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CLASS POLITICS FOR TIMES OF DEEPENING GLOBAL CRISIS

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In recent years, there's been growing interest in working-class politics on the left in so-called Canada. Inspiration has come from several sources. These include the 2017-18 workers' rights movement in Ontario, one legacy of which is the [Justice for Workers](https://www.justice4workers.org/) (<https://www.justice4workers.org/>) network in that province; strikes such as those of the [education workers](https://breachmedia.ca/the-inside-story-of-how-education-workers-beat-back-doug-ford/) (<https://breachmedia.ca/the-inside-story-of-how-education-workers-beat-back-doug-ford/>) in the Ontario School Board Council of Unions in 2022; anger at ruthless bosses and landlords; and developments in the US that include a rise in workers unionizing, striking, and organizing to change their unions, along with Bernie Sanders' version of social democratic politics. But *what kind of* working-class politics should socialists try to advance?

WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT THE WORKING CLASS

First, who are we talking about when we talk about the working class? The answer shouldn't be only about who currently *identifies* as "working class." How people think of themselves matters, but we shouldn't make the mistake of assuming that how people act is determined by how they self-identify.

Capitalism slots people into groups structured in relation to how goods and services are produced and to other such groups. At root, this is what class is about. It's not only about your job title or how much money you make. It's about where you fit in the system of producing everything that keeps society going. What you're paid to do or what credentials your employer requires aren't the issue either. The fact that so many jobs now require a university degree just means that more workers have to shoulder the costs of obtaining one (or more than one).

Almost no one gets by in Canada by farming for subsistence. Most people don't own a business, even a really small one. Most of us have to sell our ability to work to an employer in exchange for pay. Most of this wage labour, whether paid hourly or as a salary, is legally regulated economic activity. There's also working under the table, in what social scientists call the "informal sector," which



is where most workers in Canada without immigration status toil. In many countries of the Global South, most of the working class is in the informal sector. Most workers have very little control over how they carry out their assigned tasks. Others have a bit more. A small minority still have a lot of control over their work processes, which employers are keen to erode using the latest surveillance technologies.

Sometimes people who are really working for wages aren't legally classified as employees. For example, think of a computer programmer hired by a small company as an independent contractor until the company's owners decide it's worth the additional costs associated with hiring them as an employee. Or consider drivers for companies such as Uber and SkipTheDishes, whose owners fight against those drivers becoming reclassified as employees because that'd make their labour more expensive and give them basic workplace rights. Such contractors aren't small business owners like self-employed tradespeople. They're workers whose incomes are concealed wages.

Most people who are working for wages aren't given any authority over other workers by their bosses. In some cases, though, their place in an authoritarian workplace hierarchy gives them some supervisory power over other workers. This makes them "superior cogs in the machine" controlled by the employer, to quote French socialist Daniel Singer. This isn't anything new – in the 1800s the skilled workers who formed early craft unions sometimes hired, paid, and fired their helpers. It's only when people exercise a substantial amount of managerial power, as middle managers do, that they have a qualitatively different relationship to production than other employees. That puts them outside the working class.

This way of thinking about class allows us to see how the working class is broader – but also more internally stratified and divided – than most people realize. Operating with ideas about class inherited from an earlier era in the history of capitalism is unhelpful for organizers. Capitalism is still capitalism, but patterns of work have changed since the long economic boom that followed the Second World War. Our understanding of class relations needs to try to grasp them as they exist today. There's no reason to treat people who work outside of manufacturing, construction, and transportation – or outside the private sector altogether – as not part of the working class. Working at home or having more than a little control over one's work doesn't in itself place people outside the ranks of the working class either. Nor does owning a house.

