

What is the capitalist class?

Thursday, May 11, 2006

By: Tahnee Stair

Part of a series on the fundamentals of Marxism

Why do workers have to struggle just to survive while some have so much wealth? Who rules this society? Is it the rich? Is it the politicians? Is it the owners, the managers? And how can society be changed?

In 1847, people of many nationalities gathered in London to answer questions like these. They were struggling to remove the ruling class from power. They wanted the working class to be in charge, and to use the world's wealth to meet people's needs. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels were asked to write a pamphlet explaining the group's positions. It is called the Communist Manifesto.

The Manifesto outlines written history and shows that changes in society are based on struggle between different classes of people. Social classes, Marx and Engels explained, were determined by a common relation to the way wealth is produced and exploited in a society. Today, the class struggle is mainly between the ruling capitalist class and the working class.

The bourgeoisie

Each country has its own ruling class. In capitalist countries, the rulers own the means of production and employ workers. The capitalist class is also called the bourgeoisie. Means of production are what it takes to produce goods. Raw materials, satellite networks, machinery, ships and factories are examples. Workers own nothing but their ability to sell their labor for a wage.

Because they privately own the means of production, capitalists keep profits. They make higher profits by cutting workers' wages and introducing new technology to speed up production.

Under capitalism, the owner, or boss, gets richer as production increases. The working class gets poorer. But capitalists do not control the most important source of power. Production does not happen without the labor of workers. Workers keep the system running, but can also shut it down. Workers use their power by joining together in unions and withholding labor to win demands from the bosses.

Corporations are companies owned by multiple capitalists. Wal-Mart, Exxon Mobil, and General Motors are the biggest U.S. corporations. They are among the largest in the world. Whoever owns the majority of a corporation controls it. Ruling class families often own a majority of a corporation. The Walton family owns the majority of Wal-Mart. They have \$90 billion in wealth. That is more wealth than the 4 million people of Singapore produced in 2003. Bill Gates is the wealthiest member of the ruling class; he has \$48 billion. (Forbes.com, "The Forbes 400," 2004) Although he may be the richest, Gates and his company are not necessarily the most powerful capitalists in the ruling class. The intertangling of economic and political power has developed over a long time and has created longstanding networks of power inside the capitalist establishment.

People who run the corporations are called Chief Executive Officers. Lee R. Raymond is the CEO of Exxon/Mobil. His 2003 salary was \$25.2 million, according to Forbes magazine. CEOs receive numerous perks like discounts on corporate stock and free

use of company jets.

Wealth and power is inherited by new capitalist generations from the old. The Rockefeller (oil) and Morgan (banking) families are two examples. Capitalists do not have wealth and power because they work harder than millions of people or because they are smarter. Through private ownership, the capitalist system allows them to keep the wealth produced by workers.

Politicians, military, small owners and managers

Are elected officials part of the ruling class? Some politicians are. Dick Cheney was once CEO of the largest oil service corporation, Halliburton. George Bush used to be an executive of a small oil company. John Kerry and his immediate family have \$747 million in personal wealth.

Millionaires are common in Congress, especially in the "millionaires club" known as the Senate. But whether they are rich or not, elected officials in the U.S. are in office to represent the interests of the capitalist class. Politicians' campaigns are financed by the ruling class. As Marx explained, elected officials act as an organizing committee for the ruling class. They manage the affairs of state for the capitalists.

The ruling class uses the military to protect their private property and oppress workers.

But what class is the military? There are different classes in the military. Generals often come from the ruling class. The majority of soldiers come from the working class, so their loyalty to the ruling class is never a sure bet. Many workers have no way to survive other than taking a job with the military. Due to racism the poorest workers are disproportionately Black, Latino, Asian, Arab and Native American. This is reflected in the military.

The ruling class uses racism to keep the workers divided. They use laws and prisons, schools and the corporate media to spread racism. Fighting racism is integral to fighting capitalism.

Owners of neighborhood markets and landlords are examples of small capitalists. If owners employ other people, they are capitalists-even if the people they employ are family members. If they don't employ other people, they hope to. If an owner's small business does not grow, it fails. The business is taken over by a larger one.

Is a manager in the work place a capitalist? Managers who supervise workers don't usually own the company. They receive higher pay and better benefits than workers. They are not capitalists, but are paid to act in the interests of the capitalist bosses.

There are many different layers within the ruling class and the working class. There is also a huge middle class in the U.S. Yet, both the capitalist and working class have fewer layers within them than any other class in history. The wealth of the ruling class is constantly being concentrated in to fewer hands. Capitalism is always pushing more people into the working class. The working class is becoming poorer and larger.

Society can change

The production of goods and services as a means to maximize profits for a tiny segment of the population-the sole reason that goods and services are produced under capitalism-has created a severe constraint on the potential productive power

of society. It has made it impossible to meet human needs.

Because production is socialized, the entire working class is involved in the process, and society produces more wealth than ever before. If the ownership of that wealth was also socialized, instead of being the private property of the few, all workers' needs could be met. Food, housing, education, health care, and a healthy environment could be a right for all. This type of system is socialism. In the first stage of socialism, the principle of equal pay for equal work can be immediately realized.

Regular recessions, depressions and mass unemployment are the consequences of the capitalist boom and bust cycle. Socialism, liberated from this, is the only economic system that can unleash the full productive power of humanity and eventually distribute the abundant goods of society to all based on human need. This is what Marx described as the transition from pre-history to history as human beings themselves-freed from the struggle for individual survival-reconstruct a new society based on social cooperation and individual development.

What is capitalism?

Wednesday, September 1, 2004

By: Caneisha Mills

Part of a series on the fundamentals of Marxism

Karl Marx

Today, there is an enormous economic gap between the rich and the poor. According to the International Labor Organization, "one billion people are unemployed or underemployed" worldwide. Yet, six of the world's richest people have a combined wealth of \$134.6 billion. These six people have more money than nearly everyone else will see in their lifetime.

That is the nature of capitalism.

But what is capitalism? How can a tiny group of people accumulate vast wealth while others cannot pay their bills? How can there be multi-billionaires when people live on the streets?

Owners vs. workers

In all class societies, be it ancient slavery, feudalism or capitalism, wealth is the product of human labor. All of these social systems are based on exploitation. A few own and control the surplus product produced by the labor of the many.

For example, under the slave system in the U.S. before the Civil War, big landowners owned Black workers outright—along with everything they produced. Under the feudal system of medieval Europe, lords owned the land, while serfs turned over any extra produce or goods in exchange for the right to live on the land and grow enough to feed their families.

Capitalism is different from these earlier systems in that the owning class—the capitalists—rule by virtue of owning the means of production, called capital—factories, mines, stores, land, etc. Workers can only live by selling their labor to the capitalists for wages. Without going to work, selling their labor to the bosses, workers would starve.

Modern capitalists accumulate their vast fortunes by legally owning and profiting from the products created by wage workers. The difference between the social

systems is the mode of exploitation, along with the relations between the ruling class and the exploited class.

Under capitalism, the capitalist class and the working class are the two main classes. The interests and needs of these classes are not the same.

The capitalist class owns the wealth, while the working class produces everything for society. Most people in the world belong to the working class. Workers may own things such as a car or house, but they do not own capital. Capital is property that produces surplus value by exploiting labor.

The ownership of capital by one class and not the other results in an ever increasing polarization between the capitalists and the workers.

Surplus value and exploitation

Wal-Mart gives a prime example of the great polarization between these two classes. Wal-Mart employs around 1.4 million people in the U.S., and most employees make \$7.50 an hour. If every employee worked 8 hours a day for five days a week, Wal-Mart would pay a little over \$20 billion each year in wages.

In 2002, Wal-Mart sales totaled \$217 billion and their costs were \$207 billion (including the wages paid to workers), leaving an additional \$10 billion. Where did that extra \$10 billion come from? It came from the hard labor of the workers. Instead of going to the workers, it goes into the pockets of Wal-Mart's owners as profit. A basic principle of economics is that labor produces value.

