Rethinking the aristocracy of labor[1]

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Socialism has become a vital necessity for humanity. We are fighting not only against the pandemic but also against the deepening economic, political, and ecological crises. However, capital's need for profit takes precedence over social needs. Although we have the material means to solve all our urgent problems of unemployment, poverty, hunger, the environment, health, etc., they remain unresolved within the capitalist system. It is becoming clear that capitalism has fulfilled its historical mission.

But socialism, which shall displace capitalism for the salvation of humanity, faces a difficult road full of obstacles. On a global scale, perhaps one of the most important of these obstacles is the following: If the process of socialist construction does not include the core capitalist (imperialist) countries, it will come under the constant attack of imperialism and face difficulties in the long run.

Although the socialist movement emerged in Western Europe in the 19th century, there has been no successful socialist revolution in the advanced capitalist world. From the revolutions of 1848 to the Paris Commune, the German and Italian revolutions in the 20th century, the Spanish revolution, and the protests of 1968 that shook Europe and the U.S., there have been many socialist breakthroughs in these regions. But the imperialist center has somehow managed to extinguish all

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these revolutionary flare-ups, sometimes through war, sometimes through fascism, and sometimes through the ballot box. The failure of socialism in the capitalist centers has facilitated the defeat of socialist attempts in the underdeveloped world. If the socialist revolution had triumphed in one of the core countries (for example, in Germany in 1918-19), we would be living in a very different world today. Unfortunately, this did not happen.

Over the past one hundred and fifty years, the workers of the imperialist world have generally tended toward reformism rather than socialism. In Britain, the cradle of capitalism, the working class adopted a reformist approach after the defeat of the Chartist movement in 1848 and has maintained this attitude to the present day. Continental Europe was a region of stronger revolutionary currents, and Eastern Europe even came under the influence of the Soviet Union for almost half a century. In the central countries of the continent, however, the negative impact of the Second International and the subsequent social-democratic line prevailed. In the U.S., which took over the leadership of capitalist hegemony from Britain, the labor movement was generally ineffective despite occasional flashes of strength.

If the working people of the imperialist world have a long-standing tendency toward reformism, it must have material foundations. Such a tendency, one of the main obstacles to world revolution, cannot be understood in terms of elements such as "false consciousness" or ideology but in terms of the underlying relations of production. In fact, the Marxist tradition has attributed the new detrimental political trends –such as reformism, opportunism, and social chauvinism, which spread like a plague at the end of the 19th century– to the influence within the working class of a privileged layer of "labor aristocracy" that received a share of the imperialist profits in the core countries. The emergence of this layer, a minority but highly organized and influential, was seen as dependent on certain temporary, contingent conditions (which I will briefly discuss below). When these conditions changed, the labor aristocracies would weaken, and revolutionary tendencies would prevail. I think this thesis needs to be updated in some respects, and this will be the main point of this article.

In the post-Lenin period, the "aristocracy of labor" thesis has not been the subject of intense debate among Marxists. Instead, it has remained a concept that each tendency has used or avoided according to its vision. Some Western Marxists, especially the most pessimistic schools such as the Frankfurt School, argued that the working class in the core countries had been absorbed into the system and had lost its revolutionary character. There was, therefore, no need to speak of a separate "labor aristocracy." The next step in this direction was to abandon the working class and class politics altogether.

On the other hand, most of the so-called "Third Worldist" currents, which in many ways opposed Western Marxism, transferred the analysis directly to the world scale, claiming that all the working people in the core capitalist countries constituted a labor aristocracy, as opposed to the poor workers and peasants in the periphery. Therefore, according to these approaches, the working class in the imperialist world –as a whole– had ceased to be a revolutionary subject. Under these circumstances, the peripheral countries became the natural address for revolutionary hopes. But as

the once underdeveloped countries made some progress in capitalist development and industrialization, these hopes would also take a hit.

As a result of the adverse developments of the last four decades, the organized power of the working class has been weakened throughout the world. The traditional labor aristocracies in the core countries have also suffered from this weakening. In this paper, I will suggest how we should think about the labor aristocracy today. It is not possible to resolve such a crucial issue in one article, but I hope to at least contribute to moving the debate forward.

