Exploitation

Capitalists can exploit us without stealing from us. So, we are both exploited and yet not diddled. How is that possible?

The answer is in the genius of capitalism. Exposing how capitalists do so is in the genius of Marx.

Solving these puzzles requires us to grasp what Marx reveals about exploitation under capitalism.

The word 'exploitation' is flung around as abuse.

We need the scientific rigour that Marx provides to see why exploitation is never exceptional.

Only then can we grasp why there can never be 'a fair day's pay'.

Equal exchanges

Like all scientists, Marx begins from a simplified model.

He assumes that capitalists pay us in full for all the costs we meet in reproducing the only commodity we have.

If it is does, there is an equal exchange. If not, and only then, is there also a swindle.

In short, exploitation happens whether or not our wage covers the costs of reproducing our labour-power.

Does our wage cover those costs?

Same difference

For Marx, exploitation is the surplus-value that capitalists must take.

If capital does not get something for nothing, it can never expand.

That 'something' for free is the value we add over and above how much it costs us to reproduce our labour-power.

That rule applies in every corner of the world. What differs are the socially necessary costs of reproduction.

The answer to our puzzles is clearer when we apply Marx's insight to real life.

First, we'll consider a garment worker in the third-world, and then penalty rates in Perth.

The third world

A worker in Bangladesh is paid $2 per day. You'd say that she's getting a raw deal.

Yet, if $2.00 covers what she pays for all her needs, then she is not being swindled. Her labour power costs $2.00 a day to reproduce. Her boss pays her $2.00. An equal exchange has taken place.

So has her exploitation.

She is not exploited because she gets a mere $2 a day.

She is being exploited because her boss takes all the value that she adds over and above the value she supplies to cover her $2 wage.

Whether she is being exploited in the emotional sense of being swindled depends on how much her labour-power costs her.

If it costs 10 cents more than $2, she is also being swindled.

Penalty rates

The same rules apply to a Perth worker on $180 a day who gets penalty rates.

The cost of reproducing the labour-power that she sells on a Sunday is no more than that it costs her on weekdays.

Nor does she add more value on a Sunday than on a Tuesday.

How does she get a higher price for her labour-power at some times than at others?

Life-cycles

The explanation calls for us to dig deeper into the cost of reproducing our labour-power.

That sum is not decided on a daily basis. Our costs have to be met throughout a working life.

The higher rates on weekends are one way of our getting enough money to reproduce our labour-power across generations.

As ever, another part of the answer is in the relative strengths of the contending classes.

Unions, sporting bodies and churches won the battle for us to be compensated for disruptions to family life and social activities.

No exceptions

With or without penalty rates, all wage-slaves are always being exploited.

Anyone getting time-and-a-half for Sunday is being exploited. Should we have our penalty rates cut, we will be exploited at a higher rate.

That is what happened to the Seven-Eleven staff. Even after they got all their back pay, they still had not got the full value of their labour-power.

Solidarity

To recognise that exploitation is universal is the basis for workers of the world to unite.

Outrage at the cheating of Seven-Eleven workers risks leaving the rest of us feeling that we are not being exploited.

The same danger arises from not seeing beneath the surface of low wages in the Third World.

Wage-slaves can never be paid for the full value that we add to our past labours that is present in machines and raw materials.

If we were paid in full, capitalism could not exist.

Recognising the universal fact of exploitation is key to our overthrowing the rule of capital.

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