Wal-Mart, like other companies, claims to work "for the people." Sam Walton, the founder of Wal-Mart said, "We're all working together; that's the secret." If everyone at Wal-Mart is working together, why don't the workers benefit from the additional money earned? It is because the workers and the owners are not working together at all.

The total amount of wealth produced by workers for the owners is the cost of their labor—\$20 billion plus the extra \$10 billion, in this example. This means the workers at Wal-Mart toil the first two-thirds of each day to pay for the cost of their labor. The remaining third of the day, they work to make money for the boss. This unpaid labor creates what is known as surplus value. The money taken from the surplus value goes directly into the owners' pockets.

Some of that surplus goes to taxes and other expenses. But the big part is pure profit—\$7 billion a year, in Wal-Mart's case.

Wal-Mart reaps millions while its workers and those of its suppliers have their surplus value stolen.

Capitalist crisis

The capitalists at Wal-Mart, like all capitalists, reap maximum profits while millions are poor and hungry. More than 800 million people around the world suffer from malnutrition because they do not have enough food to eat. That's not because there is a shortage of food in the world; on the contrary, there is more than enough food produced in the world today to provide for all.

This irrational situation is due to the fact that capitalists organize what they produce

not by what is needed, but rather to earn profits. If goods are produced that do not make a profit, they are thrown away or destroyed.

Each capitalist produces to outproduce and outsell the competitors. They each race for an uncertain market, eventually producing more than can be sold at a profit. The unplanned character of capitalist competition leads from economic boom to bust.

Unable to sell off their inventories, the capitalists are forced to close factories. Workers are thrown out of work and so can afford to buy even less, causing more shutdowns in production. These crises in production are known as recessions or depressions, and they are built into the way the capitalist system is organized.

If the amount of food produced or the question of whether or not to produce were no longer bound by the profit-driven capitalist system, overproduction and hunger would not exist.

This dynamic will continue to exist as long as we live under capitalism. There will always be hungry and malnourished people while others throw away food.

Socialism is the answer

People will never have the things they need, such as food or healthcare under capitalism. But there is an alternative: socialism.

Socialism eliminates profit as the motive for production and replaces it with human need. The property of the capitalists, which is really the product of our labor, no longer belongs to them; it belongs to all of society.

Under socialism, the problem of hunger is solved immediately because the productive capacity exists to produce enough food to feed everyone. Society is organized to meet human need—not to make profits for a few.

What is surplus value?

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By: Bill Gottlieb

Part of a series on the fundamentals of Marxism

Within the framework of capitalist mythology, wealth and poverty are explained by psychology or individual personality traits. Rich people are rich by virtue of industriousness, hard work and conscientious saving. Poor people are poor because of laziness or other physical or personal defects.

According to this mythology, the only way to address social and economic problems is to appeal to those who have on behalf of those who don't. Fair trade should replace "free trade," and thus abolish exploitation. Reactionary central bankers like Alan Greenspan should be removed in favor of a progressive monetary policy that could eliminate unemployment and lead to permanent prosperity.

Marxism, by contrast, views the root of the economic disparities within the structure of capitalism itself. Surplus value is the key to understanding why society is divided into a handful of super-rich and millions of poor and working people.

Commodities and labor power

All human societies have been marked by a division of labor. In early societies, some

people hunted while others collected food and supplies. Over time, however, the division of labor became more complex, and trade and markets developed.

As the market developed, the movements of prices and profits increasingly regulated the division of labor. Fewer products were produced for immediate consumption and more products were produced for sale on the market—they became commodities. Eventually, human beings even began to sell their labor time; labor power itself became a commodity to be bought and sold on the market. The capitalist mode of production had arrived.

Capitalist economists and thinkers of the 17th and 18th centuries like William Petty, Benjamin Franklin, and Adam Smith tried to explain the basis on which commodities could be exchanged. They saw that the capitalist economy was really a complex set of relations in which the products of human labor are exchanged.

In the classical theory, each commodity has a natural price that reflects the average amount of labor time that was needed to produce it. The more human labor that is needed on average to produce a given commodity, the higher its natural price will be. Every commodity has both a use value, which means it meets a human need or want, and an exchange value, which is determined by the amount of labor socially necessary to produce it.

At the beginning of the 19th century, English economist David Ricardo, a brilliant and extremely logical thinker, tried to tie it all together into a completely consistent theory of capitalist economy—which Ricardo envisioned as the only possible form of economy. He thus brought classical capitalist economic theory to its highest point.

Labor power as a commodity

German revolutionary Karl Marx used Ricardo as the starting point of his own economic theory of capitalism. Marx realized that workers do not sell their labor, but rather their labor power—their ability to work.

In one sense, labor power is a commodity like all other commodities. It has a use value and an exchange value. Labor power's exchange value is determined by what it takes to produce it. For example, workers need food, clothes, and shelter. Workers also need enough commodities to raise the next generation.

Purchasing labor power means paying an employee wages. These wages are based on labor power's exchange value—the minimum socially necessary to live and reproduce.

Labor power and surplus value

But labor power is also a commodity unlike all other commodities. Labor power is the only commodity that once used actually creates exchange value. In other words, the value that a laborer produces in a day exceeds what it takes to keep that laborer alive. For part of the day, the workers produce the value that covers the cost of their own existence. In essence, what the workers produce the rest of the day is unpaid labor.

Marxists call this extra value that the worker produces during the course of a day's work "surplus value." Under capitalism, the owners of capital—the ones who buy the workers' labor power—own the fruits of that labor. This is how the capitalists make profits—when the commodity produced by the workers is sold in the marketplace, its

price is far above the amount the capitalist had to spend in wages to produce it. The capitalist takes the difference. The capitalist owns the surplus value.

To the employer, labor power has a very clear use value: it earns the capitalist a profit. This is the basic inequality built into the capitalist system. As long as one small class of owners controls the surplus value created by the working class, there will always be rich and poor, wealth and poverty.

Unlike the classical capitalist economists who only touched on the subject of surplus value, Marx understood that surplus value was the basis of capitalist profit.

Based on a full understanding of the labor theory of value, surplus value, and the nature of capitalism, it becomes clear that reforms or appeals to the capitalist class are inadequate. Exploitation and thievery are built into capitalist relations. In the drive for increasing profits, wages are held as low as possible.

Socialists aim to abolish the right of the tiny capitalist class to own in private the surplus value that is created by the millions of workers in society. Instead of serving private gain, the productivity of humanity and society's surplus would benefit the vast majority of society—those who produce it.

What is the working class?

Thursday, May 11, 2006

By: Ben Becker

Part of a series on the fundamentals of Marxism

The Marxist outlook is based on the irreconcilable conflict between the working class (the proletariat) and the ruling capitalist class (the bourgeoisie). But how do we determine which people belong to which class? Is a secretary a worker? What about professionals? Isn't there a middle class as well? Why do Marxists look to the working class to bring revolutionary change?

When class is talked about in the media or schools, it is in terms of income. "Upper class" means "rich," "lower class" means "poor," and everyone in between is in the middle class. Mainstream commercial culture idolizes the ruling class, demeans the average person's lifestyle, and refers to blue-collar work as "working class." It is not surprising that a vast majority of U.S. workers believe they are middle class.

But the commonly held definition of "class" is imprecise. Is everyone with a bank account or a child in college middle class? Is class just a question of how you perceive yourself?

The working class is composed of people who work for others, while members of the ruling class have people work for them. The vast majority of the U.S. is working class.

Different sources of income

The word "working" is not arbitrary. It refers to people who must sell their ability to work to employers. They are paid a set wage, salary or commission (regardless of how much profit they make for their bosses.)

Employers own the factories, offices, mines, restaurant chains and banks. To make money, however, they also need labor. The employers buy the workers' most valuable possession—the ability to work—and apply it to their businesses to turn a profit.

But don't CEOs work? Although it is true that some employers take on managerial duties, that is of a completely different nature. Employers earn their money not from their own individual labor, but from their ownership of the wealth produced by others. They own and sell the services and goods produced by the working class.

