
Marxism AND Oppression

By **PAUL D'AMATO**

OVER THE last few decades, left-wing activists and academics have by and large rejected Marxism and its emphasis on class and class struggle. In particular, Marxism has been attacked for ignoring or downplaying questions of oppression. The idea that society consists of a series of separate but overlapping “identities” based on things such as gender, race, class, sexual orientation, national identity and cultural practices is now widespread. This view of society is akin to the liberal pluralism we learn in school. Society, so the argument goes, consists of different, sometimes competing “interest groups.” No overarching analysis of society can take all of these “differences” into account and unite them into a coherent framework. Marxism is viewed as unable to deal with oppression because it is concerned only with class exploitation. The views of one feminist author writing in 1979 are still widespread: “Marx never questioned the hierarchical sexual ordering of society.”¹

Marx is similarly attacked for his supposed lack of attention to racism. To quote one academic:

Ethnic and racial conflicts were not subjects to which Marx gave much close attention. Although Marx acknowledged these types of division in society, he does not appear to have been much interested in explaining their dynamics. Obsessed with a supposedly more fundamental category of socioeconomic identity, namely class, Marx slighted race and did not grant it a place of its own in his historical work. In 1849, in response to the query “What is a Negro slave?” Marx wrote: “A man of the black race. The one explanation is as good as the other...A Negro is a Negro.”²

The idea that Marx and Engels ignored or downplayed oppression because they “privileged” class is simply wrong. What they (and Marxists since) have argued is that 1) various oppressions cannot be understood sep-



arately from capitalism because capitalism shapes and depends upon oppression for its survival, and 2) the most thoroughgoing struggle against oppression cannot be carried out on the basis of separate struggles of the oppressed, each united across class lines. Such a struggle will always be limited by the narrow interests of bourgeois and middle-class elements within the oppressed group who will seek to limit the scope of the struggle within the confines of capitalism. Only the working class (Black, white, Latino, gay, straight, women, men) has both the collective power and the common interest to fight for complete liberation.

The Marxist tradition

Capitalism is a society based on the exploitation of the many by the few. Because it is founded on massive inequality, it requires various means to oppress and keep down the working class and the poor. The ruling classes of the world know the value of “divide and rule,” both as a means to weaken any opposition against them, and as a means to squeeze more profits from the working class.

**NEGROES
BEWARE
DO NOT ATTEND
COMMUNIST
MEETINGS**

Paid organizers for the communists are only trying to get negroes in trouble. Alabama is a good place for good negroes to live in, but it is a bad place for negroes who believe in SOCIAL EQUALITY.

**The Ku Klux Klan
Is Watching You.
TAKE HEED**

Tell the communist leaders to leave.
Report all communist meetings to the
Ku Klux Klan
Post Office Box 651, Birmingham, Alabama.

Divide and rule: racism helps the bosses by blunting class unity

The working class is not only an exploited class—it is also an oppressed class. Workers receive worse education, worse housing and worse job opportunities than the sons and daughters of the middle class and the rich. Workers are constantly reminded that they do not possess the intelligence or the capabilities of those above them on the social ladder. Workers are disadvantaged at every step, stressed under financial and family constraints, forced to work in dangerous jobs and, therefore, more likely to suffer from various physical and mental ailments. In turn, they are then forced to accept the poorest quality health care—if they can get it at all.

Racial, sexual, national, linguistic and other oppressions interact with this basic class oppression to produce sections within the working class who are doubly or “specially” oppressed. Marx and Engels were clear that capitalism—a system based upon the exploitation of wage labor for profit—was founded on enslavement and oppression from its beginnings:

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the indigenous population of that continent, the beginnings of the conquest and plunder of India, and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of black skins are all things that characterize the dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief moments of primitive accumulation.³

The treasures captured outside Europe by undisguised looting, enslavement and murder flowed back to the mother-country and were turned into capital there.⁴

Direct slavery is as much the pivot upon which our present-day industrialism turns as are machinery, credit, etc. Without slavery there would be no cotton, without cotton there would be no modern industry. It is slavery which has given value to the colonies, it is the colonies which have created world trade, and world trade is the necessary condition of large-scale machine industry.⁵

In fact the veiled slavery of the wage laborers in Europe needed the unqualified slavery of the New World as its pedestal...Capital comes dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt.⁶

