

## Classes and Class-Consciousness in Class Society

**N**O doubt the correct way to write an article on any subject is to commence at the beginning and work towards the end, touching a few of the sidings and way points as we go along. This method however, has its difficulties, as it is sometimes hard to tell which is the beginning, and which the end of a subject, and furthermore, very often neither the beginning nor the end is in sight. Particularly is this true of human society; we know very little about the beginning, and the end is over an unknown trail.

Consequently, I have come to the conclusion that the best way to write an article is to start right in the middle of the subject, or as near the middle as possible, call the starting point zero, and work both ways like a thermometer.

The advantage of this system is easily seen. In the first place it does not matter where we begin, or where we finish. In the second place, whenever we think of anything we can write it down without considering whether it is exactly in order of sequence or not. And lastly, we cannot be expected to exhaust the subject, or say the last word.

Now let us start in right where we are and examine classes just as they exist in human society at the present time, also briefly investigate the basis of classification, and the causes and degrees of class-consciousness. What do we mean by classes in human society? and upon what conditions or circumstances do we base our classification? We hear people speak of the upper class, the lower class, the middle class, the upper ten, and the submerged tenth, the leisure class, and the common people, the educated class, and the professional class, the merchant class, the artisan class, and the agricultural class, etc. We might go on indefinitely, but this is enough to illustrate. These classes are generally referred to as social classes, and no doubt correctly, inasmuch as the classification is based on degrees of wealth and poverty, culture, education, craft, and caste, etc. The classification is very often quite arbitrary and the lines of demarcation are as a rule very indefinite. These so-called classes are merely social groups or factions, that may, or may not, be antagonistic to each other, but do not constitute distinct and separate classes in themselves. I do not remember ever hearing anyone try to explain the line of demarcation between the lower class and the middle class, or between the middle class and the upper class. There is only one certain way to distinguish a member of the middle class, and that is when we find him sitting astride of the fence that separates the slave class from the parasite class, apparently in a state of terror lest he may fall off, either on one side or the other. The middle class is a kind of fifty-fifty proposition. Its name should be zero. It is the point where two extremes meet and blend.

But what of the other two classes just mentioned? The slave class, and the parasite class, more often referred to as the working class and the capitalist class, or the subject class and the ruling class, etc., one class that does all the work of the world and owns nothing but its ability to produce wealth, and another class that owns all the wealth of the world, and performs no useful labor. There we have divisions of classes, a line of demarcation, by means of which normal human beings in civilized society may be classified in one or the other of the two classes, regardless of the gentlemen who sits on the fence, and as this classification is based on the economic conditions, or the economic situation, of the classes concerned, these classes are correctly termed economic classes, to distinguish them from the numerous so-called social classes.

Now don't try to get out of it by claiming that although you are a worker, you own a little property, or that, although you are a capitalist you do a little work, by such an argument you are merely trying to get one leg over the fence. The working class, as a class, owns no property in the means of wealth production. The capitalist class, as a class, does not perform any useful labor; it does not even do its

own dirty work. Its hirelings are drawn from the working class.

Owing to the fact that the economic interests of the working class are diametrically opposed to those of the capitalist class, it necessarily follows that the two classes must be at all times antagonistic to each other. This antagonism manifests itself from time to time in disputes and clashes over wages, hours of labor, working conditions, and so forth, between groups of workers and capitalists, now in one industry, again in another, but it is not generally recognized as a conflict of class interests by either of the classes concerned; it is supposed to be a result of the avarice and duplicity of certain individuals or groups. This being the case, the government (which is supposed to be of the people, by the people, and for the people, and to act in the interests of the people), is very often called upon to settle the dispute, which it occasionally does. However, as the government is in reality the executive committee of the capitalist class, it very naturally decides the dispute in the interest of that class, and then the people, that is the capitalist class, plus the majority of the working class, declare that justice has been done, and so it has, justice from a capitalist class point of view.

The idea never seems to enter the mind of the average worker that justice, like everything else in the universe is merely a relative proposition consequently he cannot figure out how it is that the working out of justice always seems to catch himself or some other worker or group of workers, where the chicken catches the axe. Nevertheless, after he has been through the ordeal of capitalist justice a few times the idea begins to leak into his cranium that there is something rotten in Patagonia. At this point it is almost safe to introduce him to the works of Marx, Engels, Dietzgen, and other Socialist writers, as he is likely to be in a frame of mind susceptible to Socialist propaganda. For we must remember that the mere fact that a worker is discontented, that he knows he is a worker and that his employer is something else (may in fact be almost anything else), does not make the worker class-conscious; if it did the whole working class would have been class-conscious long ago.