When the capitalists divide up the ownership of a company into shares, they each take a certain percentage of what the worker makes. They are only "sharing" amongst themselves. The ruling class survives and thrives due to its ownership, not its labor.

The "middle class"

Does this mean there is no middle class? Surely, there are different layers of the owning class as well as of the working class.

Among the working class are professionals whose work and elevated incomes differentiate their ways of life from lower-paid workers. While the average worker hopes to have some spending money for the weekend, the professional often hopes to build a stock portfolio, become a partial owner and live off the labor of others. This privileged layer of the working class easily intermingles with the small owners like shopkeepers or self-employed lawyers and doctors, who often identify with the interests of big owners even though they are usually victims of the banks and big corporations.

In the last few decades, the U.S. economy has transformed greatly. The workforce is no longer only concentrated in factories although millions of workers still do work in the industrial sector. Millions of other workers are now working in service industries, including ever-growing numbers of women, African American workers and immigrants.

For some workers, these changes have fostered the illusion that they are part of a permanently stable "middle class." But service-oriented jobs hold the same problems for the working class as manufacturing positions. In every kitchen and every cubicle, workers' wages and benefits are under attack.

Workers see the growing army of unemployed and fear for their own jobs. No matter how many mornings they come to work, they recognize that the building still does not belong to them. No matter how many times they have worked a particular machine, the machine is not theirs. Most workers still spend their days repeating a few tasks over and over again.

Revolutionary potential

Underneath these miserable conditions lies the potential for revolution. The working class, which on the surface appears to hold no power in politics or the workplace, actually possesses the greatest power of all. If workers unite on a political or economic issue and withhold their labor, the power of the working class becomes instantly recognized.

The working class holds the ability to create a new society. It produces the wealth, it has the training and, most of all, it is the vast majority of humanity.

Working people are taught to feel grateful for the small comforts they receive in exchange for the vast wealth they produce-their home, their car or their television.

All these comforts evaporate, though, the second that bosses announce layoffs or a family member becomes sick and healthcare costs mount.

An economy based on a tiny handful of people owning the wealth produced by the great majority can only offer the promise of subsistence wages and perpetual job insecurity. In the daily grind, workers inevitably find themselves laboring for an economy that takes without giving. They find themselves, like U.S. soldiers in Iraq, fighting a war that does not serve their interests.

History shows that in times of great social change, the illusions of today are cast aside as the working class moves forward to fulfill its historic role as the agent for revolutionary change. Socialists work to hasten this process.

What is the state?

Thursday, May 11, 2006

By: Saul Kanowitz

Part of a series on the fundamentals of Marxism

When people talk about “the state” in day-to-day conversation, they are usually referring to government agencies like civil services or any other service funded by taxes. Maybe, if the conversation is more directly concerned about politics, “the state” might be used to describe elected officials and their staffs.

For revolutionaries, understanding this term has special importance. After all, a real revolution defeats the existing state and replaces it with a new social force.

Russian revolutionary leader V.I. Lenin synthesized the Marxist view on the state in a 1917 pamphlet, “State and Revolution.” Just months after completing the pamphlet, Lenin led the Bolshevik party in the victorious October Revolution in Russia. Since then, every successful socialist revolution has been guided by his view of the state.

In the pamphlet, the state is defined as “an organ of class rule, an organ for the oppression of one class by another.” That means, first and foremost, having armed bodies like an army and police in order to enforce that oppression.

This definition is based on the fact that society is fundamentally divided into exploited classes and exploiting classes. In modern capitalist society, the workers on one side and the bosses, or capitalists, on the other represent the two main classes who have opposing and irreconcilable interests. The capitalists’ primary interest is the accumulation of profits through the greatest exploitation of the workers. The workers’ primary short-term interest is minimizing exploitation so as to receive the best wages possible in order to survive and support themselves and their families.

The capitalists, while small in number, are the ruling class. The workers, while being the overwhelming majority of society, are the exploited class. This lopsided situation can ultimately only be maintained by force and violence. Without the state to moderate this irreconcilable conflict, society would be in a constant state of class war.

Enforcing profits

The United States is a capitalist society, where the right of capitalists to make a profit is placed above all other rights, such as workers’ rights, the right to housing, jobs, food, healthcare, etc. This is reflected in the laws of society, in which the highest right is the right to own private property—property that generates wealth. But these

laws would be just the fantasies of the rich if it were not for the soldiers and cops that enforce them and the courts and jails that administer them.

For example, real estate owners have the right to keep housing vacant while people are homeless. If homeless workers try to live in the vacant housing, the cops will defend the owner's property rights by evicting them, using force if necessary. The courts will convict the homeless of the crime of destroying private property. The innocent will go to jail.

The real estate owners are never charged with the crime of hoarding such a needed resource. The cops are never seen forcing open the doors of the vacant housing and leading the homeless people inside. The cops are not trained to go to the real estate owners' homes and arrest them for hoarding housing for profit. Only in the rarest of cases do the courts put landlords in jail for violating the rights of tenants—and even then, only when the violation is so public and blatant that masses of people threaten to take matters into their own hands.

The sharper the class struggle becomes, the more clearly the violent nature of the state is seen. For example, in the December 2005 strike by New York City transit workers that shut down city subways and buses, thousands of cops were called on duty to protect the transit authority's property and to make sure that picketers did not deal out justice to scabs trying to cross picket lines. Union leaders were threatened with jail.

When the people's struggle goes beyond the bounds of what police can contain—such as in the massive rebellions that swept cities like Los Angeles, Detroit and Newark in the 1960s or the mass Bonus March of unemployed veterans in 1932—the armed forces are called in to “restore order.”

Smash the capitalist state

What does all this mean for those who are trying to build a society based on the interests of working people, the vast majority of society? It means that a revolution involves smashing the state of the exploiting class and replacing it with new forces organized to defend the workers' interests.

That is what happened in the 1959 Cuban revolution. The capitalist class was overthrown and the Cuban working class is now the ruling class. The old army, cops, courts and laws of the former Batista dictatorship were destroyed.

Those institutions have been replaced by a new state whose purpose is to protect the interests of the working class, the vast majority of Cuban society. Laws guaranteeing all Cubans a home, a minimum diet, free and universal education and healthcare have been enacted and enforced by the courts and police.

Should the U.S. government try to invade Cuba or try to aid Cuban counterrevolutionaries to rise up against the Cuban revolution, they will meet the organized resistance of the Cuban workers' army and popular militias.

As long as there are exploiting and exploited classes on the planet, there will be the need for armies, cops, courts and laws that defend the interests of either the exploiting classes or the formerly exploited classes that have freed themselves from capitalist oppression. Only after the organized terror of the tiny elite of imperialist bankers and big business owners is defeated on a world scale will there be the possibility of building a society organized not on the basis of force but on cooperation

and solidarity.

What is class struggle?

Thursday, May 11, 2006

By: Nathalie Hrzi

Part of a series on the fundamentals of Marxism

“If class warfare is being waged in America, my class is clearly winning.” Those were the words of billionaire Warren Buffett, chair of Berkshire Hathaway, an insurance and investment holding company. Buffett is the second-richest man in the world.

Indeed, class struggle is raging across the United States and around the world. It is a basic feature of life in capitalist society. But billionaire Buffett’s bravado is short-sighted. Class struggle is both the reality of everyday life under capitalism and the way forward to a society based on human needs and not profit.

There are two main classes in capitalist society—owners and workers. The owners, or capitalists, own the banks, the factories, and the corporations—in other words, everything essential to society’s productive capabilities. Their profits derive from work that is done by workers. Workers, on the other hand, can only survive by selling their ability to work to the owners.

The owners have a single goal: increasing profit. Since profits are based on the value that workers add in production above and beyond the cost of production, including wages, owners try to keep the cost of labor as low as possible. Workers, on the other hand, need to earn enough for food, clothing, shelter, education and other necessities. Workers’ and owners’ interests are diametrically opposed. This is the basis for class struggle.

A form of class struggle is strikes and other labor struggles. In those fights, workers join together based on common interests as workers to win back some of the surplus value they have produced.