Everyone accepts the idea that the oppression of slaves was rooted in the class relations of exploitation of that system. Fewer recognize that under capitalism *wage slavery* is the pivot around which all other inequalities and oppressions turn. Capitalism used racism to justify plunder, conquest and slavery, but as Marx pointed out, it also used racism to divide and rule—to pit one section of the working class against another and thereby blunt class consciousness. Marx developed this idea throughout his works, including these two passages about slavery in the U.S. and England’s oppression of Ireland:

In the United States of America, every independent workers’ movement was paralyzed as long as slavery disfigured part of the republic. Labor in a white skin cannot emancipate itself where it is branded in a black skin.⁷

Every industrial and commercial center in England now possesses a working class *divided* into two *hostile* camps, English proletarians and Irish proletarians. The ordinary English worker hates the Irish worker as a



A multiracial sitdown strike in Birmingham, 1937

competitor who lowers his standard of life. In relation to the Irish worker he feels himself a member of the *ruling nation* and so turns himself into a tool of the aristocrats and capitalists of his country *against Ireland*, thus strengthening their domination *over himself*. He cherishes religious, social, and national prejudices against the Irish worker. His attitude toward him is much the same as that of the “poor whites” to the “niggers” in the former slave states of the U.S.A. The Irishman pays him back with interest in his own money. He sees in the English worker at once the accomplice and the stupid tool of the *English rule in Ireland*.

This antagonism is artificially kept alive and intensified by the press, the pulpit, the comic papers, in short, by all the means at the disposal of the ruling classes. *This antagonism is the secret of the impotence of the English working class*, despite its organization. It is the secret by which the capitalist class maintains its power. And that class is fully aware of it. [Marx’s italics]⁸

Marx concluded that part of the key to building a successful workers’ movement in England was to win English workers to the idea that Ireland had the right to separate from England.

Marx’s observations on Ireland became the foundation of Vladimir Lenin’s position on the self-determination of oppressed nations—in an era when the world’s biggest and most powerful capitalist states fought to carve up the world between themselves. Lenin’s arguments against Rosa Luxemburg over Poland’s right to self-determination in 1914 have become a cornerstone of the revolutionary Marxist tradition:

Successful struggle against exploitation requires that the proletariat be free of nationalism, and be absolutely neutral, so to speak, in the fight for supremacy that is going on among the bourgeoisie of various nations. If the proletariat of any one nation gives the slightest support to the privileges of “its own” national bourgeoisie, that will inevitably rouse distrust among the proletariat of another nation; it will weaken the international class solidarity of the workers and divide them, to the delight of the bourgeoisie. Repudiation of the right to self-determination

or to succession inevitably means, in practice, support for the privileges of the dominant nation.⁹

Nationalism and combating *national oppression*, for Marx (and later Lenin) were not at all the same thing. On the contrary, it was the duty of socialists, especially those in the large oppressor nations, to combat all forms of national oppression and inequality precisely in order to *break down national divisions* in the working class and strengthen their struggle against capitalism. Socialists are for the voluntary, free union of peoples and are therefore in principle opposed to any forced retention of any nation within the borders of another. This is the exact opposite of the anti-Marxist caricature that claims that Marxism “ignores” such divisions as a “diversion” from the class struggle.

Marx and Engels on women’s oppression

Marx and Engels rejected outright the idea (upheld by conservatives, but also by some feminists) that the low status of women was an unchanging feature of human existence—fixed for all time by human biology or by the ideas in people’s heads. Women’s position in society has been conditioned by the particular stage of development of the productive forces of society, and, corresponding to that, the given social relations of a particular society. Women’s status in society has always been related to the role they have played in—and in the different forms taken by—the family in history.

