

On the Labor Aristocracy

As MCU stated in our document *Some General Theses on Communist Work in the Trade Unions*, there are many important research questions remaining to be investigated with respect to the historical existence of the labor aristocracy in the United States. Answering these historical questions will certainly aid us in more effectively combating the revisionist and opportunist leadership of the labor union movement in this country today.

Unfortunately, the criticism of MCU's political line by MIM provides no basis whatsoever from which to advance our scientific understanding of this topic; in fact, its main effect is to detract from such an understanding through a combination of deliberate cherry-picking of quotes from Lenin's essay *Imperialism and the Split in Socialism* [1], and the type of general obfuscation and jargon that is typical of bourgeois academics.

Let's revisit their central claim vis-a-vis MCU's supposed opportunism on the question of the labor aristocracy: "RMS/MCU distort Marx, Engels and Lenin's understanding of the labor aristocracy to mean a small privileged upper strata [*sic.*] of workers in any country, rather than the majority of labor having been bourgeoisified within the imperial core."

The evidence they cite to back up this claim consists of: one half of one sentence in Marx's *Capital* Vol. 1, as well as two quotes from Engels and one from Lenin, the latter three all being taken from Lenin's essay *Imperialism and the Split in Socialism*.

Regarding the quote from *Capital*, I invite anyone who has access to an internet connection to visit marxists.org and refer to Ch. 25 Sec. 5 Pt. D of said book. Not only is Marx clear that he is indeed referring to a minority section of the working class, but it is exceedingly obvious in context to anyone with the most elementary reading comprehension skills that Marx uses the term "aristocracy" in a quasi-humorous manner here; he is describing the pervasive famine and destitution wrought on the relatively (compared to English factory workers at the time) more skilled and better paid tradesmen by the periodic economic crises under capitalism.

Regarding the quotes from *Imperialism and the Split in Socialism*, it is even more trivial to understand immediately upon reading the essay that Lenin is describing the labor aristocracy as exactly what MIM claims is a non-Marxist understanding thereof, namely that it is a "small privileged upper strata [*sic.*] of workers in any country." Nevermind that Lenin literally writes in this text that, "Imperialism somewhat changes the situation. A privileged upper stratum of the proletariat in the imperialist countries lives partly at the expense of hundreds of millions in the uncivilised nations." Let's put MIM's three cherry-picked quotes back where they belong and see what we find. It is instructive to quote Lenin at length here:

"In a letter to Marx, dated October 7, 1858, Engels wrote: "...The English proletariat is actually becoming more and more bourgeois, so that this most bourgeois of all nations is apparently aiming ultimately at the possession of a bourgeois aristocracy and a bourgeois proletariat *alongside* the bourgeoisie. For a nation which exploits the whole world this is of course to a certain extent justifiable." In a letter to Sorge, dated September 21, 1872, Engels informs him that Hales kicked up a big row in the Federal Council of the International and secured a vote of censure on Marx for saying that "the English labour leaders had sold themselves". Marx wrote to Sorge on August 4, 1874: "As to the urban workers here [in England], it is a pity that the

whole pack of leaders did not get into Parliament. This would be the surest way of getting rid of the whole lot.” In a letter to Marx, dated August 11, 1881, Engels speaks about “those very worst English trade unions which allow themselves to be led by men sold to, or at least paid by, the bourgeoisie.” In a letter to Kautsky, dated September 12, 1882, Engels wrote: “You ask me what the English workers think about colonial policy. Well, exactly the same as they think about politics in general. There is no workers’ party here, there are only Conservatives and Liberal-Radicals, and the workers gaily share the feast of England’s monopoly of the world market and the colonies.”

On December 7, 1889, Engels wrote to Sorge: “The most repulsive thing here [in England] is the bourgeois ‘respectability’, which has grown deep into the bones of the workers.... Even Tom Mann, whom I regard as the best of the lot, is fond of mentioning that he will be lunching with the Lord Mayor. If one compares this with the French, one realises, what a revolution is good for, after all.” In a letter, dated April 19, 1890: “But *under* the surface the movement [of the working class in England] is going on, is embracing ever wider sections and mostly just among the hitherto stagnant *lowest* [Engels’s italics] strata. The day is no longer far off when this mass *will* suddenly *find itself*, when it will dawn upon it that it itself is this colossal mass in motion.” On March 4, 1891: “The failure of the collapsed Dockers’ Union; the ‘old’ conservative trade unions, *rich* and therefore cowardly, remain lone on the field....” September 14, 1891: at the Newcastle Trade Union Congress the old unionists, opponents of the eight-hour day, were defeated “and the bourgeois papers recognise the defeat of the *bourgeois labour party*” (Engels’s italics throughout)....