Origins

In the mid-19th century, Marx and Engels observed first-hand the defeat of the Chartist movement in England and the subsequent descent of the labor movement into reformism. In a review in the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* in 1850, after noting that the "Chartist Party" was in a state of dissolution, they wrote: "The members of the petty bourgeoisie who still adhere to the party, together with the labor aristocracy, form a purely democratic faction whose programme is limited to the People's Charter and a number of other petty-bourgeois reforms. The mass of the workers who live in truly proletarian conditions belong to the revolutionary Chartist faction".[2] In other words, according to Marx and Engels, two strata had emerged within the British proletariat: a revolutionary underclass and an elite layer inclined towards reformism (and the petty bourgeoisie). However, Marx and Engels did not feel the need to give a clear definition of who and which groups made up the upper layer, the "labor aristocracy", and they used the term for descriptive purposes only. For example, in the first volume of *Capital*, Marx refers to the labor aristocracy at just one point as "the best-paid" of the working class, without going into detail.[3] Actually, the term "labor aristocracy" was already being used in this sense by the general public at the time.[4]

In the second half of the 1850s, Engels, in a letter to Marx, again referring to the Chartist movement, had written that the English proletariat was "actually becoming more and more bourgeois": "The ultimate aim of this most bourgeois of all nations would appear to be the possession, *alongside* the bourgeoisie, of a bourgeois aristocracy and a bourgeois proletariat. In the case of a nation which exploits the entire world, this is, of course, justified to some extent".[5]

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2 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, "Review", *Marx & Engels Collected Works*, vol. 10, Lawrence & Wishart, 2010, p. 514. This source is cited by Tom Bottomore, the editor of *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, in the entry "Labour Aristocracy", Oxford: Blackwell Publishers 2001, p. 296.

3 Karl Marx, *Capital I*, *Marx & Engels Collected Works*, vol. 35, Lawrence & Wishart, 2010, p. 660. According to Eric J. Hobsbawm, at the time Marx wrote *Capital*, more than three quarters of Britain's population of 24 million were manual laborers; among these workers, a skilled and relatively well-paid 15 percent constituted the labor aristocracy. *Industry and Empire: The Making of Modern English Society, Vol. II 1750 to the Present Day*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1968, p. 128.

4 Historian Robert Gray states that the term came into use in the 1830s and 40s: *The Aristocracy of Labour in Nineteenth-century Britain c. 1850-1914*, London: Macmillan Press, 1981, p. 32, 37.

5 Letter from Engels to Marx dated October 7, 1858. *Marx & Engels Collected Works*, vol. 40,

These two phenomena, mentioned "in passing" by Marx and Engels in the 1850s, reappear constantly and interrelatedly in their later writings and in the class struggles of the last one hundred and fifty years. One is the "labor aristocracy"; the split in the working class, the privileged upper layer(s) of that class socially and politically "arm in arm" with the petty bourgeoisie. The other is the "becoming bourgeois" of the entire working class in the context of colonialism-imperialism; the workers of the oppressor nation moving closer (again, both socially and politically) to the bourgeoisie. In short, part or all of the working class becomes open to the influences of the ruling class and moves away from the revolutionary line for various reasons. In addition, some political and trade union rights, the "social reforms" that the bourgeoisie grants (is forced to grant) to the workers reinforce this situation. Contradictions arise both between classes and sections of classes and between nations.

