

The U.S. Proletariat and the Centrality of the Industrial Proletariat

July 18, 2024

1 What is Class?

When trying to understand how class in the United States functions and why MCU emphasizes the role of the proletariat, and, in particular, the centrality of the industrial proletariat, it is helpful to begin by addressing what class is. Importantly, class is not determined by things like the beliefs of individuals or their access to consumer goods, but is instead defined in terms of relationships to the means of production, for it is the relations of production (along with the productive forces) that comprise the base of society and are primary in Marxist analysis. Questions of distribution of some portion surplus-value extracted from workers back to the masses, e.g., through welfare programs run by the state, as well as questions concerning the consumption of commodities, are secondary to questions concerning the underlying relations of production when trying to understand how an economic system functions.

To begin our analysis, then, we should first clarify the major classes in the United States today. In particular, the two primary classes in the United States are the bourgeoisie, defined as those members of society who own the means of production and do not have to labor to survive, and the proletariat, who do not own means of production and must sell their labor-power to the bourgeoisie to receive a wage and be able to survive. Other classes include the petty bourgeoisie, defined as those who mainly rely on their own labor to survive but may own some small means of production and employ a worker or two (think, e.g., a trucker who owns their own truck, or a lawyer who owns a small law office where the only employee is the receptionist),¹ and the lumpenproletariat (see comrade Ari's piece in this chat for a brief description). We also note that there are additional classes, such as the peasant class or the feudal nobility, that have existed historically and/or exist in other countries today, but do not exist in the contemporary United States, as they were artifacts of a previous mode of production (feudalism) which is no longer present in the imperial core. Within these class categories exist various subcategories (subclasses) - for example, the proletariat contains members of the industrial proletariat and those working in the service industry, among others. These subclasses, as we will argue shortly, are also very important when analyzing how to go about revolutionary organizing effectively.

One point to make clear is that the above categories are “pure” categories in the sense that they represent an abstraction from reality. While this may initially appear to be a weakness, these abstractions are necessary to make sense of the world and are found throughout Marxist analysis and philosophy in general.² In Volume I of Capital, for example, Marx takes as his starting point a simple Eden of commodity exchange, one that only mirrors the reality of our world at a very high level, before gradually introducing more and more complexities. The pure categories thus form a good starting point for our analysis, but we shouldn't be thrown for a loop by a reality that does not fit these abstractions perfectly. For example, it would be absurd to call a 10-year-old working-class boy who receives a 50-dollar stock certificate for his birthday a member of the bourgeoisie, although he does now own some small piece of the means of production.

It is also worth briefly addressing one common objection to the above definitions: namely, that due to the nature of imperialism, “it is no longer correct to consider workers in the imperial core as

¹It is worth noting that the term petty bourgeoisie has historically been used in different ways by different people; see the essay “Comments on the Term ‘Petty Bourgeoisie’” from Massline for an overview [2].

²As Ajith, a member of CPI-Maoist, writes, abstraction is “intrinsic to the thought process” [8].

members of the proletariat". The root of these arguments seems to be the (correct) observation that under imperialism, workers outside of the imperial core often suffer from severe exploitation, with the percentage of surplus value extracted much higher than in the United States and other countries in the imperial core, and much of this surplus value flows back to imperialist countries like the US. However, the destination of these profits is not the workers, but the capitalists in the United States. These capitalists have no *a priori* reason to not keep these profits (as well as the profits they have accrued from the exploitation of workers in the United States) for themselves. It is only through class struggle between the workers and the capitalists that the workers are capable of winning economic and political concessions from the ruling class, as, and this is worth repeating, they do not own the means of production. Further, these concessions can always be taken back and reversed, as we have seen in the last half-century in the United States, during which social programs have been rolled back and the condition of the proletariat as a whole in the United States has declined.³

2 Why the Industrial Proletariat?

Having established a basic understanding of class and class composition in the United States today, we now turn our attention to the question of which of the oppressed classes and subclasses in the United States we should concentrate on in our organizing work. Here important questions include which classes or subclasses: (1) have an objective interest in revolution (in the sense that it is in their material interests to do so), (2) are most likely to be won over to the revolutionary Marxist position, and (3) should they be won over to the cause, will be the most effective at waging revolution. We now proceed to examine each of these questions in turn.

Regarding the first question, our analysis in the previous section demonstrates that it is the proletariat that has an objective interest in revolution, as it is only through revolution that they will be able to end the exploitation at the heart of the wage relation and wrestle control of production (as well as the state and other elements of the superstructure) from the bourgeoisie. The lumpenproletariat, as comrade Ari notes, also has some interest in ending capitalism, although they have a conflicted relationship with this question as they have dual interests and often benefit from the exploitation of other elements of the masses (e.g., by selling drugs or exploiting prostitutes). Similarly, the petty bourgeoisie, caught between the bourgeoisie proper on one side and the proletariat on the other in the class struggle, also have conflicted interests, as they benefit from the exploitation of labor under capitalism but are often crushed by the tendency of capitalism to move towards monopoly capital. Finally, the bourgeoisie are the natural enemies of a worker's movement and are firm in their opposition to socialist revolution, as it would end their ability to profit through the exploitation of the workers.