Teachers, nurses, social workers, and other workers in "professional" jobs shouldn't be seen as belonging to a "[professional-managerial class](https://newpol.org/the-pmc-does-not-exist-and-why-it-matters-for-socialists/)" (PMC) distinct from the working class, as [some socialists believe](https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/on-the-origins-of-the-professional-managerial-class-an-interview-with-barbara-ehrenreich/). Such workers are not employed to make profits for capital except when they work for private firms. And we shouldn't confuse the function of workers' jobs – the purpose of the activity employers pay workers to perform – with their place within class relations. It's true that teachers and social workers often enforce the discipline of the state against students and clients, respectively. This is harmful, but the conflicts here are generally conflicts *within* a hierarchically divided working class, not *between* different classes. That said, what cops and prison guards are paid to do – maintain the capitalist social order with violence – is [something else altogether](https://spectrejournal.com/are-bullies-unions-still-unions). Those individuals are used to prevent challenges to that order and repress them when they break out, so they [shouldn't be part of unions with other workers](https://briarpatchmagazine.com/articles/view/prison-unionism).

The big picture, then, is that most people in "advanced" capitalist countries (and many other societies) survive by selling their labour power to employers and have little or no managerial authority. There are also unwaged people who depend on the wages of others, and people who are not currently employed. All together, they make up the working class. That some wage earners also make at least a little money in another way, such as by selling goods they make at home, isn't new. They're still part of the broad, divided class that labours for capital and the capitalist state or in their shadows.

WHY THE WORKING CLASS IS CENTRAL TO A REVOLUTIONARY SOCIALIST POLITICS

For those who think the most effective means of changing society is the ballot box, the importance of the working class is primarily a matter of numbers: the working class is everywhere the majority of people. But revolutionary socialists [recognize](https://rampantmag.com/2020/04/the-capitalist-state-and-socialist-strategy/) that even the most radical government couldn't legislate a break with capitalism and the start of a transition towards socialism. This shapes how we understand the working class's role.

The reason the working class belongs at the centre of a socialist politics isn't that workers are more likely to endorse ideas about radical social change than members of other classes. Nor is it about who's most willing to engage in militant action today. Some people who depend on a paycheque to get by are up for it right now, but most are understandably hesitant about getting arrested.

The reason the working class is central to a revolutionary socialist politics is its potential to transform society in a profoundly democratic, bottom-up way. Its conditions of labour are more conducive to collective action and self-organization than those of peasants or self-employed people. The antagonism between labour and capital that's built into capitalism pushes workers to struggle together, at the same time as competition and divisions among workers push in other directions. When workers' struggles escalate and assert the needs of people over profit (or assert the needs of people over state spending restraint), they begin to point toward a different way of organizing society. By withdrawing their labour, workers can make capitalism grind to a halt. When workers take over their workplaces and start running them democratically, they show in practice that we don't need bosses. This can also hint at how the production of goods and services across society could be reorganized on a democratic and collective basis.

As revolutionary socialists, our political horizon is the possibility of breaking with capitalism and starting the transition to a classless, stateless society of freedom with a truly rational relationship between humanity and the rest of nature. Whether we call that goal ecosocialism, communism, or something else is much less important than clarity about the goal itself. It's because working-class power is the key to making that break with capitalism that the working class matters so much for socialist politics.

ROADBLOCKS AND ROADS FORWARD

So why hasn't the working class made that break except on a handful of occasions when the triumphant efforts were sooner or later defeated?

Some socialists say the main problem is that workers are misled by leaders who aren't revolutionaries. While social democratic parties such as the NDP and almost all officials at the top of unions are no foes of capitalism, blaming those parties and leaders doesn't explain why working-class people usually try to [deal with the problems they face](#) (<https://monthlyreview.org/1998/11/01/on-gender-and-class-in-u-s-labor-history>) in ways that don't involve collective struggle, let alone revolution.