Marx and Engels paid particular attention to the Irish struggle for independence in the 1860s, seeking to link the anti-colonial struggle to the class struggle in the center.[6] In this context, Marx argued that Irish independence was a precondition for the triumph of socialism in Britain – and, therefore, should be supported by the British working class. In a letter written in 1870, he wrote: "The ordinary English worker hates the Irish worker as a competitor who lowers his standard of life. In relation to the Irish worker, he regards himself as a member of the *ruling* nation, and consequently, he becomes a tool of the English aristocrats and capitalists against Ireland, thus strengthening their domination *over himself*."[7]

These sentences by Marx reflect almost perfectly the attitudes of the working class in capitalist countries today. The prevalence of racism and chauvinism among the workers of the oppressor nations is not a matter of chance or "false consciousness" but an objective fact based on material foundations. Like reformist tendencies, racist approaches can also easily take root among the workers of the oppressor nation. But the conditions of existence of the working class also give it the potential to overcome such differences and illusions, to unite, and to build solidarity against capital. The boundaries and hostilities between different class sections can be instantly overcome, especially in revolutionary situations or collective actions. Therefore, an effective struggle can prevent harmful tendencies such as reformism, racism, etc. Achieving this will be a huge step towards the socialist revolution.

In the 1860s, through the efforts of Marx and Engels, the [First] International abandoned the chauvinist approach and supported the Irish struggle for independence. But this stance could not be sustained in the long run, and the British working class began to favor the liberal policies of the industrial bourgeoisie and colonialism. In fact, from the mid-19th century onward, the British bourgeoisie, recognizing the growing power of the working class, sought to contain and integrate this class

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Lawrence & Wishart, 2010, p. 344.

6 See Özgür Öztürk, "Hindistan ve İrlanda: Marx ve Sömürgecilik" ["India and Ireland: Marx and Colonialism"], *Dipnot*, no 10, 2012.

7 Cited in: Lucia Pradella, "Imperialism and Capitalist Development in Marx's *Capital*", *Historical Materialism*, volume 21, no 2, 2013, p. 136.

into the capitalist system through a series of measures. By the end of the century, many Chartist demands, once considered impossible, had already been realized. According to Engels, Britain's power in the world economy, notably the monopoly profits from the colonies, made such an incorporation strategy possible. By playing on the divisions within the British proletariat, the bourgeoisie was able to win over the most organized and advanced section of it. In 1882 Engels complained in a letter to Kautsky: "There is no workers' party here, there are only Conservatives and Liberal-Radicals, and the workers gaily share the feast of England's monopoly on the world market and the colonies".[8]

Engels summarized the reasons for this turn in an 1885 article on the last forty years of the British working class (quoted at length in the preface to the 1892 English edition of *The Condition of the Working Class in England* in 1844). First, there were improvements for two "protected" sections of the working class. Factory workers were better off than before 1848, thanks to factory legislation and strikes. Skilled adult male workers organized in major unions were also better off. This second group, the "labor aristocracy", included "the engineers, the carpenters and joiners, the brick layers".[9] Having had the right to vote since 1867, these were mainly artisans who enjoyed economic, social, and political privileges.[10] But Engels attributed the defeat of socialism in Britain to a more general cause, its monopoly position in the world economy:

> The truth is this: during the period of England's industrial monopoly the English working class have, to a certain extent, shared in the benefits of the monopoly. These benefits were very unequally parcelled out amongst them; the privileged minority pocketed most, but even the great mass had, at least, a temporary share now and then. And that is the reason why, since the dying-out of Owenism, there has been no Socialism in England. With the breakdown of that monopoly, the English working class will lose that privileged position; it will find itself generally—the privileged and leading minority not excepted—on a level with its fellow-workers abroad. And that is the reason why there will be Socialism again in England.[11]

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8 Cited in: Martin Nicolaus, "The Theory of the Labor Aristocracy", *Monthly Review*, volume 21, no 11, April 1970, p. 92.

9 Cited in: Frederick Engels, "Preface to the 1892 English Edition of *The Condition of the Working-Class in England in 1844*", *Marx & Engels Collected Works*, vol. 27, Lawrence & Wishart, 2010, p. 265-66.

10 By this time, the scope of suffrage had been extended by the Second Reform Act. Mark Neocleous states that this was a kind of controlled experiment and when it was seen that it did not lead to the seizure of political power by the working class, reforms were continued: *Administering Civil Society: Towards a Theory of State Power*, London, Macmillan Press, 1996, p. 127. According to Eric Hobsbawm, "The rulers of Britain … were prepared to accept it [the reform], because they no longer regarded the British working class as revolutionary … The great mass movements which mobilized all the labouring poor against the employing class, like Chartism, were dead. Socialism had disappeared from the country of its birth". *Industry and Empire*, p. 103.

