Are You a Wage Slave?

Surely having to work for a wage or a salary is a modern form of slavery?

We socialists like to refer to wage labour as “wage slavery” and call workers “wage-slaves”. Non-socialists may assume that we use these expressions as figures of speech, for rhetorical effect. No, we use them literally. They reflect our view of capitalist society.

Socialists use the word “slavery” in a broad sense, to encompass both chattel slavery and wage slavery as alternative ways of exploiting labour. We are aware of the differences between them, but we also want to draw attention to their common purpose. Capitalist language conceals this common purpose by equating chattel slavery with slavery as such and by conflating wage labour with free labour. Socialists regard labour as free only where the labourers themselves individually or collectively own and control the means by which they labour (land, tools, machinery, etc.).

Why chattel slavery was abandoned

The connection between chattel slavery and wage slavery as alternative modes of exploitation is visible in the debates within the British and American ruling class that led up to the abolition of chattel slavery. While religious abolitionists condemned slave-holding as a moral sin, the clinching argument against chattel slavery was that it was no longer the most effective way of exploiting the labouring population. It was abandoned because it was impeding economic and especially industrial development – that is, the accumulation of capital.

The legal, social and political status of wage-slaves is superior to that of chattel slaves. However, when we compare their position in the labour process itself, we see that here the difference between them is not a fundamental one. They are all compelled to obey the orders of the “boss” who owns the instruments of production with which they work or who represents those who own them. In a small enterprise the boss may convey his orders directly, while in a large enterprise orders are passed down through a managerial hierarchy. But in all cases it is ultimately the boss who decides what to produce and how to produce it. The products of the labour of the (chattel or wage) slaves do not belong to them. Nor, indeed, does their own activity.

The secret abode

An obvious difference between chattel slavery and wage slavery is that as a chattel slave you are enslaved – totally subjected to another’s will – at every moment from birth to death, in every aspect of your life. As a wage-slave, you are enslaved only at those times when your labour power is at the disposal of your employer. At other times, in other aspects of your life – as a consumer, a voter, a family member, a gardener perhaps – you enjoy a certain measure of freedom, respect and social equality.

Thus, the wage-slave has some scope for self-development and self-realisation that is denied the chattel slave. Limited scope, to be sure, for the wage-slave must regularly return to the cramped world of wage labour, which spread its influence over the rest of life like a pestilential mist.

As a result of this split, capital confronts the worker in schizophrenic style, like Robert Louis Stevenson’s Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. The same person whom capital sedulously flatters and courts as a consumer and voter is helplessly exposed to harassment, bullying, yells and insults at the place of employment.

Capitalist ideologists focus on the “public” spheres of life in which people are relative social equals and do their best to ignore what happens inside the “private” sphere of wage slavery. Thus, economists analyse the exchange of resources among “market actors”, while political scientists talk about relations between the state and an imaginary classless community of citizens that they call “civil society”. Even children’s television programmes display the same bias. For instance, most of
the human characters in Sesame Street earn their living through small individual and family businesses (a corner store, a fix-it shop, a dance studio, a veterinarian clinic, etc.).

So there is a wide gap between superficial appearances and deep reality. The servitude of the wage worker is not visible on the surface of capitalist society; to witness it the investigator must enter “the secret abode of production, on the threshold of which stands: ‘no admittance except on business’” (Marx, Capital).

**Who is the master?**

It may be objected that wage workers are not slaves because they have the legal right to leave a particular employer, even if in practice they may be reluctant to use that right out of fear of not finding another job.

All that this proves, however, is that the wage worker is not the slave of any particular employer. According to Marx, the owner of the wage-slave is not the individual capitalist but the capitalist class – “capital as a whole”. Yes, you can leave one employer, but only in order to look for a new one. What you cannot do, lacking as you do all other access to the means of life, is escape from the thrall of employers as a class – that is, cease to be a wage-slave.

**Is wage slavery worse?**

Some have argued that – at least in the absence of an effective social security “safety net” – wage slavery is even worse than chattel slavery. As the chattel slave is valuable property his master has an interest in preserving his life and strength, while the wage-slave is always at risk of being thrown out of employment and left to starve.

