the union contract. A group of drivers walked out to fight his firing. UPS then fired those drivers. The drivers then walked their routes and talked to the people who they had been delivering to. Pressure from those customers forced UPS to back down. Another example from earlier this year is the strike of bus drivers in Burlington, Vermont. In that case drivers were able to successfully appeal to community support. Students who ride the bus marched in the streets with their drivers. There have also been cases where transit worker unions have worked to build solidarity with the riders by opposing fare hikes and service cuts.

This personal connection can be built on to create collective power for workers and also to defend the quality of the service for the users. Prior to the teachers strike in Chicago in 2012, active members and delegates in the Chicago Teachers Union crafted a program and built mobilizations to appeal directly to parents and students. Teacher activists argued for the defense of the resources and school conditions that students need, and called out Chicago authorities for

the racist and destructive character of their school policies. The union was able to build majority support for its strike and aims among parents, especially black and Latino parents.

When workers act to defend the interests of clients or customers, this builds social solidarity. If unions act as the hammers of social justice, and work on the basis of the principle “An Injury to One is an Injury to All”, it is much harder for our enemies to simply dismiss the unions as “a special interest group.”

Solidarity creates the basis for a movement that can act together on a larger scale, and therefore a movement with greater potential to change the society.

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