

# Commodity struggle or class struggle?

THERE is an old view still floating about that only those workers who are class-conscious and organised politically for the overthrow of capitalism take part in the class struggle, and that the average worker, who is not class-conscious, takes no part in the struggle, being simply a commodity seller.

Ideas don't fall down from the sky but are drawn from the material at hand, consequently the idea of the class struggle must have been drawn from the struggle itself. In other words the class struggle must have existed before we could become conscious of it. Therefore the class unconscious must have waged the class struggle in the first place, so why cannot the class unconscious still take part in it?

Those who contend that the class struggle only exists where there are class-conscious workers, and then only between the class-conscious and the ruling class, are driven to support the absurd position that the class struggle is imposed on society, that instead of ideas being the product of material conditions, material conditions are the product of ideas-the utopian view.

In spite of contentions to the contrary, no individual with a mighty brain came on the scene possessed with the brilliant idea of imposing the class struggle on society and ordering the combatants to line up and get on with it. The combatants were there; the struggle existed; but whereas formerly it was fought blindly, now some of the combatants, having a clear knowledge of the position, fight with understanding, and therefore to far better purpose.

While there is a similarity between the worker coming upon the market to sell his commodity and the average capitalist coming upon the market to sell his wares, yet there are essential differences-the differences that breed the class struggle. There are opposing interests between buyers and sellers of commodities - sectional interests - but there is a class cleavage between buyers and sellers of the workers commodity and *class interest* enters the matter. It is a class commodity that the worker sells, not an ordinary commodity, and it is in his capacity as a member of the master class, as opposed to the working class, that the capitalist buys it. The workers combine among themselves to sell their commodity (labour power) as high as possible-the masters combine among themselves to buy it as low as possible. The worker cannot make a profit out of the sale of his labour-power, he can only live more or less well. The capitalist, on the other hand, buys labour-power to make a profit out of its consumption. It is out of the consumption of labour-power that all surplus wealth is derived.

The interests of the workers as sellers of labour-power and the interests of the capitalists as buyers thereof are diametrically opposed, and so are the ideas with which each class sets out. The main objective of the capitalist is buying

to sell-investing capital. The main objective of the worker is selling to buy-selling his energy to obtain the wherewithal to live.

The commodity the worker sells is the basis of value, and consequently the amount of surplus value the buyers of it obtain is determined by the difference between the value of the labour-power and the value produced by the using up of that labour-power.

The value of the labour-power, however, is determined by its cost of production, which depends upon, among other things, the standard of living social development and physical surroundings have handed down. Around the question of the standard of living a constant struggle goes on. This struggle is peculiar only to the labour-power commodity and this peculiarity bears fruit in the form of the class struggle.

Workers and masters meet upon the market as equals only in the sense that they are both either sellers or buyers of commodities-but here the equality ends. The worker is bound to sell his commodity or starve; he can't go into a refrigerator, and it is this fact that binds the worker to a status of slavery-it is this fact that illustrates the sham nature of the "equality" of buyers and sellers so far as the labour-power commodity is concerned.

As soon as a child of the working class enters employment he takes a part, however insignificant it may be, in the class struggle. This struggle, in its early stages, is not a struggle for the overthrow of the system; nevertheless, it is a class struggle-the struggle of a class for existence. Ultimately this struggle develops into the struggle for the overthrow of the class that suppresses. In other words, the industrial struggle, the struggle to resist the encroachments of capital (the early form of the class struggle) develops of necessity into the political struggle, the struggle for the overthrow of capitalism. It is out of actual class struggle experience that knowledge of it, and of the method with which to wage it, is obtained.

To sum the matter up:

The labour-power commodity is like all other commodities in that it is bought and sold upon the market, its value being determined by the cost of production, around which the higgling of the market allows its price to fluctuate.

It is unlike all other commodities in that it is the commodity of a subject class sold to a dominant class, and further in that the standard of living, an historical element, enters into the question of its cost of production.

It is these two fundamental distinctions that make the matter a class conflict as apart from the ordinary matter of the competitive buying and selling of commodities.

The modern class struggle presents two aspects. On the one side the struggle to sell labour-power under the best conditions-the industrial struggle for wages and hours of labour; on the other side the struggle for the overthrow of

the wages system-the political struggle for Socialism. The un-class conscious worker takes part in the former but only the class conscious worker takes part in the latter.

The class struggle is, therefore, both industrial and political-the latter being its ultimate, its revolutionary, form.

**(NOVEMBER 1920)**