

The Existing System

BY T. A. JACKSON.

THE existing system of Society—the sort of social arrangements with which we are familiar—we call the Capitalist system because it is all built or pivoted upon the part played by the “Capitalist.”

What is a Capitalist? In the loose way we use words in our ordinary speech the idea is often given that “any man with money in his possession is a “capitalist.” This notion you must get rid of at the start. If you had all the coin in the world locked up in a vault you would not by that fact be a “capitalist.” You might be a “miser” or an Oriental Emperor or a successful pirate, but a “capitalist” you would not be. True, given certain social circumstances, you would, in that case, have the power to become a capitalist, and the chief of capitalists, but the mere possession of money, much or little, does not of itself make a man a capitalist. A Capitalist is a man with money—but every man with money is not a Capitalist. (Pay might does not turn a worker into a boss—even if he is the sort of fool that puts on the swagger of a boss when he brings his wages home).

“Capital” is a word which originally meant “head” or “well-spring” or “beginning.” Modern industry is worked in this fashion. Somebody with a stock of money goes to market and buys land, buildings, machinery, raw materials, and Labour-Power. The building is on the land; the machinery in the building; and the worker with the machine produces such a change in the raw material that the finished product, taken to market, can be sold for more money than these materials (including labour-power, mark you!) cost. At the beginning the Capitalist had a stock of money. He exchanged it for a stock of materials (including the use of sundry working men). These materials were brought together in his factory and the result was a stock of finished products. These were taken to the market and exchanged for money again.

Thus we get the series—Money; means of production; production process; finished goods; More Money (the original or “Capital” sum plus addition created in the factory or workshop by the coming together of raw material, machinery, and labour-power).

At the beginning the money form; then raw materials; then materials and men in the process of “productive consumption”; finished goods; finally the Capital back again in the money form.

Now that mode of production—the leaving of its initiation and control to the initiative of owners of stocks of money (or what comes to the same thing power to borrow money on a large scale) who engage in production solely to make their “Capital” grow—solely to get this “more money” over and over again: this is the existing system.

We are so used to it that it comes as a surprise to many when they hear us argue that another system is possible. It comes as a still greater surprise when they learn that it was not always the system even in this country—and that in some parts they have not adopted it even yet.

Originally—in the time of the Very Beginnings—men produced directly to satisfy their needs. They hunted, fished, and gathered nuts—either by themselves or (more usually) in groups and what they gained they consumed straight away. Only later when they had acquired skill in tillage and pasturage and the more fundamental crafts did man begin to think of producing one thing in order, by exchange, to obtain another.

Only slowly did men become aware of the existence of other races possessed (by reason of differing climatic and geological situations) of a surplus of the things they lacked and suffering a shortage of the things of which they had plenty. Only slowly and by a roundabout road did men acquire the habit of producing a surplus beyond their own needs for exchange for products beyond their capacity.

Only slowly did the practice of exchange create the need for “money”—as a measure of value and medium of exchange. Still later were the precious metals selected for reasons of practical convenience as the money commodity. Later again came the adoption of conventional units (by weight) of these metals; latest of all the making of these units into coins bearing the mark of some recognised authority—in our day the State—as a guarantee of weight and quality. And not until the habit of producing for the market had grown and extended for many, many centuries did we enter upon the beginning of this modern period in which all production is for the market and all subsistence derived from it.

At first men produced to satisfy their essential needs in food and clothing. Only when this was done did they take what was left over and exchange it. The modern period begins with the creation, first, of a number of crafts so specialised that the craftsmen give their whole time to the production of one special article and get their food, etc., with the money received in exchange; second, of a number of boards or accumulations of money capable of being used to buy stocks of raw materials for fabrication into such articles; thirdly, with the creation of a class of people who had become so placed that no land was at their disposal for tillage and who therefore could not produce their own food however much they wanted to.

The owners of these stocks of money were able to begin at this point. They bought the workshops, the workmen, and the means of work. They introduced into their workshops newer forms of specialisation—so that a man no longer made a whole article but specialised on a detail part of it. They thus were able because of this better division and subdivision of the work-process to get more produced in a given time than had been previously possible. This made it possible for them to undersell the craftsmen who remained independent and to continue the underselling until a point was reached at which he was forced to give up his independence and work as a wage-worker for the capitalist whose competition had ruined him.

Such, roughly, is the way in which we arrived at our existing state of Society in which the market dominates the earth and the lords of the market are lords over vast masses of propertyless wage workers—now the overwhelming majority of the population.

In this process of competitive development the capitalist workshop has grown from puny beginnings into the mighty masses of shops, sheds, bays and plants familiar to all industrial workers. As the tool of production has massed so has the ownership concentrated into a few dominant corporations whose nominal capital is expressed in millions.

The workers have likewise been massed into industrial centres and side by side with the competition between the capitalist and the small producer—and between capitalist concerns ever growing bigger as each giant swallowed more and more of its rival—so has gone on a struggle between the workers competing for jobs.

The net result of the process is that the worker dependent wholly upon the price he can command in the labour market, a price which competition and custom have combined to keep down to a minimum, is now faced with a small but enormously powerful combination of capitalist bosses who control all the resources of the earth and are united in their determination to compel the worker to live at an even lower scale than ever before.

The competition between a host of small capitalists has ended in the virtual monopoly of a few powerful groups whose quarrels threaten to disrupt human society and whose one point of agreement is their common determination to allow the working mass just as little as they can and to get from them the utmost in work that can possibly be squeezed. Capitalism gained at the expense of small, handi-

craft production because it could produce more cheaply. This was the gain to the wealthy, the luxurious, the professional, and the capitalist classes. It was a negative gain to the propertyless worker in so far as cheap food and clothing, and little of it, is better than none at all, and a humdrum life of toil better than the risks and humiliations of a life by begging or stealing. It was, in the long run, a means for the total destruction of the class that once formed the “backbone” of every nation—the class of small peasants and craftsmen, once the vast majority, now, in Britain, totally extinct.

Capitalism was in the ascendant when it was able to draw raw materials from the surplus products of self-subsisting small producers, giving them manufactured articles in exchange. That was the operation that in fact lay behind the Trade which Made the Empire. America, Africa, the Near East, India, and the Far East—all have been theatres for the activity of the Great Powers with this as the prime motive.

Now that capitalist methods are applied to the production of raw materials, and that each territory has its own “national” capitalist clique keenly determined to monopolise the plunder of its own area, this phase of Capitalism has passed.

At first Capitalism had no difficulty in disposing of its surplus goods and so realising in cash the value extracted from the workers. Now owing to the very magnitude of Capitalist production and the universal establishment of its system, this is no longer the case. Capitalism now cannot expand outwardly. Its future growth can only be along the line of limiting output to the capacity of the world market and depressing the workers’ share to the ever lower limits.

To this process there exist two great obstacles. First, the limiting of production means putting an end to the ambitions of the smaller capitalist bosses who will resist to the uttermost; secondly, it involves an adjustment of the conflicting claims of rival groups—an adjustment that is bound to end in general disappointment; thirdly, it involves beating the worker down to a level at which he will be too feeble to produce.

And yet impossible though it be the Capitalist Class of the world are forced to attempt this adjustment. Here you may see the reason for all the Conferences, all the “produce more,” “take less” propaganda, all the wage-cuts, and all the hostility to the Communists who urge the workers to resist. Capitalism has exhausted its possibilities. It can only live by making life possible to the vast working mass. If the workers want to live they must end Capitalism.

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