But class struggle is constant, even in periods of relative labor “peace.” Even when workers are not struggling to increase their share of the wealth they produce, the owners are trying to increase their share. Increased productivity, decreased wages, shifting more taxes from the corporations to the working class, cutting health care benefits—all these are ways in which the capitalist class wages class struggle against the workers.

Forms of class struggle

Awareness of class interests and looking for ways to advance these interests in the class struggle is called class consciousness. For the working class, class consciousness means understanding the need for unity and solidarity of the whole class against the tiny handful of corporate and banking profiteers.

Unfortunately, in most cases the ruling class is far more class conscious than the oppressed class. It promotes racism, sexism, anti-gay bigotry, national chauvinism and other divisive ideologies in order to keep the working class divided.

For that reason, the struggle against racism is an essential part of the working class struggle, especially in the United States. Racism, a legacy of centuries of slavery in the U.S., divides the working class, pitting white workers against Black, Latino or other immigrant workers against each other—despite the fact that all these workers

have common class interests.

The struggle against racism is then a class struggle to achieve unity in the face of the owners' constant attacks. Building solidarity among workers of all races and nationalities and fighting sexism, chauvinism and bigotry against lesbian/gay/bi/trans people advances the class struggle for the workers by building unity in our class.

The class struggle may take many other forms. When officers on the battlefield tell enlisted personnel to carry out orders in the service of imperialist war and the soldiers refuse, that is a form of class struggle. When workers come together to fight for health care or to defend Social Security, that is class struggle.

Sometimes, the class struggle of workers in an office or factory for reform against the daily abuses that occur under capitalism, come together into a struggle against the whole ruling class. In those cases, the class struggle may take the form of a struggle to overturn the state and to take political power for the working class. That's what happened in the revolutions in Russia, China, Cuba and other countries.

It doesn't have to be that way

The capitalist media and schoolbooks tell us that there has always been class society, similar to ours. The opposite is true. In *The Origin of Private Property, the Family and the State*, 19th century German revolutionary Friedrich Engels showed that classless societies existed long before written history began. In the scarcity of early classless society, classes developed as people's ability to produce increased beyond what society needed to merely survive in small groups.

As society became more organized, classes gave rise to a form of slave society, like the ones in ancient Egypt or Greece. After these societies collapsed, feudal systems emerged, with large numbers of people tied to the land in serfdom. The feudal system gave way to capitalism when lords and kings were overthrown by the capitalist class of merchants, traders and manufacturers. New and more dynamic relations of production overtook modes of production that had lasted for centuries and seemed eternal.

In earlier forms of society, crises occurred because there wasn't enough wealth produced to sustain the class organization of society. Under capitalism, production is rampant. Crises are caused by too many goods being produced for markets that are unable to absorb them within the profit-driven system of private property.

People need what is produced—desperately in many cases. But the goods can only be sold for a profit. Under capitalism, food that could feed thousands rots and clothing is thrown away while people starve and freeze to death.

As more and more workers take to the streets in the struggles against cutbacks, layoffs and war, it is the task of Marxists to show that waging the class struggle consistently can advance the working class toward a new society based on people's needs—the class interests of the workers—instead of the profit of a few billionaires and banks.

What is a revolution?

Thursday, May 11, 2006

By: John Beacham

Part of a series on the fundamentals of Marxism

You can find the word “revolution” in nearly every section of the newspaper. Innovative movies are declared “revolutions” in filmmaking. Great advances in science are deemed “revolutionary.” Meanwhile, manufacturers declare their newest products—whether high-definition televisions, shaving creams or shoe soles—all to be “revolutions” in their respective fields.

Of course, when most activists talk about revolution, they are talking about social change. Some use the word loosely. “We need a revolution” becomes a phrase that basically means, “We need a big progressive change.”

In society, changes can come about through new technology and innovation. Other changes come about through human struggle. The movements for health care, affirmative action, better wages, same-sex marriage rights and abortion rights are examples that have won some reforms. Reform movements are often large and powerful, pulling vast numbers of people into struggle against the ruling class for basic democratic rights.

Marxists use the term “social revolution” in a very precise way. Whereas reforms are changes within an existing social and economic system, social revolutions make a sharp break from one social system to another. A socialist revolution would end the private ownership of the factories, mines, transportation and offices by a tiny clique of capitalists.

Social revolutions in history

The French Revolution of 1789 was a social revolution that replaced feudalism with capitalism. It did not just do away with the monarchy—although thousands of aristocrats were killed at the hands of the people they had exploited for centuries. It uprooted feudal relations between the peasants, who were the vast majority of the people, and the landowners. It cleared the way for capitalist relations of production and commerce.

The 1917 Russian Revolution ousted the czar and the aristocracy. But it did more than that. It overturned the newly developing capitalist property relations, throwing out the owners of factories and banks and putting the property into the hands of workers’ councils—soviets. For the first time in history, the working class held state power.

Russia had been a vast and oppressive empire. Many people of different nationalities were held under the thumb of the brutal czarist regime. Russia was previously called the “prison house of nations.” The new revolutionary government charted a course of working class internationalism, both with respect to the many nations inside Russia as well as in foreign affairs.

The Russian Revolution provided a beacon for working-class organizers for decades. Korean, Chinese and Yugoslavian communists learned important lessons from the Russian Revolution that set the stage for new revolutions in their respective countries.

The socialist revolution in Cuba in 1959 seized power from the ruling elite and their U.S. corporate backers, eliminating landlords and bosses. In Cuba, the changed conditions won in revolutionary struggle produced free health care, free education and millions of dedicated revolutionaries. Today, tens of thousands of Cuban doctors are working in Latin America and Africa, providing free health care in the poorest neighborhoods.

U.S. opposes revolutionary movements

The U.S. government represents the interests of the world's most powerful banks and corporations. It has opposed all of the revolutions listed above. Nothing has changed today. The U.S. government still acts to destroy revolutionary movements worldwide on behalf of the tiny minority of property owners.

The Bush administration is threatening revolutionary movements in Colombia and Venezuela. In Venezuela, the United States backed a 2002 right-wing coup against the government of President Hugo Chávez that presides over a revolutionary process in the oil-rich Latin American country.

In Colombia, the United States has spent billions of dollars in a war against the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia and other organizations fighting the reactionary U.S.-backed death squad government of President Álvaro Uribe.

The Bush administration is also threatening Cuba and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Like Cuba, North Korea had a revolution and embarked on a path of socialist construction. The United States wants to overturn the tremendous social gains of both countries.

The potential U.S. revolution

Empires fall. Societies change. Capitalism replaced feudalism. Socialism will replace capitalism.

In the United States, a socialist revolution would expropriate the wealth of society and use it for the benefit of the vast majority. In the early stage of capitalism, the bourgeoisie were the organizers of production. Today they have become superfluous. At the current high level of technological development, workers do not need the capitalist class. On the contrary, private ownership of the means of production is holding back society's vast potential.

Socialist construction in the United States will give the working class the ability to organize the vast and highly interconnected economy to produce for human need instead of for profit. With all the machinery and technology of society in its hands, the U.S. working class can make vast improvements for humanity.

One of the biggest contradictions of the capitalist market is overproduction. Because production is based on private profit, corporations compete for markets. Without a plan, they produce more than the market can sustain. Workers cannot buy all the products produced. Unemployment and poverty exist side by side with vast wealth.

The iron law of capitalism, the profit motive, forces less profitable corporations to shut down production, abandon their machinery and lay off workers. So much potential is wasted. The homeless sleep in front of abandoned houses. People go hungry as farmers bury their crops. These contradictions characterize daily life under capitalism.

Periodically, the chaotic nature of capitalism leads to crisis, whether in the form of economic depression, imperialist war or both. In such a crisis, the stage is set for the working class to directly confront the bosses in a general struggle for power. During these inevitable periods of heightened struggle, the ruling class's inability to meet basic demands can lead to a surge in political activity, a seizure of state power and the overthrow of the entire system.

A new crisis will arise. It always does. The only question is whether the working class will have a leadership developed enough to go beyond the struggle for reform and carry out a workers' revolution.