11 Cited in: Engels, op. cit., p. 268.

Note that Engels speaks of two distinct "privileges". One is the privileged position of the English worker relative to workers in other countries, to which Engels attributes the defeat of socialism in England (i.e. the phenomenon of the "working class becoming bourgeois"). The second refers to the stratification within the British working class, or rather the "labor aristocracy". This group had adopted a reformist political line, but Engels believes that the socialist movement could overcome this obstacle, as he notes in the next paragraph that by the early 1890s, socialism was once again present in all its shades in England. What he finds most significant in this context is the revival of the East End of London and the masses of unskilled workers organizing and forming trade unions. While the old unions, the home of the labor aristocracy, took the "wage system" for granted and tried to improve their position within it a little, Engels notes that the new unions were working in a socialist direction.[12]

Between 1885 and 1892, the British industrial monopoly certainly declined, or rather continued to decline. But it cannot be said that this decline caused the sudden revival of the socialist movement (the revival was short-lived anyway). Engels' main emphasis was on the organization of unskilled workers. Behind this process, which accelerated with the dockers' strike of 1889, lay the Great Depression of the last quarter of the 19th century and widespread unemployment.[13] What strengthened the socialist movement in Britain was not the collapse of its industrial monopoly in the world economy, but the organization of large sections of the working class outside the labor aristocracy and the formation of trade unions. ***The key issue is not about the international level, but the class sections within the country***. In this respect, the condition expressed by Engels in 1885, which implies that socialism cannot be effective in an imperialist country with an industrial monopoly, is problematic, as he himself implicitly recognizes.[14] The real issue is to neutralize the labor aristocracy, which Engels calls the "privileged and leading minority" that leads the entire working class into reformism and other harmful habits; and moreover, to win this most organized section of the class (if not entirely, then partially) to the revolutionary side. To do this, the unprivileged workers (and the unemployed), who form the bulk of the class, must be organized and given a revolutionary orientation. We shall see that Lenin, writing twenty-five years after Engels in the context of the world war, points in a similar direction.

12 Engels, op. cit., p. 268-9.

13 Bernard Semmel, *Imperialism and Social Reform: English Social-Imperial Thought 1895-1914*, New York: Anchor Books, 1968, p. 9, 98.

14 Kautsky would later put forward the bizarre argument that war was unnecessary because Britain's industrial monopoly had ended. But as Lenin points out, industrial monopoly is only one form of monopoly. The colonial monopoly of an imperialist country that has declined in terms of industry can continue, or the monopoly position can be maintained by financial (or military, diplomatic, political, etc.) means. See V.I. Lenin, "Imperialism and the Split in Socialism", in *Collected Works*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, vol. 23, 1974, p. 114-5.

Lenin's interpretation

The framework for studying the contemporary labor aristocracy is provided by Lenin in his theory of imperialism. Based on the statements of Marx and Engels, Lenin analyzes the split within the world socialist movement in the context of the First World War. In today's terms, social democracy had abandoned the communist movement, turned its back on the working class and revolution and become complicit in the bloody imperialist adventures and crimes of the bourgeoisie. Lenin argues that the roots of this betrayal lie in imperialism, which means the exploitation of the whole world by a handful of countries, in the excessive profits made in this way, and in the "bribes" given to a small section of the working class from these profits. In the "Preface" to the 1920 French and German editions of *Imperialism*, written during the First World War, he summarizes his position. According to him,

> out of such enormous *superprofits* (since they are obtained over and above the profits which capitalists squeeze out of the workers of their "own" country) it is *possible to bribe* the labour leaders and the upper stratum of the labour aristocracy. And that is just what the capitalists of the "advanced" countries are doing: they are bribing them in a thousand different ways, direct and indirect, overt and covert.
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> This stratum of workers-turned-bourgeois, or the labour aristocracy, who are quite philistine in their mode of life, in the size of their earnings and in their entire outlook, is the principal prop of the Second International, and in our days, the principal *social* (not military) *prop of the bourgeoisie*. For they are the real *agents of the bourgeoisie in the working-class movement*, the labour lieutenants of the capitalist class, real vehicles of reformism and chauvinism. In the civil war between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie they inevitably, and in no small numbers, take the side of the bourgeoisie, the "Versaillais" against the "Communards".[15]