Women’s status, for example, was very different in preclass societies. Engels describes how in the horticultural society of the Iroquois, women’s control over agriculture gave them a far higher status than women in later times. Though there was a sexual division of labor, it did not necessarily confer a dominant role to the men:

The division of labor between the two sexes is determined by causes entirely different from those that determine the status of women in society. Peoples whose women have to work much harder than we would consider proper often have far more real respect for women than our Europeans have of theirs. The social status of the lady of civilization, surrounded by sham homage and estranged from all real work, is socially infinitely lower than that of the hard-working woman of barbarism...¹⁰

Women’s oppression arose and coincided with the rise of the first class divisions in society:

The first class opposition that appears in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between man and woman in monogamous marriage, and the first class oppression coincides with that of the female sex by the male. Monogamous marriage was a great step forward; nevertheless, together with slavery and private wealth, it opens the period that has lasted until today in which every step forward is also relatively a step backward, in which prosperity and development for some is won through the misery and frustration of others.¹¹

Capitalism does not free women, but it creates the conditions in which women can be liberated. Noting how modern industry in the 19th century was drawing women out of the domestic sphere and into the paid workforce, Marx argued:

However terrible and disgusting the dissolution of the old family ties within the capitalist system may appear, large-scale industry, by assigning an important part in socially organized



Women and men have fought together to defend abortion rights

processes of production, outside the sphere of the domestic economy, to women, young persons and children of both sexes, does nevertheless create a new economic foundation for a higher form of the family and relations between the sexes... [T]he fact that the collective working group is composed of individuals of both sexes and all ages must under the appropriate conditions turn into a source of humane development, although in its spontaneously developed, brutal, capitalist form, the system works in the opposite direction, and becomes a pestiferous source of corruption and slavery, since here the worker exists for the process of production, and not the process of production for the worker.¹²

Women's oppression cannot be seen as something separate or parallel to capitalism—capitalism depends upon the “private” family, on women's roles as housewives and mothers for its survival. As a more contemporary Marxist analysis of women's oppression lays out:

Marxists argue that under capitalism, women's oppression is rooted in “privatized reproduction,” or, in women's role within the nuclear family. In the private family, birthing, child-rearing, and food preparation take place as a “service” to capitalism.

“Privatized reproduction” within the nuclear family consists of bearing and raising the next generation of workers for capitalism, and of preparing present-day workers to “reproduce” their labor each day. This function of the family has become essential to the existence of capitalism, as a cheap means of maintaining the labor force.¹³

Because capitalism knows two tendencies—dependence upon women's unpaid labor in the home *and* the exploitation of women in the paid labor force—it forces women to bear a double burden of work at home and on the job. Nevertheless, Marx's insight remains valid today: the *starting point* for women's emancipation is their entry into paid labor—a change which breaks women out of their isolation in the home and gives working-class women the collective strength and confidence—alongside the men of their class—to fight for their rights as both women and workers.

Moreover, the wealth and means of production created by

capitalism can be used, if collectively seized and placed under workers' control, to socialize household functions such as cooking, cleaning and childcare in order to liberate women completely. In his draft for the *Communist Manifesto*, Engels wrote:

It [communist society] will transform the relations between the sexes into a purely private matter which concerns only the persons involved and into which society has no occasion to intervene. It can do this since it does away with private property and educates children on a communal basis, and in this way removes the two bases of traditional marriage, the dependence, rooted in private property, of the woman on the man and of the children on the parents.¹⁴

Many years later, the Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky echoed a similar theme:

The problem of women's emancipation, both material and spiritual, is closely tied to that of the transformation of family life. It is necessary to remove the bars from those confining and suffocating cages into which the present family structure drives women, turning her into a slave, if not a beast of burden. This can be accomplished only through the organization of communal methods of feeding and child-rearing.¹⁵

Who benefits from oppression?

What most theories of oppression have in common is the idea that working-class unity is impossible because each group benefits from the oppression of some other group. It is now unquestioningly accepted among feminist academics and many activists, for example, that women's oppression stems from “patriarchy,” loosely defined as a system (more or less independent of time and place) whereby all men benefit by keeping all women down. To cite just one recent example from a recent anthology on feminist theory and politics: “The first theme is that women as a social group are oppressed by men as a social group and that this is the primary oppression for women. Patriarchy is the oppressing structure of male domination.”¹⁶

Likewise, Black nationalists and academics influenced by “identity” politics tend to view racism as a system where all whites benefit from the oppression of Blacks. The same anthology cited above quotes two Latina feminists: “Racism is societal and institutional. It implies power to implement racist ideology. Women of color do not have such power, but white women are born with it and the greater their economic privilege, the greater their power.”¹⁷

If class is talked about at all, it is “classism,” that is, how the better-off sections of the oppressed (say, middle-class and rich women) need to learn how to be less elitist so that they can unite in solidarity with their poorer oppressed sisters and brothers. Class is not viewed as a fundamental divide in society, whereby a tiny minority exploit for profit the labor of the majority, but simply as something oppressed groups should recognize in order to overcome any friction inside the movement or organization.

