

The Lumpenproletariat

Shane in the spirit of comradely CSC I want to criticize the way you have been approaching this debate. Pasting quotes from Wikipedia, and then saying, “I’m not quite grasping why RMS/MCU doesn’t hold a Maoist or MLM position on the revolutionary potential of the lumpenproletariat..” is not a comradely criticism. You do not engage directly with our line on these things and are straw-manning an argument that comrades have already broken down to you twice (Comrade Xochi mentioned talking with you about this when you first joined the study, and I spoke about this with you on Saturday). Both times when comrade Xochi and I explained MCU’s line on why the proletariat is the leading class of the revolutionary movement, and the divided class character of the lumpen, you did not disagree with our position. Now, in a chat with comrades who were not there for the aforementioned conversations, you act as if we have never explained these concepts or engaged with you on them before and now are putting forward disagreements you did not raise in the moment with us. This is concerning and uncomradely. It is an internet politics type of way of engaging in these conversations that seek to stir up drama rather than patiently discuss things and be open with others about the struggle that has already played out.

On a call we had about prostitution this past Saturday, I explained to you that the lumpenproletariat has a divided class character – on the one hand, they are an oppressed class, but on the other hand, often oppress other classes (namely workers, the peasantry, and sometimes, the petit-bourgeoisie). The lumpenproletariat often reproduces itself through anti-people ventures. Take, for example, drug dealers, who have a vested class interest in keeping workers, other lumpen people, and even some sections of the PB, addicted to drugs and in constant cycles of debt and dependence. Another section of the lumpenproletariat is pimps, the low-level enforcers of the sexual enslavement of women via prostitution, who have a vested class interest in keeping prostituted women trapped in cycles of addiction and abuse to enrich themselves.

There are sections of the lumpenproletariat and semi-lumpen who do not make their money from exploiting other workers but instead are thoroughly saturated in PB small business owner mentalities – for example, a worker who then makes a good amount of money through a side hustle reselling drop shipped cheap commodities from abroad, or operating some sort of semi-illegal small business selling food and whatnot. These PB illusions keep the lumpen married to trying to hustle harder to make it big one day, rather than seeing themselves as proletarians and aligning themselves with the working-class struggle against capital.

Then there are the sections of the lumpen that are the most downtrodden and oppressed by other lumpen-proletarians, like prostitutes and homeless people, who face intense personal contradictions that make organizing incredibly difficult, do not play a key role in production, and are trapped in intense cycles of drug addiction. This is not a moral judgment of these lumpen-proletarians, but it is objective that they are not playing a key role in production, and have quite large barriers to organizing, compared to non-lumpen classes. In figuring out who to organize, we have to think about the strategic role classes play in either maintaining or overthrowing class society, instead of liberal identity political moralizing about who is the “most oppressed” needing to be the main people we organize.

We must see the contradictions of the lumpen clearly, and that internal to the class there are very divided class ideas and positions. Engels described the lumpenproletariat as the “scum of the decaying elements of all classes, which establishes headquarters in all the big cities, is the worst of all possible allies [to the revolution].” Precisely because of the way they oppress other workers and drag the revolutionary movement backward in many instances. None of this means that we cannot win over the lumpen-proletariat and that they are incapable of contributing to the revolutionary overthrow of society, but they will certainly not be the leading elements, and not be the main class force communists should be focusing on. I said as much when we talked about this before, and the cherry-picked Mao quotes in the Wikipedia article about the divided class nature of the lumpen are pretty much the exact things I said in our call on Sunday. In Mao’s quotes you use to criticize us, he says that the lumpenproletariat needs to go through thought reform to abandon their anti-people outlooks, not that they are the leading force of the revolution! Below are two full quotes from Mao about the lumpenproletariat (emphasis mine):

“Apart from all these [other classes], there is the fairly large lumpen-proletariat, made up of peasants who have lost their land and handicraftsmen who cannot get work. They lead the most precarious existence of all. ... One of China’s difficult problems is how to handle these people. *Brave fighters but apt to be destructive, they can become a revolutionary force if given proper guidance.*” —Mao, “Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society” (March 1926), SW1:19.

“China’s status as a colony and semi-colony has given rise to a multitude of rural and urban unemployed. Denied proper means of making a living, many of them are forced to resort to illegitimate ones, hence the robbers, gangsters, beggars and prostitutes and the numerous people who live on superstitious practices. This social stratum is unstable; while some are apt to be bought over by the reactionary forces, others may join the revolution. *These people lack constructive qualities and are given to destruction rather than construction; after joining the revolution, they become a source of roving-rebel and anarchist ideology in the revolutionary ranks.* Therefore, *we should know how to remold them and guard against their destructiveness.*” —Mao, “The Chinese Revolution and the Chinese Communist Party” (December 1939), SW2:325-6.

The [Massline dictionary definition of the lumpenproletariat](#) contains more quotes and information that could be helpful on this question as well.

The Black Panther Party’s lumpen-line was a key factor in its downfall – because of the political instability and individualism inherent in the class position in the lumpen, they were susceptible to becoming agent provocateurs and informants, which was a major issue in the BPP. Also, there was line struggle internal to the BPP on this question, with Huey Newton taking up more of the lumpen line (he also had some other confused, anti-Maoist views like revolutionary communalism), while Fred Hampton, arguably one of the sharpest BPP leaders, emphasized the role of the proletariat. Also, there is a massive Black working class in the United States, which is not lumpen! And some workers might have semi-lumpen outlooks/experiences (for example, formerly incarcerated workers at UPS), who largely have a working-class outlook and class interest. When we (MCU) organized in public housing, there was constant class conflict between black and nationally oppressed lumpen-proletarians, black proletarians, and other nationalities of

proletarians. The workers rightly saw the lumpen on one hand, as people who are oppressed by the state and the ruling class, experiencing national oppression like themselves, but also, people who kept the people trapped in cycles of addiction and abuse, and were violent towards workers and other lumpen people. The fetishization of the lumpenproletariat is common in petty bourgeoisie activist circles, where we are largely isolated from the realities of what it is like to be the victim of and live amongst, areas with lots of lumpen activity, and thus we undersell the real impact this stuff has on the lives of working people.

Does the industrial proletariat, and non-lumpen proletarians more generally, have a vested class interest in the oppression and abuse of other workers? Categorically not. The only thing they have to lose is their chains. The lumpen, in contrast, have to be 1st – won over to not chaining other workers and themselves in cycles of despair, and then 2nd – freeing themselves from exploitation that has made them think the only way they can get ahead is by taking advantage of other people.

The lumpen are not the most strategic section of the people which can lead up the revolutionary movement. The lumpen do not play a key role in production, they instead further cycles of despair and decay in our society, some profiting off of it, others being trapped in its jaws (prostitutes). When communist forces are so small in this country, where basic working-class consciousness is so low, why would we focus our work on backward, wavering, unreliable class elements? If comrades want a more thorough breakdown of our line on the industrial proletariat, and the centrality of the proletariat more generally, I recommend comrades read [MCU and the Working Class Movement](#), as well as the article [On Communist Work in the Working Class Movement](#), which both flesh out our broader strategy and approach of how to make revolution in this country.