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### Workers Who Benefit from the Exploitation of Other Workers

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## Comments on “Workers Who Benefit from the Exploitation of Other Workers”

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Working-class internationalism is needed more than ever today, and this attempt to try and understand why it has been so hard to achieve is very welcome. Capitalism is inherently global; the imperative to ‘accumulate, accumulate!’ pushes it to expand into every corner of the world in search of new sources of raw materials, land, markets and labour power. What has been characterised as ‘the first international division of labour’ emerged out of the imperialist phase of capitalist expansion, when capital depended heavily on state intervention to support its expansion around the world. Inevitably, this led to inter-imperialist competition and conflict, as each imperial power tried to assert control over more territory, either directly, by establishing its own rule in the countries it colonised, or by less direct methods, such as installing local leaders whose interests were so entwined with those of the imperial elite that they could be partners in exploiting the working people of their country.

In this period, it is possible to identify both direct and indirect benefits accruing to workers in the imperialist countries from the exploitation of colonised working people, as listed in the paper. In general, then, it is true that imperialism in this period eventually provides benefits for workers in the imperialist countries which are enabled by the exploitation of working people in the colonies, but with three caveats:



First, the period should be extended backwards to include the slave trade and genocide of the indigenous peoples of the Americas and Australia, which undoubtedly contributed to both the industrial expansion of the imperialist countries and the reshaping of the global division of labour.

Second, we can question whether this occurred in a 'semi-capitalist global market,' and whether 'the commodities imported into the capitalist countries... were produced in a non-capitalist manner'. The slaves and indentured labourers working on plantations and in mines producing raw materials and consumer goods, even the peasants forced to produce sugar, tea, indigo, coffee and opium, were working under the control of capital and for a capitalist market, and were therefore involved in capitalist relations of production.

Third, serious consideration needs to be given to analyses showing that what emerged from the Russian and Chinese revolutions was not an alternative to capitalism but a different form of capitalism; lacking recognition of this, it becomes difficult to explain subsequent developments in these countries. Moreover, although there was briefly hope that the colonies of the tsarist empire would be liberated after the revolution, they were in fact exploited brutally under Stalinism. It would be worthwhile investigating whether workers in this particular imperialist heartland (Russia) have benefited from the exploitation of working people in its colonies.

This phase of capitalism reached its limits in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. On one side it encountered liberation struggles of colonised peoples and industrialisation in their countries. On the other, the efforts of imperial bourgeoisies to block industrialisation of their colonies meant that the potential for exporting more manufactured products to these impoverished nations, as well as for counteracting the tendency of the rate of profit to fall by investing in their industries, confronted obstacles. Division of the world into empires constituted a drag on the most advanced capitals, which relied on their technological superiority rather than on protection and promotion by a nation-state. The ICT revolution helped to promote a new and far more intricate and complex international division of labour.

Although workers in developed countries still benefit from cheap products imported from the Third World, this advantage comes at a huge price: unemployment resulting from the transfer of what they see as 'their jobs' to these countries. Paradoxically, this has led a significant section of the working class in developed countries to embrace an inverted version of the view of Fritz Sternberg, Samir Amin, Arghiri Emmanuel and Zak Cope that there is an outright antagonism between the interests of workers in First

World countries and workers in Third World countries, leading them to fall prey to the neo-protectionist, isolationist rhetoric of politicians like Donald Trump. Yet as the paper shows, capitalist production in each country is today so intricately linked to and dependent on capitalist production in other countries that delinking would destroy employment, impoverishing and disempowering workers in their own country.

We need to keep in mind the fact that indifference to the suffering of workers in other countries is as prevalent *between developing countries* and *between developed countries*, and may be linked to ignorance and preoccupation with one’s own struggle for survival as much as to jingoism and xenophobia. Thus building solidarity between British and French workers or between Indian and Pakistani workers may be as challenging as building solidarity between workers of former imperial powers and former colonies, despite the fact that their cultures and histories have so much in common. Historical differences between countries in the same category may mean that workers in countries which have set up a robust public healthcare system may be better off when illness strikes than workers in a country which is equally rich or poor with a minimal public healthcare system. Hence, finding out about workers in other countries would be crucial to building solidarity.

It is also important to keep in mind *inequality within countries* (where, for example, workers with secure labour contracts and decent wages are better off than workers in casual, precarious employment, who are also more likely to be women, children and ethno-religious minorities including indigenous peoples). In these cases too, workers from the majority community may benefit from discrimination against ethno-religious minorities, most male workers benefit from the unwaged domestic labour of women and girls in their families, and so on.

The *only* way forward is to embark on the difficult path of building solidarity between workers whose immediate interests may appear to be contradictory. Where lack of solidarity is a result of ignorance – for example, workers in developed countries seeing Third World workers as poor because they are docile and compliant, or Third World workers seeing First World workers as uniformly rich and privileged – films, stories and actual interactions can demonstrate to the former that many Third World workers are in fact engaged in militant struggles and their poverty is a legacy of imperialism, and to the latter that many First World workers suffer unemployment or are underpaid and work in hazardous conditions.

Where hostility is based on racism, casteism or xenophobia, or religious fundamentalism and bigotry, or sexism and homophobia, combating it is

much harder, because these divisions within the working class are the consequence of attitudes imbibed from early childhood, and so deeply rooted that they are virtually unconscious. In their case, the craving for a sense of belonging to communities built on narrow, one-dimensional identities is probably a more potent driving force than any material benefit. Therefore, constructing more complex identities and a sense of belonging to a broader working-class community would be necessary to combat such divisions.