But while it is true that individual workers may hold sexist

or racist ideas, it is not at all true that workers benefit from it, even if they think that they do. In fact, when one part of the working class is kept down, it helps the bosses to keep *the entire class down*. Rather than benefiting from oppression, all workers are hurt by it.

Those who argue that male workers have “power” over women, or that white workers have “power” over Black people, have no idea what real power is. In their focus on some particular group oppression, they think that another group has “power.” That is a moral conception of power. The ruling class has the real power—through its control of production, of resources, of the means of destruction and of the means of disseminating ideas. It uses that power to maintain its ability to exploit and make profits unhindered. Workers’ power—that is, their ability to change their circumstances and challenge the system—comes from their collective organization and the confidence they draw from it. Atomized and separate, encouraged to go for each other’s throats, workers are powerless. So when a male worker abuses his wife, he is acting not out of power, but out of powerlessness, out of weakness. And when a white worker acts in a racist manner toward a Black worker, the white worker is not expressing their own power, but the power of the system over them. In defeat, workers are most susceptible to the prevailing ruling-class ideas—racist, anti-immigrant, anti-woman, homophobic, and so on. In periods of large-scale collective struggle, workers find in class solidarity and hatred of all oppression the basis of their real collective power.

The bosses consciously foster divisions among workers in order to weaken and defeat their struggles for better conditions. This is openly evident in the written instructions to a detective firm on how to help break the 1919 steel strike in Pittsburgh:

We want you to stir up as much bad feeling as you possibly can between the Serbians and the Italians. Spread data among the Serbians that the Italians are going back to work. Call up every question you can in reference to racial hatred between these two nationalities; make them realize to the fullest extent that far better results would be accomplished if they will go back to work. Urge them to go back to work or the Italians will get their jobs.¹⁸

The very conditions of capitalist exploitation and competition also help to foster divisions among workers. As Sharon Smith points out:

While capitalism propels workers toward collective forms of struggle, it also forces them into competition. The unremitting pressure from a layer of unemployed workers, which exists in most economies even in times of ‘full employment,’ is a deterrent to struggle—a constant reminder that workers compete for limited jobs which afford a decent standard of living.

Without the counterweight of the class struggle this competition can act as an obstacle to the development of class consciousness, and encourage the growth of what Marx called ‘false consciousness’—part of which is the ideas which scapegoat other sections of society. The growth of such ideas divides workers, and impedes their ability to focus on the real enemy.¹⁹

By oppressing a section of the working class on the basis of its sex, race, sexual orientation, language or national origin and driving those workers’ conditions of existence down, capitalism is able to drive the conditions of *all* workers down. A white worker may *perceive* that their conditions of work and pay are

better *because* of the lower pay received by Black workers. The reality, however, is that the bosses use the conditions of the lowest paid workers to drive the conditions of all workers down. The worse the pay and conditions of the most oppressed workers, the more the bosses can lower the pay of *all* workers. Conversely, when the conditions of the most oppressed sections of the working class are improved, the conditions of all workers improve. This explains why in the South, where rampant racism has been used to divide workers and keep unionization rates extremely low, the pay of white workers, though better than that of their Black counterparts in the region, is historically lower than the pay of Black workers in the North.²⁰

Clinton’s gutting of welfare disproportionately hurts Black people because Blacks are disproportionately poor. However, a majority of people on welfare is white, as are the majority of poor people. Politicians used racial stereotyping in order to whip up anti-welfare sentiment—in order to attack both poor Blacks *and* poor whites. This attack has repercussions for all workers, who will not only suffer from less access to social aid in times of economic distress, but who will also face employers’ attempts to use the cheap labor of former welfare recipients to drive employees’ conditions down.



