

Squeezing the workers

The bureaucracy has all the reactionary traits of the old possessing classes — parasitism, squandering of the social surplus product, oppression of the direct producers and even their exploitation — without having their progressive traits: a historic function for the introduction and defence of relations of production which are superior from the point of view of the development of the productive force of social labour. It manages only to exploit for its own profit the relations of production established by the overthrow of capitalism...

Between the bureaucracy and the working class, there are no relations of production, although there are relations of exploitation. Relations of exploitation distinct from the relations of production we can call 'inorganic'. What constitutes this inorganic exploitation?

Given the postcapitalist, but hardly transitional, nature of 'actually existing socialism', bourgeois norms of remuneration of labour necessarily remain as a powerful factor for the development of the productivity of social labour. These are bourgeois norms, "insofar as the distribution of life's goods is carried out with a capitalist measure of value and all the consequences ensuing therefrom"¹.

The social inequality which these norms sanction not only engenders bureaucracy, but is also one of the most important factors in the tendency to bureaucratic degeneration of the postcapitalist state. Trotsky said in relation to the bureaucracy: "In its very essence it is the planter and protector of inequality. It arose in the beginning as the bourgeois organ of a workers' state. In establishing and defending the advantages of a minority, it of course draws off the cream for its own use. Nobody who has wealth to distribute ever omits himself. Thus out of a social necessity there has developed an organ which has far outgrown its socially necessary function, and become an independent factor and therewith the source of great danger for the whole social organism"².

To the extent that this bourgeois organ of the postbourgeois state usurps the political power of the dominant class (that is, the working class), the conditions arise which allow the bureaucracy to appropriate a portion of the social surplus production in the form of major material privileges. This is the first aspect of exploitation: it is founded on bourgeois norms of distribution, that is, on the remuneration of labour not only according to its quantity, but also according to its "quality"³. The functions of the bureaucracy "are related, in their essence, to the political techniques of class

Zbigniew Kowalewski, a former leader of the left wing in Solidarnosc now living in exile, argues that the Eastern Bloc states have a systematic tendency to super-exploitation of the workers — though he still considers them 'post-capitalist'.

domination"⁴.

Appearing before the working class as a layer of specialists in these political techniques, and in the techniques of organisation and management of production and of the economy in general, the bureaucracy imposes a remuneration for labour corresponding to the "higher quality" — which it determines itself — of its own labour. It is that which allows it to live on the backs of the working class. "The difference in incomes is, in other words, determined not just by the difference in individual productivity, but by the masked appropriation of others' labour"⁵.

The bureaucratic state apparatus develops from an organ of defence of bourgeois norms of distribution into an organisation of defence of the appropriation of the labour of the working class to the benefit of the personnel of this apparatus and of the whole wider bureaucratic layer on which it bases itself. The sources of income, overt and covert, of the bureaucracy, "do not constitute a system of exploitation in the scientific sense of the term. But from the standpoint of the interests and position of the popular masses it is infinitely worse than any 'organic' exploitation"⁶.

The phenomenon of 'inorganic' exploitation of the working class is not limited to that. And what we have described does not constitute the most important aspect of it. The exclusive political power of the bureaucracy allows it to dispose of the whole social surplus product (economic surplus). Besides appropriating a part of that surplus product in the form of individual and collective material privileges, the bureaucracy distributes and utilises the social surplus product to impose and reproduce its domination over the working class and the whole of society.

"The working class has no influence on the size of the surplus product, on its use and distribution, since — as we have seen — it is deprived of influence on the decisions of the authorities, who have at their

disposal the means of production and the labour product itself... The surplus product is... taken away by force from the working class in proportions that have not been fixed by the workers, and is then made use of outside the range of their influence and possibility of control..."⁷.

It is in those terms that, in 1964, the Polish dissidents Jacek Kuron and Karol Modzelewski explained the reasons why one can and should consider, from a Marxist point of view, that the working class in 'actually existing socialism' is exploited. And it is the best and most correct explanation. Its only weakness is in the thesis, which cannot be sustained, that the worker only gets a subsistence minimum for his labour.

It is a simple explanation: the working class is exploited because it does not dispose of the social product, it does not collectively determine its use and its distribution, and because it is a social group separate from the working class, exercising power over it and not participating in productive labour, which entirely disposes of that social product, according to its own interests and needs, with the objective of reproducing the conditions of its own domination.

The working class does not determine the use and distribution of the social surplus product; and, simultaneously, it does not determine the proportions in which surplus product is extorted from it, that is, the proportion between the labour time necessary for the reproduction of labour power and the surplus labour time. On the contrary, it is subjected to permanent pressure for the augmentation of the surplus labour time at the expense of the necessary labour time, including the pressure of a tendency to augmentation of absolute surplus product, which correspondingly diminishes the possibilities for the reproduction of labour power. The permanent tendency to super-exploitation is inherent in capitalist relations of production, but in postcapitalist society under bureaucratic power, far from disappearing, it increases significantly.

In relation to capital which exploits the direct producers without being a social relation of production, Marx says that this exploitation occurs "under conditions worse than those under the immediate control of capital"⁸. This applies entirely to the bureaucracy, too. The overthrow of capitalist relations of production creates conditions favourable to the development of the productive forces and to increasing the productivity of labour. But, at the same time, bureaucratic power is an obstacle to that development and, what's more, a relative obstacle which tends to become more and more an absolute obstacle⁹. At the same time — I will come back to this question later — if labour is not free but subject to the bureaucracy, its



subjection is not real, as is the case in capitalism, where it "not only transforms the situations of the various agents of production, it also revolutionises their actual mode of labour and the real nature of the labour process as a whole"¹⁰.

