

WE SHOULD RUN OUR WORKPLACES



OWNERS AND WORKERS

Today the economy is divided into two broad classes of people. One is a small elite who control the vast majority of the wealth, organisation, and productive capacity of society; private business owners. The other is the majority of workers who have little independent access to the means of survival and must work for one of these private owners in order to make the money we need to live. This structure has put workers in a position in which we must accept mistreatment by our employers or risk the insecurity and poverty of unemployment, and as such it is called “capitalism” as it is a system in which those who own the means of production, or capital, run the economy.

Many workers trapped in this economic structure hate their jobs. Even many workers who enjoy their work and the more farsighted owners can see that capitalism is often harmful. However, capitalism is treated as either a fact of nature or the best of all available options. This pamphlet challenges the idea that our current economic system is natural or optimal, suggests an alternative way of managing the economy, and lays out how we can get there.

A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE

Much of our acceptance of capitalism rests on a myth that it developed out of the free choices of everyone. In this myth, people were liberated from the previous medieval system based on peasants paying compulsory tithes to lords and priests, and everyone was free to associate, work, and trade on an open market. Some people became richer through their superior vision or work ethic and came to own much of society's wealth. Having risen to their position based on their abilities, this new ruling class of capitalists were the best people to run the economy. Their position is a result of the free choices of people on the market and any attempt to restrict them will involve restricting freedom for everyone.

However, capitalism is not the result of freedom but the result of violence and oppression. In many places, including Britain, the creation of capitalism involved vast amounts of violent theft from common people by the ruling class, with the medieval peasantry being kicked off their own land by the aristocracy, who turned that stolen land into their private property and turned themselves into capitalists. The exact methods of this theft change from place to place, but nowhere has there ever been a free market out of which a capitalist ruling class naturally developed on the basis of their own merits.

From these origins, capitalism has continued to require violence to maintain itself. From governments directly aiding capitalists with police or military violence, to more subtle forms of support such as favourable regulatory frameworks or subsidies ultimately enforced by a police baton or soldier's bullet. Likewise, large corporations are always heavily involved in politics; funding politicians in exchange for favours, running government services, supplying goods, and hiring from government bureaucracies.

WORKPLACE DICTATORSHIP

Capitalism is also incompatible with the values it claims to be based on. While it appeals to the liberal ideals of freedom and democracy, capitalist workplaces are strict hierarchies that answer to the dictatorship of the owner and workers exist as resources to be controlled without any real say in how the organisations we rely on for work are run.

This lack of freedom has a real impact on the lives of workers. We end up living a significant part of our lives not for ourselves, but for our employers. What we learn, who we know, where we live, and when we are free are all set by the demands of our jobs. Our employers get the best hours of our day for most of our lives and we retire only once we are worn out and no longer of any use to capitalism. This is the case even in “good” jobs. In bad jobs, where pay is bad, and the bosses are abusive or negligent, we can suffer all kinds of mistreatment which we often accept because we can not afford to quit.

Capitalist owners also have competing interests with their workers. Workers want a decent wage that we can live on, and we want working conditions that allow us to work and live with dignity. However, high wages and good working conditions are costs that eat into the profits for the owner, and any business that does not produce profit is not worth running. Since the owner has the power in this relationship, workers end up not being treated like people, but tools to make the rich ever richer, and we only get to live insofar as we can be good tools to that end.

These problems are the core cause of many of the other problems we face today. The capitalist need for profit results in a constant drive for lower wages, higher prices, and generally worse living conditions. The vast amounts of wealth that capitalists hoard and their key role in running the economy mean that they also have significant political power and are able to bribe or intimidate governments into serving their needs. Because these profits are often guaranteed by state violence, individual workers have very little power to push back against these worsening conditions. Capitalism means that modern society, despite being many times richer than any previous society, does not provide a basic level of human dignity for all of its members.

MORE MONEY THAN SENSE

Capitalism is also justified as being economically efficient. It may suck for many workers but this is the price we pay for the wonders of modern society. But this is also a myth, as many supposedly “efficient” businesses are bureaucratic nightmares, run by people who have no idea what is happening below them.

Part of the reason for this is the sheer size of many businesses. Past a certain point, a corporation becomes too large for anyone to know how it functions regardless of their level of business genius or technical expertise. The power imbalance between owners, their managers, and workers also means that people lie to their superiors to protect themselves, worsening this ignorance at the top. Anyone who has worked for a large organisation at its lower levels will know that day-to-day operations are often more reliant on front-line staff ignoring orders to get things done than on visionary leadership from above.