While men occupied Flint auto factories, women faced the cops outside

Likewise, some male workers may *perceive* that they benefit from women’s oppression—they don’t have to do as much housework, for example. But the relative advantage a man gets from this setup doesn’t compare either to the benefit capitalism receives from women’s unpaid labor in the home, or to the gain for both working-class men and women if the conditions of women’s double burden were lifted. Male workers suffer from the fact that women’s wages are still on average lower than theirs—both because it drives down the wages of all workers, and because it lowers the financial resources of working-class families. The prime beneficiary of women’s role in the privatized family is the capitalist class, who does not have to pay for taking care of today’s and tomorrow’s generation of workers.

Even in instances where men and women do equally share housework, workers are still stuck in private households, forced to carry a difficult burden that allows no leisure time. One could only laugh at a man who proclaimed his pleasure at the

fact that his wife was treated as a sex object at work, could not afford an abortion, could not take paid maternity leave, had trouble finding quality affordable childcare or received low wages.

It is true that oppression—such as racism or sexism—affects all classes in society. But the character and intensity of the oppression is very much shaped by the class you come from. An unemployed white autoworker in Flint, Michigan, for example, is far more oppressed than Gen. Colin Powell (if indeed he is oppressed at all), who is part of the American ruling class. Moreover, a Black autoworker in Flint, Michigan, shares much more in common, in terms of social status, living and working conditions, with a white autoworker than he does with Colin Powell or a Black businessman. More than that, Colin Powell actually benefits from the existing social order. Therefore, whatever Colin Powell's personal views on discrimination or racism, he has a stake in a system that depends upon discrimination and racism.

Likewise, there is a wide gulf between the oppression experienced by a wealthy woman who can afford maids, cooks and nannies, and the woman who works for her as a maid or a nanny. They stand apart from each other across a yawning class divide. The wealthy woman has no need to fight for all of the things that would free working women from their oppressed condition—such as free and available abortion (and other health care), equal pay, childcare, and so on—because she can pay for these services and hire working-class women to perform these tasks. In fact, complete liberation for all women hurts the interests of her own class, which depends upon women's unpaid labor in the home, the low pay of immigrant workers who tend their lawns, cook their food and work in their factories, fields and hospitals.

Building women's "unity" means, in practice, subordinating the interests of working-class women to bourgeois and middle-class women. "The sisterhood of woman," wrote the socialist Elizabeth Gurley Flynn in 1915, "like the brotherhood of man, is a hollow sham to labor. Behind all its smug hypocrisy and sickly sentimentality loom the sinister outlines of the class war."²¹

Rejection of revolution

But the class war is just what many on the left have rejected. The same sections of the left who have rejected Marxism and accepted some form of identity politics have also, since the collapse of Stalinism and the much-touted "triumph" of free-market capitalism, completely rejected the idea that society can be fundamentally transformed. This can be seen even in the case of left-wing writers who consider themselves socialists. Manning Marable, for example, wrote in the February 1993 issue of the *Progressive*:

We must accept and acknowledge the reality that, for the foreseeable future, the essential debate will not be about "capitalism versus socialism" but about the character and content of the capitalist social order... This means advancing a politics of radical, multicultural democracy, not socialism. It means, in the short run, that tactical electoral alliances with centrists like Clinton, within the Democratic Party, are absolutely necessary if we are to push back the aggressive, reactionary agenda of the far right.

Urvashi Vaid, director of the Policy Institute of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF), is quoted in a recent

South End Press book, ironically titled *Talking About a Revolution*:

For many years, I thought that we would have a revolution that would overthrow existing structures and replace them with the new thing. I don't believe that now, and I haven't for a long time...

But I really believe that we can make capitalism more responsive, accountable, environmentally sound. We can make it fairer, non-discriminatory. We can take the benefits of the economic system and spread them out, so they can benefit more people rather than the five owners of everything... This is a pragmatic formulation."²²

Even when unity between different oppressed groups is discussed, the basis of unity is not class, but only some vague sense that oppressed groups cannot achieve their liberation alone. The result is pro-Democratic Party reformism, represented by the quotations above, combined with an argument for cross-class unity. Vaid argues,

I really value identity... And yet, I very much believe I can link up and find common ground with a heterosexual mother who lives in the suburbs. I think I can link up and find common ground with a straight white businessman who's working in a big corporation. I really believe that."²³

The working class is completely absent from this equation. It is ironic that, in this view, workers cannot unite across racial and sexual lines, yet Vaid (a nonwhite lesbian) thinks nothing of proclaiming her ability to unite with a "straight white businessman." The middle class can unite, workers cannot.

