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Class consciousness

Has working-class consciousness collapsed?

- Debate -

Publication date: Wednesday 3 September 2008

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Class consciousness: "The awareness of individuals in a particular social class that they share common interests and a common social situation. Class consciousness is associated with the development of a "class-for-itself" where individuals within the class unite to pursue their shared interests." Online Dictionary of Social Sciences

The crisis of working class representation is a familiar theme in the left internationally, the idea that because of the shift to the right of mass social democratic and Stalinist parties, or because of their collapse, the working class lacks a political force that can defend its interests in the national political domain.

In many countries efforts have been made to create, or begin to create, broad left parties that can begin to resolve this crisis. However the idea of the "crisis of the working class subject" takes the analysis one step further, saying in effect that class consciousness has declined to such a degree that the overwhelming majority of working class people have no consciousness of themselves as part of a class that has its own interests other than those of the ruling class; using Lukacs' distinction the working class is a "class in itself" but no longer a "class for itself". If this is correct of course then it has big implications for socialist analysis and strategy.

We argue here that the idea that the working class is no longer a "class for itself" is an exaggeration, but like most caricatures is based on aspects of reality that socialists have to identify and integrate into their strategy and tactics. Consciousness, especially mass consciousness, is a dynamic factor that is subject to change and sometimes, in periods of crisis, is subject to abrupt shifts. So any attempt to capture and interpret mass working class consciousness is likely to be partial and one-sided. Before we get into the detail of that we have to say something about the changing structure of the working class, in Britain and internationally.

John Major in 1996 argued that "we are all middle class now" – in other words working class living standards have risen to such a degree that the difference with middle class people have become blurred. However Cumbria University academic Phillip Bond has recently argued the precise opposite – the "middle classes" are being forced into the working class (1).

He argues, "The middle classes are no longer earning a living wage while a new global super class has over \$11 trillion in off shore tax havens...Forty years ago a single skilled manual wage was enough to provide a living for a working-class man, his wife and family. Now even a middle-class couple with both partners working can't bring in enough to make ends meet.

"The golden age for the salaried worker across all the OECD countries was between 1945 and 1973, when ordinary working people gained their highest percentage share of GDP. Since then the real wages of the middle and working class have stagnated or fallen, while income for the rich has rocketed and that of the super-rich has hit the stratosphere.

"The facts are astounding. Contrary to the delusions of the free-market fundamentalists, the Thatcher/Reagan revolution has come at a great cost to the working and middle classes. In the US, the top one per cent have seen a 78 per cent increase in their share of national income since 1979 with the bottom 80 per cent of the population experiencing a 15 per cent fall.

“Far from being a tide that raises all boats, neo-liberalism has undermined the wealth and security of the majority of the working population. In Britain for example, the liquid wealth of the bottom half of the populace has fallen from 12 per cent in 1976 to just one per cent in 2003, while the top 0.01 per cent in Britain are taking a larger share of national income than at any time in modern history and have seen their incomes rise by more than 500 per cent in under a generation.

“Wage earners have coped with this structural shift by taking on unprecedented levels of debt, working more and asking their partners to join the workforce. Family life has suffered; children see less of their parents than at any time in the last 100 years and since nobody has any time, civic life has virtually vanished.

“But there are signs that the general population across the globe has had enough of this rampant inequity. According to a recent FT/Harris poll, huge worldwide majorities consider income inequality to be too great. The percentages against this global shift to the rich are remarkably consistent: 87 per cent in Germany consider income inequality to be too great, 76 per cent in Spain agree. Even in Britain 74 per cent of people believe the rich should be taxed more and the poor less. What is most striking is that 80 per cent of the Chinese concur.”

While outrage at the excesses of the super rich are important and point to the likelihood of future growth in class consciousness, it is not necessarily an indication of a ‘class for itself’ now. Indeed the very economic and social changes that Phillip Bond points to have been responsible for a decline in class consciousness. In our view the fundamental factors driving this have been:

* The experience of defeat of working class struggles in the 1980s and 1990s, which has undermined confidence in collective action and solutions, and with it greatly reduced trade union membership. In Britain the key turning point was the defeat of the 1984-5 miners strike and the Wapping strike that followed.

* As a result of these defeats and as a consequence of the restructuring of the workforce associated with them, a decline in the percentage of the working class involved in manufacturing, and thus a sharp decline in the number of large, factory-based workplaces with a tradition of working class organisation and their replacement with generally smaller service-based work places.

* In Britain especially, through the semi-destruction of the social housing stock by Margaret Thatcher, forcing people into an immense economic effort to find somewhere to live and forcing people to rely on their own capital, generally in the form of a house, to find resources for their old age.

* As a consequence of these defeats and declining confidence in collective action a general ideological retreat that finds its expression in the ‘dumbing down’ of popular culture and the absurd cult of celebrity and the dreamworld of fame. This aspect is particularly important among young people who are likely to be apolitical and have no experience of trade unions, although there are important counter-examples, most importantly the involvement of young people in the environmental movement.