What is socialism?

Thursday, May 11, 2006

By: Tanya Chase

Part of a series on the fundamentals of Marxism

The United States is the wealthiest country in the world. Its Gross National Product is \$12 trillion. Yet 45 million people in the United States live without health insurance. Some 33.6 million people are food insecure or hungry. Over 3 million people experience homelessness each year in the United States, 39 percent of them children. One out of every five children is born into poverty. That number soars to one out of two for the African American community.

That's life under capitalism in the richest capitalist country. For most of the capitalist world conditions are much more severe. Nearly 800 million people are unemployed globally. Nearly 2 billion people survive on less than two dollars per day. Some 827 million are undernourished. Fewer than five hundred billionaires and multi-millionaires have assets equal to the three billion poorest people on the planet. While a tiny minority hoards society's wealth, those who do the work are barely making ends meet or are living at the very edge. The capitalists promote this as the "natural order." Socialists contend that this argument is merely an excuse for inequality and oppression.

There is an alternative.

For as long as there has been a working class, there have been efforts made to change society to meet the needs of the many. During the Industrial Revolution of the 1800s, workers organized in trade unions to demand better working conditions. In 1838, the Chartist movement in England tried to open up the Parliament to working people, eventually drawing millions into sometimes-heated battles with the police.

At the same time, early utopian socialists like Robert Owen in England and Charles Fourier and Comte Henri de Saint-Simon in France advocated socialist systems to provide just solutions to the injustices and inefficiencies of capitalism. They tried to win over rich and poor alike to the rationality of their ideas.

It wasn't until 1848, however, after careful study of revolutionary struggles, that Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels put forward a scientific approach to the problems of capitalism—as well as a way forward. The Communist Manifesto, issued by Marx and Engels for the Communist League at the outbreak of the 1848 revolutions in Europe, can be considered the founding document of the scientific socialist movement.

Marx and Engels drew lessons from concrete workers' struggles and came to the conclusion that capitalism is based on inherent conflict between the working class and the owners of factories, banks and other means of production. But in addition to explaining the working class's exploitation, they also showed how the working class was the one class that held in its hands the potential to overcome exploitation once and for all. It was for that reason that they wrote "the proletariat [working class] alone is a really revolutionary class."

Based on the experiences of the 1848 revolutions, Marx and Engels came to the

conclusion that the only way to end exploitation of the poor and oppressed is for the working class to take control of the means of production through a working class revolution. Only smashing the capitalist state and replacing it with a new workers' state can lay the foundation for socialism.

Until 1871, Marx and Engels drew lessons from the workers' movement—largely through its defeats. But in 1871 the workers of Paris, France showed for the first time that workers could run their own state. The Paris Commune, set up to defend Paris against Prussian invasion and the treachery of France's capitalist government, gave the first glimpse into what socialism could look like.

The Paris Commune paid all public servants a worker's wage. Elected officials were subject to immediate recall and were accountable for helping to carry out the laws they passed. The army and police that had served to oppress the workers were disbanded and the entire working class was armed.

The Commune was drowned in blood after three months by the combined might of the Prussian and French armies. But it remained an inspiration and an invaluable lesson to many of the subsequent workers' revolutions.

Since the time of Marx and Engels, there have been many cases where the working class has been able to lead successful revolutions, removing the capitalist class from power. The 1917 Russian Revolution, the 1945 Korean Revolution, the 1949 Chinese Revolution and the 1959 Cuban Revolution all gave new experiences and lessons in the possibilities of building socialism—inspired by the Paris Commune.

Some important lessons have emerged from all these experiences in building socialism. In the first place, all these revolutions took the ownership of the means of production away from private owners and made them publicly owned. The revolutionary governments sought to steer the economy not through capitalist commodity relations but by means of a planned economy. Foreign trade, once the business of the biggest companies conducted for the purpose of private profit, remained exclusively in the hands of the state.

All of these means were viewed by the working-class leaders and governments as means to achieve socialism—a society where economic activity was based on fulfilling people's needs, not the profit of a few. Marx and Engels saw this society as leading to a true classless society—communism—where there was no exploitation and no need for repression, police or jails.

The countries that have tried and are trying to build socialism are not utopias, nor are they paradise on earth. They all face enormous problems, including scarcity and aggression by U.S. imperialism. The science of rational economic planning has progressed in fits and starts. Some socialist projects, like the Soviet Union and the Eastern European socialist camp, were not able to withstand the pressures and have, like the Paris Commune, been defeated.

Nevertheless, these revolutions show the outlines of a new society where the working class is the ruling class. The Soviet Union lasted over 70 years without unemployment or economic recessions or depressions. China was able to feed its huge population for the first time in history. Cuba has maintained educational levels unseen in Latin America—not to mention in much of the developed world.

Socialists don't claim that a revolution will solve all social problems at once. Many problems like racism, sexism, and anti-LGBT bigotry have festered for centuries as

essential components of class rule. But eliminating the economic basis for these social diseases opens the door to waging a determined and successful struggle against them.

The working-class struggles over the past 150 years have shown that “another world is possible.” But wishing for it won’t make it happen. It takes revolution to achieve socialism.

What is imperialism?

Thursday, May 11, 2006

By: Brendan Baker

Part of a series on the fundamentals of Marxism

With the U.S. war against Iraq raging, more and more people are talking about imperialism. Scenes of U.S. troops patrolling the streets of an Arab country, U.S. diplomats handpicking “leaders,” and U.S. corporations earning billions of dollars from Iraqi resources bring to mind the most blatant examples of colonialism from the past 100 years. The slogan “No war for empire” is common at anti-war protests throughout the United States.

Marxists use the term imperialism in a particular way. It is not just a description of a particular policy of a particular government. Imperialism refers to a specific stage of economic development of capitalist relations.

Russian revolutionary Vladimir Lenin described the outlines of this analysis in 1916, in the bloodiest days of World War I, in a pamphlet called “Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism.” He wrote this not just to describe the forces that were driving the major capitalist countries into war. He aimed to analyze it in order to fight against it.

The major capitalist countries—the United States, Germany, France, Japan and Britain—have certain common economic features. Major corporations in these countries have merged and conglomerated to such an extent where there are really only a few monopolies that dominate national and even international economies. Through a process known as combination or vertical integration, one corporation owns many layers of production. A steel corporation may own mining companies and smelting companies as well as companies producing finished steel goods like cars or tanks. This may be done directly or indirectly, such as through stock ownership or interlocking boards of directors.

Capitalism’s “free market” roots are replaced by monopoly. A handful of banks and other financial industries dominate the economy by virtue of their ability to manage and organize money among different sectors of the economy.

The process of transforming free market, industrial-based capitalism to monopoly finance capitalism has been completed in the major capitalist countries for close to a century. What changes is the international relationship between these monopolies in terms of markets and “spheres of influence.” During the first great imperialist war, World War I, each of the major European powers needed more resources and more markets than were available. The competition for the domination of these markets led to war on an international scale between the imperialist powers.

Governments—what Marx called the “executive committees of the bourgeoisie”—act in the interests of the centrally organized monopolies. The tendency to war is a reflection of the natural capitalist tendency to constantly conquer new markets and

resources. In order to continue to expand economically, an imperialist combine must overcome all resistance from every quarter: workers resistance, resistance from smaller independent capitalists, and competition from imperialist rivals. The drive to war is not a policy—it is a natural tendency of capitalism.

Of course, this drive to war is always hidden under flowery phrases like “solving a humanitarian crisis” or “fighting terrorism.” When the true aims of imperialist war become clear to millions—as they did in World War I—the ruling classes can face revolution.

To say that the U.S. war in Iraq is an imperialist war means that it is not a “mistaken policy” or the “wrong war in the wrong place at the wrong time.” It means that the U.S. ruling class was driven to invade Iraq and control that country’s natural resources—not just for the sake of the profits of U.S. oil companies but for its dominant position relative to other imperialist powers.