Marable at least recognizes that there has been a growing class polarization among Blacks in the U.S.:

Despite the legal and political gains African-Americans have achieved, and despite the growth of a Black middle class, the reality is that the basic conditions for the vast majority of Black people—and youth especially—have become strikingly worse in the past 15 years."²⁴

Marable also points out that the number of Black political officials in office has risen dramatically since the 1965, from 100 to more than 8,000, at the very same time that conditions for the majority of Blacks have worsened.

But Marable doesn't use these facts to challenge the idea of an undifferentiated "Black community," or to explain that class interest pits poor and working-class Blacks against middle-class and rich Blacks. Instead he argues: "If the Black Community is going to move forward into the next century, we must take aggressive steps, and quickly, to bridge this generation gap."²⁵ By describing what is a growing class gap as simply a *generational* difference, Marable is then able to argue for *all Blacks* to unite.

Instead of linking the struggle of ordinary Black people against racism and exploitation with the struggle of other workers who face inequality and exploitation, Marable calls for a new fight for "Black empowerment" that unites Blacks across the class divide. "We must also search for common ground—the basic unity of interests that bring together people of different backgrounds, genders, sexual orientations, languages and social classes to advance the ideals of democracy."²⁶

The Polish-born German revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg answered Marable well a century ago in her polemic against reformism. The bourgeoisie, she argues, has long ago abandoned any commitment to real democracy out of fear of any struggle from below :

We must conclude that the socialist movement is not bound to bourgeois democracy, but that the fate of democracy is bound with the socialist movement. We must conclude from this that democracy does not acquire greater chances of life in the measure that the working class renounces the struggle for its emancipation, but that on the contrary, democracy acquires greater chances of survival as the socialist movement becomes sufficiently strong to struggle against the bourgeois desertion of democracy. He who would strengthen democracy should want to strengthen and not weaken the socialist movement. He who renounces the struggle for socialism renounces both the labor movement and democracy.²⁷

Centrality of the working class

The working-class struggle cannot be successful unless workers are able to throw off the yoke of oppression that divides them. That is why, as a class, workers not only do not benefit from oppression, but also have a common class interest in fighting oppression. Capitalism would have no need for dividing workers if there were not another dynamic at work—the tendency for capitalism to compel workers to collectively fight back against the various aspects of their oppression and exploitation. Writes Hal Draper, using a quotation from Marx:

Capital “assembles the bourgeois and the proletarians in large cities, in which industry can be carried on most profitably, and by this herding together of great masses in *one* spot makes the proletariat conscious of their power”...

...The interests of workers, as a group organized by capital, lead them to struggle.

To engage in class struggle it is not necessary to “believe in” the class struggle any more than it is necessary to believe in Newton in order to fall from an airplane. The working class moves toward class struggle insofar as capitalism fails to satisfy its economic and social needs and aspirations... There is no evidence that workers like to struggle any more than anyone else; the evidence is that capitalism compels and accustoms them to do so. [Draper’s italics]²⁸

It is in the course of struggle that the ideas used to divide workers begin to break down, and workers see in practice who the real enemy is. But because capitalism both divides and unites workers, it is necessary to build an organization—a revolutionary socialist party—that brings together the most class-conscious workers and fights to link every small battle against exploitation and oppression in the system with the struggle to overthrow the system as a whole. Writes Tony Cliff:

For any oppressed group to fight back there is need for *hope*. And that is to be found, not in the isolation of oppression—the housewife trapped in the home, the gay in the closet, the Jews in the ghetto—but in the collective strength of the working class. For Marxists the notion that the working class, by liberating itself, will liberate the whole of humanity, is central. Which is why the revolutionary socialist party must support struggles against *all* forms of oppression, not only of the working class but of any downtrodden section of society.²⁹

Lenin argued that working-class consciousness could not be

considered full class consciousness until workers were trained to combat all forms of oppression:

Working-class consciousness cannot be genuine political consciousness unless the workers are trained to respond to *all* cases of tyranny, oppression, violence, and abuse, no matter *what class* is affected...