Before a worker can become conscious of his position in human society, he must understand that society is divided into two distinct economic classes, a master class, and a slave class, and that he is a member of the slave class; he must also understand that the economic interests of these two classes are, at all times diametrically opposed. To understand this he must have some knowledge of the Marxian law of value, he must know something of the economic basis upon which class society stands. It is also necessary that he should know something of the causes, origin, and evolution of class society from its earliest inception, consequently, he must study the materialist conception of history. He must also learn to apply the dialectical method of reasoning to every phase of human activity, otherwise, he will be continually losing himself in the swamps of capitalist class psychology.

Now this may seem rather a large order at first glance, but after all it does not require such a great effort if one really wishes to learn; it is not so much what we must learn, as what we must unlearn. Before we can get new ideas into our heads, we must get some of the old ones out. We must discard nearly everything that has been crammed into our minds in the home, in the school, in the church and in every institution of capitalism: this is the difficult part. Furthermore, there is no regularly prescribed dose of knowledge; the only rule that can be laid down is that each worker learn as much as he can, no one can know it all, and the amount of knowledge acquired by each individual will depend on the time and opportunity at his disposal, the effort he makes, and his ability to understand.

It is safe to say that no worker who thoroughly understands his class position in human society can ever be influenced by ideas of nationalism, or by the

drivel of patriotism, and yet there are many who call themselves Socialists that are influenced by such ideas. It may also be pointed out that even a limited knowledge of the fundamental principles of Marxian economics makes a worker immune to opportunism, and all schemes for reforming capitalism. Likewise, a fairly good understanding of historical materialism is an antidote against all the various brands of superstitious drivel that are peddled throughout the world in the interests of capitalism, in other words, it is a sure cure for ghosts.

Regarding the question of how a class-conscious worker should act, I might say that the main reason why he should be class-conscious is that he may know how to act in his own class interests, under all circumstances, without advice from anyone else. There are, however, many ways in which a worker can demonstrate that he is class-conscious. For instance he can vote the Socialist ticket, if he has a vote, and the opportunity to use it. He can also support the Socialist press, in preference to the prostitute press of the capitalist class, and this is a very important point, here we have no barriers to contend with, there is nothing to prevent any worker from being a subscriber to a Socialist paper. On the other hand, our anti-political action friends would have us believe that there are millions and millions of class-conscious workers whose fingers are just itching to get at the throat of capitalism, but they cannot express their opinion by means of the ballot, because they have not got a vote. If this is true, one would naturally expect to find the Socialist press swamped with subscribers. But such is not the case. Even the so-called Socialist and Labor parties that have platforms broad enough to accommodate the whole human race, with the possible exception of John D. Rockefeller, and the Pope of Rome, are forced to beg continually, for support for their press. The truth of the matter is that the percentage of workers who are class-conscious is as yet, very small, unless we extend our classification to include almost every degree of radicalism, which we cannot afford to do. There are many other ways in which a worker can demonstrate that he is class-conscious, but I will not take up space to enumerate them here.

Among other views in connection with class-consciousness, we occasionally hear the remark that because capitalists as a class, always act in their own class interests, (that is, they always vote a capitalist class ticket, support the capitalist class press, and other capitalist class institutions, etc.) they must of necessity be class-conscious, and that this fact would indicate that they are more intelligent than the workers, who do not act in their own interests as a class. I do not see it that way. It is true, there is a small percentage of capitalists that do understand this class position in the same way as a Socialist understands his, but the majority do not. All that the average capitalist does in his own interests, is to do as he always has done. Continue to believe the same things he always has believed. Support the same church, the same press, the same political party, that he always has supported. Do, as he has been trained to do, from his infancy. In short, act like a trained monkey. This, I maintain, requires neither "brains" nor education; all that is necessary, is to howl with the pack. When we know it to be a fact that the majority of the workers can be depended upon to act in the interests of the capitalist class at all times, and directly in opposition to their own class interests just because they have been trained to do so, surely it is logical to assume that the majority of capitalists can be depended upon to act in their own interests on the same principle. In fact, I have an idea that if the capitalists were really class-conscious, if they understood the trend of social evolution, if they had any idea of what the future may have in store for them, they would not always act as they do at present. Anyhow the moral for the workers is to study, and prepare themselves for the new society, no matter how their masters may see fit to spend their time.

F. J. McNEY.