Only a united working class can confront global capitalism successfully. Theories that postulate an immutable contradiction between the interests of workers in developed and developing countries inadvertently divide workers and thereby strengthen capitalism.

### ***Rohini Hensman***

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Marcel van der Linden é, certamente, um dos mais qualificados historiadores sociais do trabalho. Ao longo de sua vasta obra, ele demonstra uma enorme capacidade de entender as *tendências mais amplas da história do trabalho*, articulando-as, em seus processos históricos, aos tantos desafios do movimento operário contemporâneo. Conhecedor em profundidade do universo *microcômico* do trabalho, consegue relacioná-los e inserí-los na complexa teia de relações sociais que estão presentes nas ações da classe trabalhadora hoje.

Um exemplo desta singular qualidade encontramos neste “Workers Who Benefit from the Exploitation of Other Workers”, onde o autor apresenta um rico conjunto de problemas com a finalidade de melhor compreender quais são os principais elementos que dificultam a solidariedade internacional entre a classe trabalhadora do Norte e a do Sul do mundo. Van der Linden por certo reconhece e destaca momentos efetivos de uma rica solidariedade de classe. Por exemplo, cita as mobilizações e greves que ocorreram durante a vigência da Primeira Internacional, mas nos recorda também do colapso da Segunda Internacional, além de tantos outros exemplos críticos que encontramos na história do movimento operário.

Sua indagação principal talvez possa ser assim resumida: onde encontramos as causas que dificultam e obstam a solidariedade operária entre o Norte e o Sul?

Van der Linden apresenta, então, elementos *materiais* e *objetivos* de diferenciação (salarial, renda, nível de emprego, consumo, etc) no interior da classe trabalhadora global, que resultam das diferentes taxas de

produtividades do trabalho existentes entre o centro e a periferia. Temporalmente, o autor analisa dois amplos períodos: a *primeira divisão internacional do trabalho* (1830/1940) e a *era do fordismo e pós-fordismo* (1940 até o presente).

Na impossibilidade de recuperar os diversos elementos históricos e analíticos apresentados pelo autor (dado o limitado espaço que temos), vamos fazer alguns breves comentários adicionais ao segundo período. Van der Linden destaca o vasto crescimento global da classe trabalhadora, no que contrasta positivamente com a tendência eurocêntrica que, por décadas, defendeu a tese do *fim* ou da *perda de relevância do trabalho*. E, ao assim fazer, avançou positivamente na compreensão das novas dimensões desta classe, na fase atual de transnacionalização do capital.

Nosso comentário, então, caminha em clara sintonia com as reflexões de Marcel van der Linden, sugerindo algumas pistas que estão em curso na classe operária. Isto por que, no mundo do trabalho contemporâneo, a *nova morfologia do trabalho* vem ampliando ainda mais suas conformações, não somente em relação às diferenciações nacionais e regionais, mas também pelo *reconhecimento* de *seus decisivos recortes de gênero, etnia/raça, geração, etc*, contemplando novas *heterogeneidades e fragmentações* que por certo dificultam, como indica van der Linden, a construção de um movimento operário internacional.

Nossa indicação, então, é que talvez estejamos presenciando o afloramento de um novo elemento importante: nos países capitalistas do Norte, a parcela da classe trabalhadora mais precarizada, que se autodenomina como *precarizado* (aqui incluso não só os jovens, mas também o enorme contingente de trabalho imigrante), vem se expandindo significativamente e assim aproxima-se mais efetivamente do proletariado do Sul, que sempre vivenciou níveis intensos de exploração e de precarização da força de trabalho. Se tivermos razão em nossa indicação, pode estar nascendo, então, um efetivo *ponto de maior aproximação* entre a classe trabalhadora do Norte e do Sul, que poderá auxiliar na ampliação dos laços de solidariedade.

Como pude desenvolver em *O Privilégio da Servidão (o novo proletariado de serviços na era digital)* (Boitempo, 2020), a *lógica destrutiva do capital* hoje vigente, é *múltipla* em sua *aparência*, mas *una* em sua *essência*. E a eclosão da pandemia do COVID-19 (que nos gerou o *capitalismo virótico*), parece capaz de auxiliar na aproximação entre os distintos segmentos da classe trabalhadora. Os exemplos dos *trabalhos uberizados, intermitentes e informais*, que se expandem no Sul e também no Norte, podem ajudar, em um futuro

talvez não muito distante, na criação de novos laços de solidariedade e organicidade nas lutas internacionais do proletariado contra o enorme processo de *precarização estrutural do trabalho que vem se expandindo em escala global*.

A ampliação desse *novo proletariado*, largamente vinculado à indústria de serviços, às plataformas digitais, aos “aplicativos”, à indústria de *fast food*, hoteleira, ao turismo, aos *call center* e *telemarketing*, etc, é exemplo emblemático do crescimento da classe trabalhadora contemporânea. E os exemplos da China, Índia e demais países asiáticos, é clara expressão desta ampliação também do espaço industrial, fenômeno que se desenvolve também na agroindústria.

Assim, estamos desafiados a compreender a *nova morfologia da classe trabalhadora*, cujo elemento mais visível é o seu desenho multifacetado, que faz *aflorar tantas transversalidades entre classe, geração, gênero, etnia etc*. E as pistas de Marcel van der Linden, ao tratar da expansão do capitalismo global, nos ajudam a entender que esse *novo proletariado*, cada vez mais inserido nas *novas cadeias produtivas de valor*, traz também a possibilidade de avançar em direção a uma ação mais internacional da classe trabalhadora.

***Ricardo Antunes***