Socialists should conduct propaganda that exposes the horrors and abuses of the system, so that the most backward worker



will understand, *or will feel*, that the students and religious sects, the peasants and the authors are being abused and outraged by those same dark forces that are oppressing and crushing him at every step of his life. Feeling that, he himself will be filled with an irresistible desire to react, and he will know how to hoot the censors one day, on another day to demonstrate outside the house of a governor who has brutally suppressed a peasant uprising, on still another day to teach a lesson to the gendarmes in surplices who are doing the work of the holy inquisition.³⁰

There has long been a false dichotomy posed on the left: *either* you choose to focus on class questions, to the detriment of issues of oppression; *or* you focus on fighting oppression. In reality, the only way to effectively challenge oppression and ultimately to destroy it is to link the two together. Where oppres-

sion and class intersect, it is only the working class who has an interest in sweeping away *all* forms of oppression *and* exploitation, that is, to stand for the complete liberation of the oppressed.

The need for revolution

Revolutions are festivals of the oppressed and the exploited. At no other times are the masses of the people in a position to come forward so actively as the creators of a new social order.

Lenin³¹

What all of the critics of genuine Marxism have in common is the idea that somehow oppression can be ended without ending capitalism. This is essentially the standpoint of middle-class and bourgeois radicalism. Bourgeois as well as middle-class sections of the oppressed always seek to *limit* the scope of the struggle, to keep it within the bounds acceptable to their class. Their cries for “unity of the oppressed” are ultimately calls for the working-class sections of the oppressed to not “break ranks” by asking for too much. The middle class—professionals, managers, engineers, and so on—seeks merely to improve their status within the framework of the existing system. As Rosa Luxemburg put it, “Instead of taking a stand for the establishment of a new society they take a stand for surface modification of the old society.”³²

There have been some improvements over the last few decades for middle-class Blacks, Latinos and women—gains that have been partially eroded, but not eliminated. As the class



Teachers on strike in Oakland

tem. For the majority of working-class and poor people, conditions have worsened. Real liberation must be linked to a *class struggle* for better pay, housing, education, more jobs, more social spending, against police brutality and so on. And those struggles must be linked to a fight to destroy the system that feeds on oppression. A revolution in the U.S. would fuse together struggles against police brutality and the criminal injustice system, struggles of women for equal pay, struggles against immigrant- and gay-bashing, and so on, with the struggle of ordinary workers to seize the reigns of production.

At the heart of any real revolution is the transformation of the economic relations in society—the socialization of the means of production by the working class in order to produce for human need. But that doesn’t mean at all that revolution consists simply of a change in the economic relations of society. Revolution is about a total transformation of all aspects of society. “The history of a revolution,” wrote Leon Trotsky in his masterful *History of the Russian Revolution*, “is for us first of all a history of the forcible entrance of the masses into the realm of the rulership over their own destiny.”³³ Revolutions bring forward all the downtrodden, the oppressed and the mistreated. They awaken what is best in humanity, that collective spirit of solidarity in which all forms of oppression are laid bare and challenged openly.

This happened in the Russian Revolution of 1917. At the heart of the 1917 October Revolution was the seizure of the factories by the workers and the seizure of the land by the peasants. But the revolution did far more than that. Oppressed nationalities were offered the right to secede from Russia. Homosexuality was legalized. Divorce was made free and easily available to either party, and Soviet Russia became the first country to grant women the right to vote. More importantly, efforts were made to establish the means by which women could be freed from household slavery and dependence in the husband: access to jobs and education and to communal kitchens, laundries and childcare services. The Bolsheviks created a special “Women’s Department,” which sought to draw millions of women into active social life, combat illiteracy and challenge men’s resistance, especially in the countryside, to women’s freedom.

And in a country where anti-Jewish pogroms had recently been commonplace, Jews rose to positions of leadership in the



A wartime wildcat strike at Chevrolet

divide has widened, middle-class women and Blacks have moved rightward along with the Clinton Democrats, offering not the slightest challenge to Clinton’s rollback of welfare spending and the increasing brutalization of young, predominantly poor Black and Latino men in the criminal justice sys-

revolutionary government. Kamenev and Zinoviev, both Jews, were prominent leaders in the new government. Trotsky, a Jew, became first commissar of foreign affairs, and then, months later when the revolution was under attack, he became commander of the Red Army, which beat back attacks from 14 different armies.