It also means that the fight against imperialist war cannot be limited to exposing the criminal acts of U.S. imperialism in Iraq. It points to the solution: taking power out of the hands of the banks and monopolies and turning it over to the working class. That is the task of socialists in the anti-war movement.

What is national oppression?

Thursday, May 11, 2006

By: Muna Coobtee

Part of a series on the fundamentals of Marxism

Oppression and exploitation are basic features of capitalist society. Workers are paid wages while the capitalist owners make profits from the products created by those who work. This is the essence of economic exploitation. Almost every worker, even if they do not use the word “exploitation,” is aware of it nonetheless.

All workers under capitalism—no matter how much they are paid—are exploited by the owners. Wealth created by workers is handed over to a handful of bankers and owners. All the laws in capitalist societies are made to enforce this inequality.

In addition, class society breeds a network of special oppressions that goes beyond the economic exploitation that defines capitalism. There is oppression against women based on gender and oppression against LGBT people based on sexual orientation, for example.

One of the main forms of special oppression under capitalism is national oppression—the exploitation of a whole people based on their nationality. This is widely recognized in the international arena, where the most powerful imperialist countries dominate the entire economies and politics of oppressed countries. Workers and property owners in the oppressed countries are both subjugated by huge banks, corporations and governments in the United States, Germany, Japan and other big imperialist powers.

When Marxists analyzed this national oppression in the early part of the 20th century, they distinguished between a nation and a country. A country is defined by geographical and political boundaries. A nation is defined by more complicated social relationships.

A nation usually shares a common territory and language. It shares common economic relationships and a common culture.

As capitalism strengthened in the 18th and 19th centuries in Europe, merchants and factory owners seized on the aspirations of nations struggling for political and economic independence from restrictive feudal relations. The new capitalist classes gave the political leadership for the national revolutions against oppressive empires, like the Austro-Hungarian or Ottoman empires.

France, Germany and Italy are examples of nations—sharing a common territory, language, economic relations and culture—that became states.

Some of the nations that became states earlier in the development of capitalism also became imperialist after colonizing much of the rest of the world and enriching themselves through super-exploitation of Africa, Latin America and Asia. England, Belgium, the Netherlands, France, Germany and other nations extracted huge wealth from far-flung colonial empires at the cost of misery and oppression for hundreds of millions of people in the colonies.

After World War II, the United States took the place of the earlier colonial powers as the dominant imperialist power on the globe, keeping nations on every continent in economic enslavement.

As capitalism grew into its modern, imperialist stage, national movements in oppressed countries intensified the fight against the oppression by the big imperialist powers. In some cases, like in the Iraqi revolution or the Indian independence struggle, the capitalist class in the oppressed nations was able to capture the leadership of the national liberation struggles. In other cases, such as China and Cuba, the working class was able to lead the national struggles against imperialism.

One of Russian revolutionary leader V.I. Lenin's great contributions to Marxism was his view on the national liberation struggles. He put forward the view that all legitimate national liberation struggles by oppressed nations against imperialist and oppressor nations deserve support—regardless of the leadership of those struggles.

National liberation struggles often take the form of an oppressed country against an imperialist power. But in some cases, many nations may exist within a single country. Czarist Russia was the classic example of a "prison house of nations," where dozens of nationalities lived under the domination of the "Great Russian" rulers.

Today, the United States is an example of this kind of "prison house of nations."

Since its origins, racism has been a characteristic of U.S. society. This racism has often disguised the fact that the Black population within the United States has emerged with all the main features of a nation within the borders of the United States. Racism against African Americans is a manifestation of national oppression.

The African people who were brought to the United States in chains as slaves had different languages, religions and cultures. Over a period of centuries, a new Black nation was forged within the United States by the common experience and oppression of slavery. Its survival against tremendous odds and resistance to brutal repression also created a great culture and identity, albeit with variances throughout the country.

In relation to the white-dominated society, the Black nation is an oppressed nation, as can be seen by examining any of the economic or social indicators of African Americans. As an oppressed nation, however, it contains certain unique

characteristics. In the modern era, every nation is divided between classes: between rich and poor, workers and bosses, exploiters and exploited. This is a characteristic feature of oppressed nations as well.

The African American nation is overwhelmingly working class. It is part and parcel of the multinational working class within the United States. Thus it is natural that the struggle for national emancipation in opposition to racist oppression finds its expression as an essentially working-class movement.

The national oppression of African Americans has been shown most starkly recently in the damage caused by Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. While victims of the hurricane were both Black and white, the heaviest casualties fell on the city's Black community. The one-third white population of New Orleans, while also suffering heavy losses, largely managed to evacuate the city.

Other nations exist within the United States. Puerto Ricans in the United States have maintained their distinct nationality despite over a century of U.S. colonial rule in Puerto Rico. The island remains the homeland of a distinct nation that is still struggling for its political independence.

The Native American tribes, the Hawaiian people and others have maintained some of their national character despite efforts to extinguish them as separate nationalities. Asian, Arab and Latino people suffer national oppression in the United States, despite differing national heritages and traditions within each of these groups.

National oppression—in the United States and around the world—allows the capitalist ruling class to extract higher profits from the workers in these oppressed nations. It also divides the working class by promoting racism, national rivalries and chauvinism.

Marxists strive for multi-national unity of the working class. That means first and foremost giving unconditional support for oppressed nations' right to self-determination and the struggle for equality for all nations. This is the way to fight the racism that divides the working class so that workers can organize against capitalist exploitation and oppression.

Is women's oppression inevitable?

Thursday, May 11, 2006

By: Jane Cutter

Part of a series on the fundamentals of Marxism

Lawrence Summers, president of Harvard University, faced widespread criticism in late January for suggesting that women are less able to succeed in math and science due to their "innate differences" with men. Women scientists from the same institution reacted with outrage, describing the struggles they waged against sexism in the workplace. They helped lead a national outcry that forced Summers to make an apology and commit to increasing the representation of women faculty in these fields.

Summers' remarks reflect a belief that social differences between men and women are a result of innate biological differences. These justifications are a rationalization of the sexist reality facing women around the world today. But the barriers women face prohibiting their full participation in society are social, not biological, in origin.

Justifying sexism

“Innate differences” are used to explain why so few women are welders, atomic physicists or firefighters. Supposedly women are not as “well-equipped” to complete these tasks. Since they are not able to do the job well, the story goes, many women do not apply for these jobs.

Historically, it has been socially acceptable to say that men were intellectually superior to women. Similar justifications were used for slavery and colonialism. White colonialists pointed to “innate differences” as a justification for colonizing and enslaving people throughout the world. Allegedly, Europeans were biologically superior. The theory behind the “white man’s burden” was premised upon the inferiority of other people.

Even after the end of slavery, Blacks were told to stick to jobs requiring physical labor because they were not equipped for anything else. Blacks were told they did not possess the intellect to apply for other jobs.

The same alleged “innate differences” that were used to explain male-dominated professions are now used to justify refusing women particular positions. They rationalize the denial of certain positions to women by claiming we are not as strong or smart as men.

Even though the outright discrimination of women is now considered illegal in the United States, sexism is still a grinding reality. If Harvard President Summers wanted to explain the lack of women scientists and mathematicians, he could start with the fact that from a very early age, girls are told that boys are better at math. Or that they are told it is not “feminine” or “attractive” to be good at math. Girls who excel in math and science are typically not encouraged and stop taking these courses once they are no longer required. Those who become scientists face a hostile environment in a predominantly male workplace. If a woman scientist chooses to have a family, matters are complicated. Does she receive paid maternity leave? If she takes any time off after having the baby, will this affect her chances at getting tenure or a promotion?

None of these barriers women face is brought on by “innate differences” between male and female brains. It is the social reality of a sexist society.

Class society oppresses women

Can these barriers that are brought on by sexist societal norms be changed?

For the vast majority of human history, archeological and anthropological research indicates that women were not specially oppressed as women. Women and men may have done different work in early human society, based on the demands of childbearing, but all people were valued for their contributions to the survival of the group. Women were held in the highest esteem.