Lenin, too, seems to speak in general terms and does not give precise definitions. Indeed, in another text from the same period, he writes, again in general terms, that "to a thin crust of the labor bureaucracy and aristocracy, and also to the petty bourgeoisie (the intelligentsia, etc.) which 'travels' with the working-class movement, it promises morsels of those profits".[16] Apart from general categories, he does not refer to a specific group such as "carpenters." Because, this "bourgeois" layer of workers, "quite philistine in their mode of life, in the size of their earnings and in their entire outlook" does not constitute a fixed group. In fact, the main issue is not their "mode of life" or their wages, but their political attitudes derived from these. Imperialism "has the tendency to create privileged sections also among the workers, and to detach them from the broad masses of the proletariat"; this

15 V.I. Lenin, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, in *Collected Works*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, vol. 22, 1974, p. 193-4.

16 V.I. Lenin, "Opportunism, and the Collapse of the Second International", in *Collected Works*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, vol. 21, 1974, p. 442.

privileged group of workers is, in fact, the product of imperialism.[17] By positioning itself against the masses and on the side of the bourgeoisie, it formed the basis of social chauvinism and opportunism within the Second International. According to Lenin, the "trend nurtured and supported by the bourgeoisie, and expressing the interests of a small group of intellectuals and members of the labor aristocracy that have joined hands with the bourgeoisie" is very strong, and due to "the objective conditions of the 'peaceful' period of 1871-1914, it has become a kind of commanding, parasitic stratum in the working-class movement".[18] Lenin notes that these elements can keep the masses under control by resorting to revolutionary rhetoric when necessary. In other words, this privileged group can pull the broad mass of the working class along with it. This became clear when the world war broke out.

Lenin's view combines (and updates) the two phenomena mentioned by Marx and Engels (the labor aristocracy and the "becoming bourgeois" of the working class in the colonialist country) and links the formation of the labor aristocracy to imperialist policies. The excessive profits made possible by imperialism may bring some gains to all the workers in the core country, but these are insignificant things that can only last for a short time; there is no "becoming bourgeois" of the class as a whole. It is only a section of the proletariat in the core countries that really benefits from imperialism. "A privileged upper stratum of the proletariat in the imperialist countries lives partly at the expense of hundreds of millions in the uncivilised nations".[19] Therefore, it is possible for the laboring masses to take a political stand ***against*** imperialist policies, even in advanced capitalist countries.

Saying that something is possible does not, of course, provide a recipe for how it can be realized. Moreover, according to Lenin, "bourgeois workers' parties" (or groups, tendencies, etc.) exist in all the major capitalist countries, and it is certain that they will not disappear by themselves. As the revolution comes closer, "the more strongly it flares up and the more sudden and violent the transitions and leaps in its progress, the greater will be the part the struggle of the revolutionary mass stream against the opportunist petty-bourgeois stream will play in the labor movement".[20] Engels has already laid out how this struggle should be waged, on the example of England: "Engels draws a distinction between the 'bourgeois labor party' of the old trade unions—the privileged minority— and the 'lowest mass', the real majority, and appeals to the latter, who are not infected by 'bourgeois respectability'. This is the essence of Marxist tactics!"[21] According to Lenin, the task of socialists is to reach the lowest strata of the working class, the real masses, to show them where their real interests lie, and to expose the social chauvinists and opportunists.[22]

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17 Lenin, *Imperialism*, p. 283.

18 V.I. Lenin, "The Voice of an Honest French Socialist", in *Collected Works*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, vol. 21, 1974, p. 355-6.