Regarding the second question, it is often argued that while the proletariat has an objective interest in waging revolution, "many members of the proletariat in the US today have backwards, anti-people beliefs, and thus cannot be won over to the Marxist cause (they lack the subjective factors necessary to wage revolution)". While it is certainly true that the vast majority of the proletariat today does not possess a revolutionary disposition, the reason for this does not lie in any sort of metaphysical orientation against revolution, or the fact that they are all "bribed", but rather the extent to which bourgeois ideology has penetrated all classes in society (including the lumpenproletariat, who, despite their generally poor quality of life, are often heavily invested in elements of reactionary bourgeois ideology). This is not grounds for defeatism, however, because, as Marx argues, "the question is not what goal is envisaged for the time being by this or that member of the proletariat, or even by the proletariat as a whole. The question is what is the proletariat and what course of action will it be forced historically to take in conformity with its own nature" [7]. Here Marx is arguing that the nature of the class struggle and the role that the proletariat plays in it will lead to changes in their revolutionary disposition - for, again

³We note in passing that this claim has been objected to on the basis that "since the purchase of certain consumer goods has increased during this time period, surely the conditions of the proletariat must be improving". This argument is blatantly absurd and makes sense only if one conflates the ability to purchase commodities (commodities that, it should be noted, have been declining in quality during this time period - see, for example, the rise of highly processed junk food as a central component of many American's diets, or the use of planned obsolescence in product design) with the conditions of a class. It is also worth emphasizing that many of the social programs in the United States that are currently being torn apart have their origins in the New Deal period, which was unsurprisingly the time period where class struggle in the United States and the bribery of the working class were both at their heights.

following Marx, “it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness” [6].

The previous paragraph shows that when analyzing which classes or subclasses can be won over to the Marxist position, it is not correct to emphasize the “empirical individual of history” and his “empirically given (and hence psychological or mass-psychological) consciousness”, to use a framing provided by Lukács [4]. Another common error in analysis of this question is to assume that “the most oppressed or exploited sections of the masses (or, more particularly, the proletariat) naturally have the most revolutionary potential”. Indeed, the history of the communist movement has demonstrated that this is not the case and that it is in fact the proletariat, and, more specifically, the industrial proletariat, that has the most revolutionary potential, despite the fact that they are often better paid than other sections of the masses. Evidence for this point can be found by examining the tactics of the Bolshevik party in Russia, which conducted a successful socialist revolution through a strategy where their work was, to quote Lenin in the Tasks of Russian Social Democrats, “primarily and mainly directed to the factory, urban workers” [3]. Further, the reason the Bolshevik party arrived at this successful strategy, was due to the fact that “the Russian factory workers had proven themselves in practice to be the leading section of the class during the waves of strikes in the 1880s and 1890s in Russia” [9].⁴

The question that naturally follows this historical analysis is *why* the industrial proletariat have consistently demonstrated and realized their strong revolutionary potential. The answer to this question lies in the highly socialized nature of the production process that the industrial proletariat participates in. For in production, workers “produce only by co-operating in a certain way and mutually exchanging their activities. In order to produce, they enter into definite connections and relations with one another and only within these social connections and relations does their action on nature, does production, take place” [5]. Thomas Berg, of the Swedish Communist Workers’ Union, explains how this applies to the industrial proletariat in more detail:

“The most advanced sections of the proletariat are the industrial proletariat and mainly those who work in large-scale industry. This, because of their role in production, makes them see most clearly the fundamental contradiction in capitalism, that between social production and private (capitalist) appropriation. This is because they work in large teams, are unionized and participate directly in capitalist production, are long-term employees and are part of an international production chain, and are thus politically aware of the international character of capitalism. The industrial proletariat thus has the greatest potential to achieve advanced class consciousness because of their working conditions. But even those who work alone, but are strongly united by trade union organization, have demonstrated advanced class consciousness” [1].

We now turn to the third and final question we set out to answer, regarding which class will be the most effective at waging revolution. Here again, we find the answer to be the industrial proletariat. This is for two reasons: they are highly organized, disciplined, and cohesive, all of which are qualities that are necessary for effective revolutionaries, and their labor is positioned at critical points in the capitalist economy. Through their actions, they can thus bring to a standstill huge portions of the economy. This is simply not the case for other sections of the proletariat, including those working in service industries, education, and tech.

In summary, in these two sections, we have argued that the proletariat, and more specifically the industrial proletariat, should be the focus of revolutionary organizing in the United States today. This is a crucial element of our platform, and one that cannot be taken lightly, for it dictates the thrust of much of our practical work. Hopefully the arguments here can be of some help in both clarifying confusions and making it clear where we stand.

References

- [1] Thomas Berg. Gonzaloism: A “left” revisionist deviation. 2021.
- [2] Scott H. Comments on the term ‘petty bourgeoisie’. *Massline*, 2019.

⁴See the cited piece (“MCU and the Working-Class Movement”) for a more detailed analysis.

- [3] Vladimir Ilich Lenin. *Collected works of VI Lenin*, volume 13. International publishers, 1927.
- [4] Georg Lukács. *History and class consciousness: Studies in Marxist dialectics*. MIT Press, 1972.
- [5] Karl Marx. *Wage Labour and Capital*. New York Labor News Company, 1902.
- [6] Karl Marx. A contribution to the critique of political economy: Part one preface. In *Marx Today: Selected Works and Recent Debates*, pages 91–94. Springer, 2010.
- [7] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. *The Holy Family: or Critique of Critical Criticism Against Bruno Bauer & Company*. Lowenthal, 1844.
- [8] K. Murali and Saroj Giri. *Of concepts and methods: On postisms and other essays*. Foreign languages press, 2020.
- [9] National Committee of the Maoist Communist Union. MCU and the working-class movement. 2023.