The oppression of women arose with the emergence of the first class societies, those based on slavery. Under these systems, women became the property of their husbands in the same way that slaves were the property of their owners. Women, enslaved and “free,” became valued for the children they could bear, not for their intrinsic value as human beings.

The origins of violence against women and the denial of women’s right to control reproduction can be traced to this “world historic defeat” of the female sex, as 19th century German socialist Frederick Engels called it. (See Engels’ “Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State.”)

Women's oppression has changed over time along with the mode of economic exploitation, with slavery giving way to feudalism and feudalism to capitalism. Capitalist production needs the employment of male and female laborers. Ever-changing technology has made the differences in physical strength between men and women increasingly irrelevant. How much strength is required to push a button or use a keyboard?

Since the inception of capitalism, working class women have been drawn out of the isolated atmosphere of the home and brought into collective production. Some of the earliest factory workers were women. They operated automatic looms or made clothing. The capitalist system profits directly by sexism, super-exploiting the productive labor of women workers. Owners can realize super profits by paying women less than men for work of equal value. On average, a woman in the United States earns about 75 cents to every dollar that a man earns for the same work. Globally, women earn on average about half of what men earn. Capitalists also profit indirectly from the unpaid labor of women in the home to maintain and reproduce the working class.

Legal equality not enough

But even if women had complete legal equality with men, women's oppression cannot be eradicated under capitalism. The system profits from the super exploitation of women all around the globe. Discrimination, denial of access to resources, and gender-based violence are all attempts to keep women from organizing and asserting their rights. An innate feature of class society is the oppression of women. For women to be truly liberated, we must live in a society where all are encouraged to achieve their highest potential.

Socialist society can codify equality between men and women into law. It is the starting place for true equality. Cuba has made important strides in attempting to eliminate sexism. The constitution outlaws discrimination based on gender, race or sexual orientation. Reproductive rights are guaranteed. Women have access to contraceptives and abortion. They have access to top-quality pre-natal and obstetric care as well as maternity leave. Cuba's infant mortality rate is lower than the United States'. All Cubans have access to education, and the majority of doctors, teachers, researchers and scientists are women. Women are 47 percent of the workforce. (Federation of Cuban Women Report, Beijing 2000)

Eliminating the capitalist market and guaranteeing all workers the basic right to a job, health care, housing and education lay the foundation for ending sexism and women's oppression. The struggle to end sexism, male chauvinism and inequality will not happen automatically. Rather, it requires a profound commitment by a revolutionary government to overcome all vestiges of the past. This will be a struggle that will last generations, even after a socialist revolution.

Socialists stand with the most determined fighters for women's rights in every battle, whether for equal rights, reproductive rights, maternity benefits or paid parental leave, as essential components in the class struggle.

The first step in all these day-to-day battles lies in realizing that women's unequal status is not caused by "innate" biological or cognitive differences. We must tear down the walls of socially created barriers that attempt to keep working women "in their place."

What is dialectical materialism?

Thursday, May 11, 2006

By: Shawn Garcia

Part of a series on the fundamentals of Marxism

Since the beginning of recorded history, people have been striving to answer essential questions about nature and human society.

In earlier times, almost all events in nature were attributed to divine beings or a godlike force. The existing social order that governed the relations between people was explained as part of the same natural order. Things were as the gods or god wanted them to be. While this message may have been beneficial for the ruling classes whose clergy preached that the division between the haves and have-nots was god's will, mystical and impalpable concepts don't shed any scientific light on human existence or why things actually happen.

Marxism is the science of revolutionary social, economic and political change. As with any science, the theory behind it—the formulas and calculations used to form scientific conclusions—is important to understand. Dialectical materialism is the theoretical foundation of Marxism.

“For [dialectical philosophy] nothing is final, absolute, sacred. It reveals the transitory character of everything and in everything; nothing can endure before it except the uninterrupted process of becoming and passing away, of endless ascendancy from the lower to the higher,” Fredrick Engels wrote in “The End of Classical German Philosophy.”

Dialectical materialism as a methodology is the combination of dialectics and materialism. It shows that changes in society are not necessarily linear; that history moves forward in fits and starts. Understanding this term necessitates an examination of its component parts.

What is materialism?

Materialism argues that the actual reality of the surrounding world determines the way people think and what they believe. In contrast to religious and other “idealist” philosophies, Marx's materialist conception of history asserted, “it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.” (Karl Marx, Preface to “A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy,” 1859)

Historical materialism is the philosophical opposite of idealism. It is directly opposed to idealism, the notion that material reality is created by what people believe or perceive in their minds. Marx also asserted that in all class societies the dominant ideas are the ideas of its ruling class. Racism, sexism, homophobia and national chauvinism are the ideas that the masses of people assimilate from the ruling class, which benefits from the promotion of those ideas.

We've all heard the basic idealist argument: society won't change until people's ideas change. On that line of thinking, activists need to do only educational work or teach in schools.

Materialism shows that the process of humanity's social development is tied directly with the development of production and technology. Production is the expression of humanity's ongoing relationship with the world. It is a manifestation of the never-

ending battle for survival. Every living organism struggles to survive and thrive, whether simply defying cold weather, eluding predators, searching for food or working in a factory.

Of course, not everyone's material reality is the same. For the working class, the struggle for basic needs occupies a greater part of life. For the capitalist class of owners, material reality consists of luxury gained by virtue of their social position within the exploitative capitalist economy.

This material reality, according to the materialist worldview, determines how people think about the world.

Materialists would reply to those activists who want to change people's ideas: yes, we want to change people's ideas. But the only way to do that is to change the material conditions—the way society is organized. In the process of engaging in revolutionary struggle, and eventually in building a new society, people's ideas definitely will change.

The laws of change

Dialectical thought is merely the reflection of objective dialectics: laws governing the development of nature, the laws of uninterrupted change or, as Darwin discovered, the laws of evolution. According to this view, change occurs in the struggle between opposites. Nothing exists without opposition. When opposites confront each other, changes occur.

A central law in dialectics is the transformation of "quantity into quality"—that a change of the amount (quantity) will eventually bring about a material change in the whole make-up of something (quality).

One of the most practical examples of the transformation from quantity into quality can be seen in nature with water. A change in the temperature of water is a change in quantity. If the temperature gets colder, but is still above freezing, the water stays in liquid form. As the temperature continues to drop, the water eventually will freeze. At that point, the water has changed to ice—from liquid to a solid state. The cause of the change is the drop in temperature; the change from liquid to solid is a qualitative change. In the other direction, when water heats and boils at 212 degrees Fahrenheit it passes through a qualitative alteration and becomes steam.

In society, social change occurs in the conflict between opposing classes—in capitalist society, between the working class and the capitalist class. The conflict breaks out on a day-to-day basis—protests, strikes, pickets and so forth. But when these protests come together in a united political movement against the capitalist class, a quantity of struggles can bring about a qualitative change—a revolution.

The analysis incorporated in dialectics, combined with materialism, is the basis for the Marxist view of the world.

Dialectical materialism: a science of revolutionary change

Marxism is a living science, made of both theory and practice. Its theoretical underpinnings can be applied not only to history but also to current events to show Marxism's continuing validity and relevance as a way of analyzing the world.

Both liberals and conservatives argue that people have to work within the capitalist

system to try to salvage it. They don't want to destroy the system and make something new.

Religion similarly argues that people are not the main force for change. It attributes change to a divine power, offering hope for change in an afterlife. But dialectical materialism shows that both notions are false.

Marxists understand that the material conditions in the United States, as elsewhere, shape political consciousness. And yet political consciousness is not mechanically and statically determined. As the contradictions in capitalist society grow quantitatively, large numbers of people are compelled to fight back. The catastrophic war in Iraq and the "natural" catastrophes of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, for instance, compel people to go into the streets and struggle for change. When this happens, revolutionary organizations can help shape a new consciousness that breaks with the rotten, racist and corrupt ideology of the capitalists.

We strive to point out that it is material contradictions that exist under capitalism that lead to the dialectical resolution of these contradictions. The capitalists themselves create the conditions necessary for the socialist revolution that will bring about better social conditions for people here and all over the world.

What is alienation?