However, the conflict of interest between workers and owners is also a massive cause of inefficiency. Workers who think and act for themselves will always tend towards working towards their own interests and do as little as possible for their pay. On the other hand, workers who have been crushed down into obedient tools will lack drive, initiative, and the will to push back against, or work around, counterproductive commands from above. Capitalist organisations will always tend towards being run by people out of touch with reality and staffed by workers who are either in a state of rebellion or a state of apathy.

WORKER CONTROL

The solution to these problems can't be found within capitalism as they arise from the very structure of ownership at the core of capitalism. Instead, they can only be solved by changing that structure of ownership and putting control of the means of production into the hands of workers. Only when workers control the day-to-day running of the organisations we rely on for our livelihood can that reliance not be used to exploit and oppress us.

Worker control would also remove the internal conflicts that cause problems in capitalist businesses. When workers are the collective managers and owners of our workplaces, there is no conflict of interest between worker, manager, and owner. Without this conflict, there is no reason for workers not to cooperate and share information for our own mutual benefit, and no need for a management hierarchy to keep people in line. Likewise, without the ability of individuals to make ever more money from ever larger businesses, there is no reason for organisations to grow larger than is economically efficient from the perspective of serving their workers and consumers.

The first response to this is often that such a change in ownership would be theft from the capitalists. But as already discussed, the current ownership structure is itself based on historic theft from peasants, workers, and other lower classes. Returning the ownership of the means of production to the descendants of those dispossessed people would be an act of justice, not theft. The second response is that workers do not know how to run businesses. But in most businesses, neither the management nor the owners really know how to run the business and it is the workers who actually keep the business functioning.

Such a change in ownership would change the very foundations of our society and would abolish capitalism in the sense that capitalists, as a class of people who own most of the capital, would not exist. Likewise, the working class, as defined by having to rely on capitalists to employ us in order to survive, would also cease to exist, as we would collectively own and run our workplaces. Society would not be run by a privileged class, but by its members in general as free equals; everyone would have a say on the running of the means of production and infrastructure that we rely on in order to survive.

SOCIALISM AND THE STATE

Worker control of our workplaces and society is not a new idea; it was the core demand of the old socialist movements. But these movements relied on the state to control the means of production for workers and so the government, not workers, ended up as the real owner of our workplaces and society. This put workers in the same position of disempowerment as we face under capitalism; someone else controls access to what we need to work and live, and so can control, oppress, and exploit us.

While the state does not have the same profit motive as private businesses, its structure still encourages oppression and exploitation. All states are built on the obedience of their subjects without which the rulers of the state have no power. A working class that is too wealthy and too free-thinking to be easily controlled is a threat to that obedience. Likewise, the politicians and technocrats who seek power within the state must gather resources to battle each other for power and those resources must be extracted from the working class. Workers who have worked for government departments will know that they can be just as abusive and incompetent as private businesses. Even the most democratic states suffer from these problems, with a theoretically perfect democracy only empowering the majority to exploit and abuse minorities.

If workers are to take control of society and our own lives, we need to do so from the bottom up. We need to run our workplaces, our housing, and the utilities we rely on directly, based

on consensus wherever possible. To run the economy as a whole, we need these worker controlled workplaces and community controlled infrastructure projects to cooperate together in networks, alliances, and federations which are run on the basis of bottom up free agreement instead of being imposed from the top down on the basis of rulership and obedience. Only when society is organised in this way can workers claim to really own the means of production.

ANARCHO-SYNDICALISM

In order to achieve this kind of control, workers need to build our own organisations from the bottom up, independent of the state and capitalism. We need to build radical unions in our workplaces and community organisations, like renters' unions and mutual aid groups in our neighbourhoods. These organisations can fight for higher pay, lower rents, and better living conditions through strikes, boycotts, and protests. By being local and decentralised they can be run by workers without creating a new hierarchy of rulers over us.

However, these organisations must have aims beyond just winning a higher wage in a particular workplace or preventing an eviction in a particular community. By linking these organisations together on the basis of mutual cooperation they would have the ability to launch strikes and boycotts across entire industries or countries. Such power could be used to oppose larger problems like unjust laws or the bad behaviour of large corporations. Once sufficiently developed such an alliance of workers' organisations would have bottom up control over the economy and society, could use that control to do away with both the state and capitalism, and truly put workers in control of society.

This approach to change has a name. Because it rejects all authority and rulership, it is anarchist, which literally means without (an) rulers (archy). Because it rejects the use of the state for political change and seeks to build working class power through organisations in the workplace and the community, it is syndicalist, which comes from the French word for a workers' union. Together, these two ideas form Anarcho-Syndicalism.



WEBSITE: SOLFEDNL.NOBLOGS.ORG

EMAIL: SOLFEDNL@RISEUP.NET