Actually, the severity with which the chattel slave is treated depends on just how valuable he is. Where chattel slaves were in abundant supply and therefore quite cheap – as in San Domingo, where a slave rebellion in 1791 led to the abolition of chattel slavery and the establishment of the state of Haiti (C.L.R. James, The Black Jacobins) – they were commonly worked, whipped, or otherwise tortured to death. How the wage-slave is treated similarly depends on the availability of replacements. For instance, capitalists in China see no reason why they should protect young peasant workers in shoe factories from exposure to toxic chemicals in the glue, because plenty of teenage girls are constantly arriving from the countryside to replace those who fall too sick to work (Anita Chan, China’s Workers Under Assault: The Exploitation of Labor in a Globalizing Economy, M.E. Sharpe 2001).

**Intermediate forms**

As alternative modes of exploitation, chattel slavery and wage slavery are not separated by a Chinese Wall. Under conditions unfavourable for the working class, wage slavery can easily degenerate into an intermediate form that more closely resembles chattel slavery.

It is common for desperately poor people in underdeveloped countries to be induced to sign a labour contract (which, being illiterate, they cannot read) by lies about the atrocious conditions that await them. By the time they discover the truth it is too late: they are forcibly prevented from running away. Such, for example, is the plight of the half million or more Haitian migrants who toil on plantations in the Dominican Republic (see http://www.batayouvriye.org/English/Positions1/dr.html).

Comparable but more formalized was the system of indentured labour that prevailed in colonial America in the 17th and 18th centuries and was gradually displaced by black chattel slavery. In exchange for passage across the Atlantic, poor Europeans undertook to serve a master for a set number of years (typically seven). Some survived their temporary servitude, others did not.

**Slavery and violence**

The word “slavery” conjures up the image of the cruel overseer on a plantation in the Caribbean or the old American South, wielding a whip over the heads of his helpless victims. The lash is rightly regarded as a symbol of chattel slavery.

Yet here again no Chinese Wall separates one mode of exploitation from another. The lash has also been widely used against indentured labourers and certain categories of wage-slaves. Only in 1915,
for instance, was a law passed in the United States (the La Follette Act) to prohibit the whipping of seamen. Even after that a sailor could still be placed in irons or put on reduced rations for disobeying orders.

Children in the textile mills of 19th-century Britain were hit with leather straps for not working hard enough. In China, abolition of corporal punishment was one of the demands made by Anyuan coal miners in the strike of 1923. As Anita Chan shows in her book, it is in widespread use again today in factories owned by Taiwanese and Korean capitalists.

Even in the developed countries, many people are bullied and tormented at work, usually by a person standing above them in the hierarchy. Some are driven to suicide. Many suffer serious physical or sexual assault. On one of many websites devoted to this problem (www.worktrauma.org) we find the story of a bookkeeper at a power tool company whom a manager kicked in the buttocks with such force that she was lifted off her heels, causing severe back injury as well as shock. While I was at Brown University, a laboratory assistant was raped in the lab by her supervisor.

Such acts of violence against employees are no longer sanctioned by law, but they happen all the time. The victim is sometimes able to win some compensation, but criminal charges are rarely made against the perpetrator.

**It doesn't apply to me**

If you are fortunately situated, you may feel that my argument doesn’t apply to you. Your boss or manager treats you well, you do not suffer insult or assault, you are satisfied with your working conditions, and the work itself may even give you satisfaction. You at least are not a wage-slave.

Or so you imagine. Some chattel slaves – in particular, the personal servants of kind masters and mistresses – also had the good fortune to be treated well. But they had no guarantee that their good fortune would continue. They might be sold to or inherited by a cruel new master following the old master’s death, departure or bankruptcy. You too may suddenly find yourself with a nasty new boss or manager. The matter is out of your hands, precisely because you are only a wage-slave.

If you are a technical specialist, a scientist or analyst of some kind, you may even say: “What sort of slave can I be? I am not ordered about all the time. On the contrary, I was hired for my expertise and I am expected to think for myself, solve problems and offer suggestions. True, I can’t make important decisions by myself, but my bosses are always willing to listen to me. And they are always polite to me.”

You are deluding yourself. I know because I have been in a similar situation and deluded myself. Your bosses listen to you before they come to a decision. Once they make a decision, they expect you to accept it. But suppose you once forget yourself (which means – forget your place) and continue to argue against a decision that has already been made. Then you are in for a rude shock!

What makes your delusion possible is that you have grown accustomed to analyse problems from your employer’s point of view. You are every bit as alienated from your own thinking as the assembly line worker is from his or her physical movements. And if a process that you think up is patented, do you imagine that the patent will belong to you?

**STEFAN**

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