Where has the working class gone ?

The basic answer to this question is: nowhere. The restructuring of production internationally has shifted the focus of manufacturing industry south and east so that China is now the ‘workshop of the world’ and countries like India and Indonesia are increasingly industrialised. But that doesn’t mean that the vast majority of the population in countries like Britain aren’t working class. The latest available figures of workers by industry in Britain show this, as

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can be seen from the following table:

Occupation Percentage of the work force

Manufacturing 14%

Construction 9%

Public administration, education and health 27%

Agriculture 2%

Banking, finance, insurance etc 15%

Distribution, hotels and restaurants 21%

Energy and water 1.5%

Transport and communication 7%

Other services 7%

Source: Nasima Begum, Office for National Statistics: Labour Market Trends

The same study shows that something like 14% of the workforce has some managerial or supervisory role – everything from directors to checkout supervisors.

In each of these categories the overwhelming majority of the workforce are proletarians, ie people whose labour contributes to the production and reproduction of surplus value. But the subjective experience of the working class is now very different to what it was in the 1930s or even the 1960s. The ‘massification’ of the working class has ended, with many people working in smaller work units. In larger workplaces like call centres, the workers are likely to be low paid, highly regimented and un-unionised. Working class organisation depends on struggle and the building up of organisation and consciousness over time. It would be incredible if call centres and the like had emerged fully unionised from the beginning. So the decline in unionisation is striking: from just over 13 million workers in 1979 to just over 6 million today

But do these people, unionised or not, consider themselves to be working class? According to a survey published by the National Centre for Social Research in January 2007, 57% of people said they considered themselves to be working class, a figure that the Centre itself said was “staggering”. In the light of the ideological bombardment through the media telling us we’re all middle class, that someone with a mortgage and a car is middle class, 57% is an amazing figure, even if it’s down about 10% since the 1960s.

Interestingly the number who consider themselves working class is far in excess of those who work in ‘blue collar’ manual jobs. According to a BBC report of the survey, “...only 31% of people are actually employed in what are categorised as traditional ‘blue collar’ occupations, according to the survey. The number who consider themselves

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working class far outstrips this" (2). In other words, large numbers of those who work in call centres, warehouses, banks and hairdressers still consider themselves to be working class, even if they're not in a union.

So it seems that, in Britain at least, the working class still exists as an objective category and that very large numbers of them consider themselves to be working class. But does this amount to a 'class for itself'. Clearly consciousness of being part of a class is just a spit away from recognising that that class has its own interests but a much bigger step away from finding the means for fighting for those interests.

However two factors need to be taken into account here. First is the economic crisis which is likely to be prolonged. Like all economic crises this is a huge assault on working class living standards and conditions. Probably unemployment will be in the millions within a year or two. Price rises at something over a real figure of 10% for poorer working class families (who spend more of their income on food and energy) are catastrophic for workers whose wage increases have been held at 2% or thereabouts for several years. While growing unemployment is likely to be a disciplining factor it is highly likely that we shall see in the next period a big increase in strike action, particularly in the public sector. Already we've seen important strikes of local government workers and others this year. The likelihood is that trade unionism will grow in this period and not decline, and struggle naturally leads to an increase in levels of class consciousness not their decline.

The second factor, alluded to in the Phillip Bond report quoted above, is the growing anger many ordinary people at the huge disparity between the super-rich and everyone else. Neoliberalism has meant the ascendancy of finance capital and the swiveling of production to prioritise high profit luxury goods (3). What ordinary people see is that the super rich are rewarded for incompetence and idiocy and working class people are punished for the mistakes of the rich.

The Northern Rock example is very eloquent. Former chief executive Andy Kuipers who pioneered the 'lend money we don't have' business model that led the bank to become bankrupt was given more than £1m in 'compensation' for having to go. Northern Rock meanwhile is making 1,300 workers redundant and leads the market in house repossessions for those who are falling behind with their mortgage.

More generally the massive profits of the energy sectors and supermarkets are obvious to everyone as is the fact that the super rich generally pay little or no tax while enjoying luxury lifestyles. An amusing take on this was the popular response of Italian holidaymakers. According to Alexander Chancellor:

"As other people have to tighten their belts, do without luxuries, and scrimp on their holidays, one wonders for how long they will put up with the arrogant ostentation of the super-rich, and when they will start to insist that they take some of the pain as well. There are signs, indeed, that the worm is already beginning to turn. Fat cats arriving in dinghies last week at Sardinia's Emerald Coast were pelted with wet sand by resentful holidaymakers trying to stop them disembarking. The flotilla of celebrities from a luxury yacht moored out at sea was led by Flavio Briatore, co-owner of QPR football club and manager of Renault's formula one team.