Isolated and economically backward, the Russian Revolution ultimately failed. But though socialism could not be achieved in Russia, the revolution remains the highest achievement of humanity in this century, showing us all the way to fight for and build a society free from all oppression and misery. The Russian revolution gave us a glimpse of what a society run by workers would mean—for all the oppressed.

- 1 Zillah Eisenstein, "Developing a Theory of Capitalist Patriarchy," from Eisenstein, ed., *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism* (Monthly Review, 1979), p. 9.
- 2 Clarence E. Walker, *Deromanticizing Black History: Critical Essays and Reappraisals*, (University of Tennessee, 1991), pp. 4-5. Walker engages in what is typical for anti-Marxist hacks: he misquotes out of context. The quote from Marx comes from two sources: a series of speeches he made in 1849, which was published as a pamphlet entitled "Wage Labor and Capital," and also from a footnote in *Capital* in reference to an argument that capital is "not a thing, but a social relation between persons." Here is Marx's full 1849 quote: "A negro is a negro. He only becomes a slave in certain relations. A cotton-spinning jenny is a machine for spinning cotton. It becomes *capital* only in certain relations. Torn from these relationships it is no more capital than *gold* in itself is *money* or sugar the *price* of sugar." In this comment there is not the slightest hint of racism. On the contrary, Marx's comment implicitly challenges the prevailing ideology justifying the enslavement of Africans.
- 3 Karl Marx, *Capital* (New York: Vintage, 1977), p. 915.
- 4 *Capital*, p. 918.
- 5 Karl Marx, "Marx to Annenkov, December 28, 1846," *Collected Works*, Volume 38 (New York: Progress Publishers, 1982), pp. 101-02.
- 6 Quoted in Ahmed Shawki, "Black Liberation and Socialism in the United States," *International Socialism* 47 (Summer 1990), p. 8.
- 7 *Capital*, p. 414

- 8 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Ireland and the Irish Question* (New York: International Publishers, 1972), pp. 293-94.
- 9 V.I. Lenin, "The Right of Nations to Self Determination," *Questions of National Policy and Proletarian Internationalism* (Moscow: Progress, 1970), p. 74.
- 10 Hal Draper, "Marx and Engels on Women's Liberation," *International Socialism* 44 (old series) (July/August 1970), p. 23.
- 11 Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (New York: International Publishers, 1985), p. 129.
- 12 *Capital*, pp. 620-621.
- 13 Sharon Smith, Deborah Roberts and Celia Petty, *Women's Liberation and Socialism* (Bookmarks: Chicago, 1987), p. 61.
- 14 Quoted in Draper, p. 22.
- 15 Leon Trotsky, *Women and the Family* (New York: Pathfinder, 1986), p. 29.
- 16 Quoted in Chris Weedon, *Feminism, Theory and the Politics of Difference* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1999), p. 27.
- 17 Quoted in Weedon, p. 176.
- 18 Quoted in Jeremy Brecher, *Strike!* (Boston: South End Press, 1972), p. 125.
- 19 Sharon Smith, "Mistaken Identity—or Can Identity Politics Liberate the Oppressed," *International Socialism* 62 (Spring 1994), p. 39.
- 20 See Shawki, p. 97.
- 21 Quoted in Philip Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement*, Volume I (New York: The Free Press, 1979), p. 412.
- 22 South End Press Collective, eds., *Talking About a Revolution* (Boston: South End Press, 1998), pp. 108-09.
- 23 *Talking About a Revolution*, p. 102.
- 24 Manning Marable, *Black Liberation in Conservative America* (Boston: South End Press, 1997), p. 246.
- 25 Marable, p. 248.
- 26 Marable, p. 248.
- 27 Rosa Luxemburg, *Reform or Revolution* (New York: Pathfinder, 1980), p. 76.
- 28 Hal Draper, *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution, Volume 3: the Politics of Social Classes* (New York: Monthly Review, 1978), pp. 41-42.
- 29 Tony Cliff, *Class Struggle and Women's Liberation* (London: Bookmarks, 1984), p. 237.
- 30 Quoted in Cliff, *Class Struggle and Women's Liberation* (London: Bookmarks, 1984), p. 238.
- 31 Quoted in Cliff, p. 139.
- 32 Luxemburg, p. 78.
- 33 Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution* (Pluto Press, London, 1997), p. 17.