That these ideas, which were repeated by Engels over the course of decades, were so expressed by him publicly, in the press, is proved by his preface to the second edition of *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, 1892. Here he speaks of an “aristocracy among the working class”, of a “privileged minority of the workers”, in contradistinction to the “great mass of working people”. “A small, privileged, protected minority” of the working class alone was “permanently benefited” by the privileged position of England in 1848–68, whereas “the great bulk of them experienced at best but a temporary improvement”.... “With the break-down of that [England’s industrial] monopoly, the English working class will lose that privileged position...” The members of the “new” unions, the unions of the unskilled workers, “had this immense advantage, that their minds were virgin soil, entirely free from the inherited ‘respectable’ bourgeois prejudices which hampered the brains of the better situated ‘old unionists’” “The so-called workers’ representatives” in England are people “who are forgiven their being members of the working class because they themselves would like to drown their quality of being workers in the ocean of their liberalism...””

Upon reading a mere three paragraphs of this text, we can see the extremely cutting and clever trick MIM pulled off here, in particular, they selected the sole two quotes from Engels (out of several) where the references specifically to the *opportunist leadership of the unions and more generally the working class movement* in England were left implicit.

To break this concept down a bit further: neither the unions nor the working class as a whole are monolithic: they have internal contradictions and divisions which determine their character and dictate how they develop over time. For example, there are contradictions between rank and file members and professional union leaders, between progressive and reactionary forces in the union, between different sections and strata of the workers, between different sections and strata of the bureaucracy, etc.

The most common conception of unions among left-ish activists in our present context is that "unions are good." To use the vocabulary of Marxist philosophy, this is a metaphysical, rather than dialectical, conception. And surely it is a fundamentally incorrect way to think about things – you can't read any decent account of US labor history without stumbling upon numerous examples of outright betrayal and sabotage of workers' interests by the leaders who were nominally supposed to represent them. The story is the same today, perhaps with a different coat of paint in some instances. Witness the recent sellout contract the Teamsters leadership foisted onto UPS workers last summer as a "historic victory."

Furthermore: if we understand the historical context in which Lenin was writing this essay, it is not too hard to demystify the broad contours of his thesis, which MIM works so hard to obscure: Lenin is polemicizing against Kautsky's alignment with the *opportunist leaders* (i.e. "privileged upper stratum") of the working class movements of countries represented in the Second International, all of whom ultimately betrayed said movements and took the sides of their own imperialist governments in WW1:

"The proletariat is the child of capitalism—of world capitalism, and not only of European capitalism, or of imperialist capitalism. On a world scale, fifty years sooner or fifty years later —measured on a *world* scale, this is a minor point—the "proletariat" of course "will be" united, and revolutionary Social-Democracy will "inevitably" be victorious within it. But that is not the point, Messrs. Kautskyites. The point is that at the present time, in the imperialist countries of Europe, *you are fawning* on the opportunists, who are *alien* to the proletariat as a class, who are the servants, the agents of the bourgeoisie and the vehicles of its influence, and *unless* the labour movement *rids* itself of them, it will remain a *bourgeois labour movement*. By advocating "unity" with the opportunists, with the Legiens and Davids, the Plekhanovs, the Chkhenkelis and Potresovs, etc., you are, objectively, defending the *enslavement* of the workers by the imperialist bourgeoisie with the aid of its best agents in the labour movement. The victory of revolutionary Social-Democracy on a world scale is absolutely inevitable, only it is moving and will move, is proceeding and will proceed, *against* you, it will be a victory *over* you."

At this point there is nothing substantive left of MIM's argument on this topic to deal with; their most elementary premise has already evaporated upon the most cursory examination of the very texts they hold up to supposedly "prove" their positions.

[1] *Imperialism and the Split in Socialism* (1916). V. I. Lenin. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/oct/x01.htm>