In a postcapitalist society, labour can only be really subjected to the working class itself; that is to say, this subjection is only possible with the progressive development of the self-organisation of the labour process by the working class itself and of its own control over the process of production. But in 'actually existing socialism', the dominant class does not dominate its own labour (except, as we shall see, negatively), and that is why a constant revolutionising of the labour process and of production is impossible. All this is expressed by the inevitable development of the tendency to super-exploitation: the daily average of increased surplus labour is not an increase in relative surplus product, but the extortion of absolute surplus product (whether or not combined with the extortion of relative surplus product).

The scope of super-exploitation in 'actually existing socialism' increases enormously if we do not take the book-keeping presentation of surplus product (of surplus value) in Marx as a 'complete' theory of exploitation, that is, if we do not abstract from the condition of work in which the extraction of surplus product is carried out and from the conditions of reproduction of labour power¹¹. Dust, noise, vibrations, toxic gases, heat and cold, etc., in the factories, and pollution in the industrial zones, are also a powerful factor of destruction of the use value of labour power.

Whatever may be the possibility of realising the tendency to super-exploitation in the framework of time

wages and collective piecework rates (this latter being widely applied today to the work of 'semi-autonomous' or even 'self-managed' teams), the fundamental means, in 'actually existing socialism', is individual piecework rates. The generalisation of piecework is a degenerate form through which is expressed the tendency of postcapitalist society to remunerate according to the quantity of individual work. It allows for the measurement, through a determinate quantum of product, of the different degrees of aptitude, strength, energy and perseverance of the individual workers. At the same time, it fits in well with the demands and the conditions for the exercise of bureaucratic power over the process of production: it allows for the transfer onto labour power and its remuneration of the consequences of irregular and discontinuous work, for the maintenance in the units of production of a reserve labour force without having to keep it regularly occupied, for the maintenance of a large supervisory staff, and so on.

It imposes the atomisation of the workers in the labour process (piecework facilitates a low level of cooperation, very useful for damaging or breaking the unity of groups of workers) and forces them into intense competition between themselves. (The bureaucracy launched the Stakhanovite movements precisely on the basis of individual piecework). But, on top of all that, or above all, individual piecework is, in the hands of the bureaucracy, an effective means for subjecting the workers to super-exploitation, a fact which the Hungarian dissident Miklos Haraszti demonstrates exhaustively in a book which describes and analyses the author's experiences of manual work.

"The real meaning of piece-rates lies in

the incessant increase in production. The bosses do not have to impose it. It is enough for them to register that it has happened and then to incorporate it officially by changing the norms. Of course, there are sometimes abuses and injustices: occasionally management pushes matters and goes a bit too far in settling the new norm, even though the compulsion to loot would get the same result anyway. But clever management simply acknowledges the results which have been achieved, and bases further increases on them.

The production graph is used to justify a revision of the norm. They could establish its trajectory for each individual worker, but usually they prefer to base it on the largest possible sample, taking, for example, the average increase in production throughout the sections, or that of all the turners. The calculation is simple. If I produce at the official 100 per cent, my output is 100 per cent; if I produce more it is more. (We are on a 'continuous', and not 'declining' piece-rate: this means that every piece over and above the 100 per cent norm is paid for at the same rate). And so who isn't producing more than 100 per cent? The pay for 100 per cent is fixed in such a way that we have to make more. That is clear. So we always try to squeeze the maximum out of every job...

There is no way out of this. To make our living, we are forced to provide the rate-fixers with irrefutable arguments for the revision of the norms, and so for the reduction to an ever more unreal level of the time per piece and consequently the pay per piece. This incites us to speed up the rate still more to try and reach a greater level of production. Therefore we prepare the ground, slowly but surely, for yet another increase of the norms¹².

1. Leon Trotsky, *Revolution Betrayed*, p.54.

2. *Ibid* p.113.

3. See A.Zimine, *Le Stalinisme et son «socialisme réel»*, p.57-67.

4. Translated from Kowalewski's French text, which cites Trotsky, *Oeuvres* vol.2, p.256.

5. Translated from Kowalewski's French text, which cites Trotsky, *De la révolution*, p.297.

6. Trotsky, *Writings 1938-9*, p.325.

7. K.Modzelewski and J.Kuron, *An open letter to the Party*, p.14. No passage quite corresponding to the French text quoted by Kowalewski can be found in the English edition. The French text translates as follows: "Clearly the worker cannot receive the equivalent of his production in the form of real wages. For production to expand, it is necessary to set aside an accumulation fund; to maintain the non-productive sectors necessary for the needs of the worker and of all society (education, health, science etc.) a part of production must be given over. But, in the present system, the worker only gets, in the form of wages and services, the subsistence minimum. The surplus product is taken from him by force (the worker has no control over its size and its distribution) and is used for objectives alien and even opposed to him. This means that he is exploited: he produces the subsistence minimum for himself and has the whole power of the state against him; the product of his own labour is raised up against him in the force of an alien or enemy force and thus does not belong to him. If the product created by the worker does not belong to him, that means that his labour, the source of that product, does not belong to him either".

8. K.Marx, *Capital* vol.3, p.335.

9. See P.Frank, *Le Stalinisme*, p.35-41.

10. K.Marx, *Capital* vol.1, Penguin edition.

11. See L.Altusser, *Enfin la crise du marxisme!* in *II Manifesto, Pouvoir et opposition dans les sociétés post-révolutionnaires*, p.249-250.

12. M.Haraszti, *Worker in a workers' state*, p.59-60 and p.63.

This is a translation of an excerpt from Zbigniew Kowalewski's book 'Rendez-vous nos usines!' ('Give Us Back Our Factories!'), published by La Breche in Paris.