"Briatore, accompanied by his new showgirl wife, Elisabetta, who now spends a lot of time shopping in London, had come to inaugurate a new beach restaurant that he recently transformed from a popular bar into a heavily protected retreat for luxury yacht owners and their guests, the daytime equivalent of the nearby Billionaire night club that he also owns. Briatore and his VIP guests arrived in three motorised dinghies to a storm of protest by holidaymakers already crowding the Capriccioli beach. They screamed and swore and shouted, 'Louts, go home.' They drenched them with water from their children's buckets. They hurled wet sand at them." (4)

This little incident is indicative. As the crisis deepens impatience with the super rich and celebrity culture will grow

enormously reinforcing a developing class consciousness.

The real issue: strategy and tactics

Nonetheless, anger and resentment, and the possibility of future struggles, do not a 'class for itself' make – not necessarily. A huge job has to be done to rebuild working class combativity and organisation, something that will take a whole historical period. What implications does that have for socialists? Tactics are born of overall strategy and since the working class remains the only social force capable of effecting a transition to socialism, its struggles remain at the centre of socialist concerns. However at this time there is a dispersal of fields of struggle, of campaigns and issues that do not necessarily find their focus in the organised working class. But it is not, and cannot be, a question of getting involved in 101 campaigns and 'waiting for the working class' to achieve a higher level of organisation and consciousness at a future time. On the contrary both in terms of issues and fields of struggle a working class orientation is immediately relevant.

Let's take first of all the issue of community struggles. Many issues of course present themselves first and foremost as a concern of the local community, for example hospital closures or post office closures. Campaigns on these issues are legion. But the leadership of them is contested or potentially so. Tories and even the BNP frequently involve themselves in these fights or give them demagogic support as a way of attacking New Labour. The answer to this is not just active socialist intervention but linking up with the local labour movement in general and in the first place with the trade unions involved - something that happens spontaneously on many occasions. Building alliances including the unions promotes trade unionism in the wider community.

Moreover taking central political campaigns into the labour movement both strengthens those campaigns and helps politicise and radicalise the movement. The environment is an obvious example here. This is a central political issue that needs the kind of social weight behind it that can only be eventually supplied by the organised working class. Here and now activist groups play a vital role and something like the climate change camps couldn't function without them. For socialists it is a question of forging alliances which centrally involve the labour movement.

Revolutionary socialists are not trade union fetishists and understand full well that a 'labour movement orientation' can degenerate into getting labour movement bodies that only activists attend to pass worthy resolutions that have no implications for action. Many campaign activists are sceptical about the labour movement and understandably so. Even so, unions and working class struggle remain central to our long-term strategy and the tactics of alliance building that we pursue today.

Dangers of lumpenisation

Because of the death of social democracy as a force fighting for any kind of reform, sections of the white working class where de-industrialisation has taken place – the so-called 'sink estates' – are prone to lumpenisation and the growth of the BNP. Of course the BNP is building a classic fascist alliance involving sections of the petit bourgeoisie as well as lumpenised workers. But key areas of BNP support include areas like Barking and Dagenham, Stoke-on-Trent and towns in the Manchester conurbation that are precisely areas of extreme deprivation with high unemployment, high levels of crime, drug abuse and general despair. It is becoming increasingly obvious that traditional 'anti-fascist' activities of the ANL type, while remaining important, will never crack this issue in the long term. Only a rise of working class struggle and the building of a mass working class political alternative can challenge the BNP's attempt to monopolise the political vacuum the collapse of social democracy has left in these areas.

Once again however the left cannot adopt a spontaneist, wait and see attitude, hoping for a working class upsurge and the appearance by some magical process of a broad left alternative. Class politics, of the kind provided by

Respect, aids the development of class consciousness and trade union struggle.

Global working class

Neoliberal globalisation has created a new, global working class. The decline of the peasantry and the rise of the proletariat globally creates the basis for a new class politics on a truly global scale. As Paul Mason documents in his book *Live Working or Die Fighting* (5) the emergence of a new class consciousness will be a long and complicated process. In China massive struggles happen daily, largely hidden from view, but the development of a working class consciousness and organisation is proceeding slowly. In Vietnam this year dozens of strikes (6) have occurred in factories owned by the transnational corporations and this is indicative of the likely development in many countries.

Class consciousness may have declined in Western countries, but a decline does not denote an absence. To truly become a 'class for itself' the working class, in Britain and elsewhere, has not just to fight for its immediate interests but to fight for an historical alternative. This is a work in process. Socialism is not inevitable but only the working class can develop the consciousness and organisation to bring it about. That certainty remains at the heart of socialist strategy and tactics.

Notes

1. <http://www.cumbria.ac.uk/AboutUs/News/Press%20Releases/2008/June/PR339.aspx>
2. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/6295743.stm>
3. See M. Chossudovsky, *The Globalisation of Poverty*, <http://globalresearch.ca/globaloutlook/GofP.html>
4. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/aug/15/italy.globaleconomy>
5. See: <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Live-Working-Die-Fighting-Global/dp/0436206153>
6. See "Vietnam labour strikes scare foreign companies"
<http://asia.news.yahoo.com/060409/afp/060409020352business.html>

This article will appear in a future issue of Socialist Resistance