Thursday, May 11, 2006

By: Danny Shaw

Part of a series on the fundamentals of Marxism

When Karl Marx published "The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844," he set out to outline the process by which the capitalist mode of production exploits workers. He called this phenomenon alienation, meaning that working people put everything into their jobs but get little in return. Marx explained that, under capitalism, workers are alienated in the following three ways: within the production process itself; from the objects produced by their labor; and from nature and the rest of humanity.

Alienation from the production process

For most of the working class, labor is nothing more than a means for physical survival. The labor process—working a job—is not educational or enriching in any way. Marx refers to this process as "the sacrifice of vitality." This means workers most often hate their jobs, but have to do them anyway. Few blue-collar or white-collar workers could make the argument that they greatly benefit or prosper from their 9-to-5 jobs. Each worker's time, energy and intellect is focused solely on profit-making for the capitalist owners.

As Marx noted, under capitalism, "He who does not produce (that is, the owner) has dominion over production and over the product."

For example, the wait staff at a restaurant—plus cooks, busboys, cleaners, hosts, bouncers—give much of their energy so that the business will continue to operate. Typically, they dedicate 40 to 60 hours per week to the restaurant, which they could otherwise spend with their families or doing something fun and enriching. But they need to get paid, so they work instead. At the end of the week, each gets a contemptibly meager check that is gobbled up by landlords and other parasitic bill-collectors, supermarkets and others. The workers end up with very little left over.

Alienation from the objects produced

The working class constantly produces under capitalism, but the goods and services produced belong only to the capitalist owners. All of the aching bones, headaches, sweat, mental anguish, injuries, repetition and stress help generate commodities that reap benefits for somebody else. Workers have no control over the goods—they become alien to the worker—once they are produced.

Marx commented on this reality: “While the worker’s activity is torment to him, to another [the capitalist] it is his delight and his life’s joy. ... The wretchedness of the worker is in inverse proportion to the power and magnitude of his production.”

The owner gets richer at the expense of his or her employees. The quicker the laborer’s hands move to clean or cook, the more wealth is produced for the capitalist. In the case of a busy urban restaurant, kitchen workers produce \$20 plates of gourmet food often at lower than minimum wage. The fact that workers’ labor goes toward the accumulation of the owner’s wealth while workers receive a pittance in return is a fundamental feature of capitalism.

Alienation from nature and humanity

The third form of alienation Marx analyzes is the most complex and pervasive—the alienation of workers from their social environment. Consumed by the daily quest for survival and individual ascension in the workforce and society, it is easy for anyone to feel isolated. Capitalism reduces workers to mere appendages of the machinery they operate.

The institutions of capitalism also cause many workers to seek to attain a higher status in society, to adopt the views or outlook of the capitalists who oppress them. This effect is called “false consciousness.” But the vast majority of workers will never become capitalists or even wealthy. Most will barely be able to survive no matter how hard they work.

Alienation is built into the capitalist system. It is countered when workers fight together. Instead of being atomized individuals operating in a society that exploits them, they come together as a collective force. When workers struggle together, they find a new, non-alienating bond. This bond arises in the fight against the existing social order.

It is in the struggle against capitalism that false consciousness can be replaced by revolutionary class consciousness. Class consciousness is a byproduct of struggle. It is not spiritual or metaphysical, it is real. It can arise when people take action together to overcome oppression. Then they are no longer just individuals, they are part of a powerful, collective movement for revolutionary change.

Class consciousness can develop spontaneously during the course of intense class battles. Revolutionary class consciousness, however, can be achieved on a mass basis only by the successful intervention of a revolutionary socialist or communist party in the spontaneous movement against oppression.

The way forward, the only way to eliminate the core contradictions facing workers—including the alienation that is intrinsic in capitalist society—is the elevation of the working class so that it can achieve political supremacy in society. That process is known as the socialist revolution.

What is democracy?

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By: Ed Felton

Part of a series on the fundamentals of Marxism

The U.S. Senate is full of millionaires and 97 percent white. That's democracy?

The word "democracy" comes from the Greek words "demos"—the people—and "kratos"—rule, and therefore means "rule of the people." As a political form, it is commonly understood as majority rule.

For centuries, the U.S. government has upheld itself as the most advanced expression and international defender of democracy. It has launched wars and invasions in the name of democracy. But there are different types of democracy, so what type exists in the United States?

The earliest European system commonly called a democracy was in Athens, Greece around 2,500 years ago. In a city of 100,000 people, however, it is estimated that less than 10 percent of the population voted. Only men who had completed their military obligations and who were full citizens could participate. The system excluded women, immigrants (metics) and the more than half the population who were slaves.

In a government based on the "rule of the people," it was really a minority ruling class that decided who constituted "the people."

Much like the democracy of ancient Greece, U.S. "democracy" was founded by slave owners. It too excluded women and enslaved people, and initially gave voting rights only to men who owned property. As of 1787, the property-owning requirement to run for political office was so stringent that most voters did not even qualify as candidates. So the owning class used property ownership requirements to create a "democracy" that concentrated political decision-making power in their own hands.

Since the founding of the United States, popular struggles have torn down exclusionary voting requirements. State after state eliminated their property qualifications for white male voters in the first half of the 19th century, with South Carolina being the last to do so in 1860. A powerful suffragist movement won white women the right to vote in 1920. African Americans defeated Jim Crow voting restrictions in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, winning the Voting Rights Act in 1965.

But as this aspect of the democratic system—voting requirements—has been opened, the U.S. ruling class has carefully adjusted the political system so that informal rather than formal requirements keep power in the hands of the rich property owners. A bipartisan political system offers the appearance of a choice—between two parties that fundamentally agree on the supremacy of the corporate exploiters at home and imperialist exploitation abroad.

For instance, rather than formally requiring someone to be worth a certain dollar amount in order to run for office, as it was in 1787, candidates now must be able to raise tens of millions of dollars in order to run their campaigns. It is basically an informal requirement that one must be rich to win political office.

There have only been three African American senators since post-Civil War Reconstruction ended in 1877. Nearly half of current senators are officially millionaires. The real number is probably higher. There is not one worker in the U.S.

Senate. It is hardly a representative body.

Moreover, only the inessential parts of the U.S. political system are subject to the vote and majority rule. You do not get to vote on your wages or benefits. You do not get to vote on whether the company you work for should lay off workers. You do not get to vote on whether the country should go to war, or if it should cut spending on social programs. There may be a vote taken on these issues, but it is a vote amongst millionaires in the corporate boardrooms and the halls of Congress.

Marxists call this kind of “democracy” under capitalism “bourgeois democracy”—the democracy of the owning class. No matter the outcome of any given vote, the continued rule of the capitalist system is guaranteed.

In a society divided into social classes, words like democracy only have a meaning in the context of actual class relations—democracy for which class?

When the African American community, still suffering from systematic disenfranchisement, calls for democracy in the United States, that is something very different than the right-wing Cuban exiles in Miami who clamor for “democracy” in Cuba—a country where working people have more political and social rights than in any advanced capitalist country in the world. The former aims to extend rights to more working people, while the latter aims to take rights away.

The basis for working-class democracy

Is there an alternative to this democracy for the rich? The practical basis for constructing a new type of democracy is very simple. Whether in Ancient Greece or in modern capitalism, a minority class has controlled society’s wealth and decision-making powers. “Majority rule” is a lie as long as a tiny minority holds the vast majority of the wealth.

Under capitalism, the economy is not subjected to the will of the majority. It is driven by the quest for profits. Decisions are made by individuals and groups of individuals on the basis of how and where to maximize their personal profits.

A democratic society would be organized so that the people have decision-making power over how to use the wealth of society, which is produced collectively. Subjecting the economy to conscious decision-making and to majority rule—in other words, bringing the economy into the realm of democracy—is called a planned economy. It is a basic principle of socialism.

The single biggest obstacle to this real democracy in the United States is the tiny elite of corporate owners and bankers—the capitalist class. Expropriating the wealth of the capitalist class and using it to meet the needs of society would lay the basis for genuine working class democracy.