Another idea about why there haven't been more working-class revolutions, particularly in the Global North, points to a minority of workers in rich countries who are allegedly bribed by the profits of imperialism: a "[labour aristocracy](#) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20190225112753/http://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/5edo/777f248114127997056169e8c87364ec9b23.pdf>).” Socialists who take this idea seriously are likely to turn their backs on whoever they think is in the “labour aristocracy.” To be sure, we should challenge reactionary behaviour and pro-capitalist ideas among higher-paid workers. We should strive to persuade them to act in solidarity with lower-paid, lower-status workers. Elitism, clinging to respectability, and bonding with bosses and other high-status people are real problems. But high-paid workers aren't the only people who cling to respectability or adopt a boss's view of the world. Being low-paid and marginalized doesn't necessarily make people more sympathetic to anti-capitalist politics, let alone to militant action.

When we avoid these mistakes and instead recognize how broad the working class is, socialists can develop politics best suited to advancing the class struggle under today's conditions. We also need to acknowledge how the working class is highly fragmented along lines including income, occupation, industry, home ownership, unionization, and citizenship status. It's also divided by sexism, racism, cis supremacy, heterosexism, [settler colonialism](#) (<https://www.prairiered.ca/archive/colonialism-and-the-working-class-in-canada>), and other forms of oppression, all of which confer advantages (privilege) on dominant groups within the class. It helps to be humble about the limits of what we know, curious about what we don't know, and eager to become constructive participants in workplace and community organizing where we can learn from experience.

COLLECTIVIZE EVERYTHING

If the working class today is highly decomposed, with people mostly trying to survive through their families or on their own, we should see our task as helping to recompose the class, building unity and solidarity one step at a time. This means always [promoting collective responses](#) (<https://labornotes.org/secrets>) to the problems confronting people, in the workplace and beyond. “What force on earth is weaker than the feeble strength of one?” asks the old labour song “Solidarity Forever,” with good reason.

Collective action is the stuff of which class politics is made. It may need to begin in a very modest way – for example, with a group grievance by workers or a group complaint by tenants. Sometimes it's possible to take the effort up a rung on the ladder of militancy – for example, having a group of workers visit the boss if a grievance is stalled – and we should always have an eye on that possibility. Escalation can't be proclaimed; it has to be organized step by step. Once people are really in motion, they may take an unexpected leap to carrying out a more militant form of action, but that happens only when they're already organized and confident.

“An injury to one is an injury to all” is a saying as old as “Solidarity Forever.” Although the words are sometimes spoken in unions, this vital principle is rarely taken seriously. What counts as an injury is often contentious, as is the question of why people who haven’t been directly injured should care. For example, many cis people don’t grasp what’s wrong with a government requiring teachers to tell parents when their child uses a different name or pronouns than the ones on record, and many workers who aren’t unionized don’t realize [how they’re affected \(https://www.epi.org/publication/union-decline-lowers-wages-of-nonunion-workers-the-overlooked-reason-why-wages-are-stuck-and-inequality-is-growing/\)](https://www.epi.org/publication/union-decline-lowers-wages-of-nonunion-workers-the-overlooked-reason-why-wages-are-stuck-and-inequality-is-growing/) when governments attack the rights of unionized workers. Fostering the widest possible recognition of injustice, and greater commitment to act against it, is an essential aspect of class politics.

That isn’t just about persuasion. Persuasion can sometimes get people to attend a picket line or rally against an injustice they don’t know first-hand, but it’s the practical experience of spending time at those sites of struggle – and building relationships in the process – that really changes minds. We need more people to have those experiences if we’re to be able to address not only the exploitation and alienation of the entire working class, but also the various forms of oppression interwoven with them. This means calling for demands that cover all workers – for example, stronger employment standards and better public healthcare – as well as demands tailored to the needs of specific groups of oppressed people, such as employment equity and public healthcare that meets the needs of trans people. And it means recognizing that the masses [standing on the same side \(https://lazarapress.ca/class-consciousness-poster/\)](https://lazarapress.ca/class-consciousness-poster/) of the fence between capital and labour are all part of the working class.



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