19 Lenin, "Imperialism and the Split in Socialism", p. 107.

20 Lenin, op. cit., p. 119.

21 Ibid, p. 120.

22 Ibid, p. 120.

As in the case of economism, in the case of opportunism the conditions of existence of the working class produce certain tendencies in favor of capital. The spontaneous development of the working class does not automatically lead to a turn towards socialism - this requires a revolutionary political organization. In the absence of such an organization, the working class will seek solutions to its problems within the existing system (economist, reformist, and social chauvinist tendencies are the result). Moreover, there is no guarantee that the revolutionary organization will succeed; the outcome of the struggle is not predetermined. What matters, however, is the existence of the revolutionary potential of the working class. This potential may be waiting to be awakened, and it often is, but apart from it, there is no other force capable of overthrowing capitalist society. The working class in the imperialist world has historically failed to play the revolutionary role expected of it but the blame for this lies not with the workers but with the socialist movement, which has failed to awaken the sleeping giant.

Critiques of the labor aristocracy thesis

The classical Marxist view of the relations between the labor aristocracy, imperialism and reformism has established the basic principles. However, it needs to be updated because it naturally fails to take into account some 20th century processes such as social policy and the internationalization of capital. I will briefly discuss below the direction(s) such an update must take. But first, it will be useful to outline the critique of the labor aristocracy thesis by Marxists since the second half of the 20th century. For, over time, the labor aristocracy thesis has appeared increasingly inadequate to both Marxists and non-Marxists.

The criticisms and questions raised by various currents against the labor aristocracy thesis can be summarized as follows:[23] First, it is not clear who exactly the concept includes or who counts as a "labor aristocrat".[24] Is it high-wage earners, unionized industrial workers, white-collar workers, or all of them? The source of the privileges of the privileged strata is also unclear. The working class in the imperialist countries leads a much more prosperous life than the miserable masses in the "Third World." Is this due to higher labor productivity, or does the "Western worker" participate in the exploitation of the underdeveloped countries? If so, how does this happen? In other words, how is the "bribe" Lenin spoke of distributed? For example, do multinational corporations prefer to pay higher wages to workers in their own countries? Is the only or main reason for the tendency toward reformism in the imperialist countries the fact that the leadership of the labor movement has been bought off with direct or indirect bribes? On the other

23 Most of these criticisms can be found in Charles Post's article rejecting the labor aristocracy thesis: "Exploring Working-Class Consciousness: A Critique of the Theory of the 'Labour-Aristocracy'", *Historical Materialism*, no 18, 2010.

24 Timothy Kerswell notes that the term "labor aristocracy" has been used for many different groups, such as union leaders, skilled workers, all First World workers, and high-wage earners in the Third World countries. "A Conceptual History of the Labour Aristocracy: A Critical Review", *Socialism and Democracy*, 2018, p. 17.

hand, the idea that privileged workers are more prone to reformism and lower-class workers to revolutionism seems wrong in light of historical experience. The most radical actions are often led by so-called "privileged" workers, while poorer sections of workers are often politically indifferent. Worse, they come dangerously close to racist-fascist politics.[25]

Cliff and Marcuse's criticisms of Lenin

Criticism of the labor aristocracy thesis was particularly widespread in the period after the Second World War. The failure of the working class in the imperialist world to make the expected revolutionary breakthrough and the experience of fascism resulted in the questioning of the labor aristocracy thesis. It was generally accepted that Lenin had defined the labor aristocracy too narrowly. Was Lenin trivializing the problem and being over-optimistic?

As we shall see, this critique came from very different wings of the political spectrum. In 1957, for example, Tony Cliff argued that the economic and social roots of reformism were not confined to a very small section of the proletariat, as Lenin had suggested. According to Cliff, "*[i]n the final analysis the base of Reformism is in capitalist prosperity*" (emphasis in the original). Over the past hundred years, the conditions of the working class as a whole have improved. And this has not been confined to the major imperialist countries. A large section of the workers' bureaucracy has emerged, which has tended to mediate between the bosses and the workers, ensuring a kind of "class peace". Moreover, even if the economic basis for reformism disappears, there is no guarantee that the tendency toward reformism will end – for that to happen, revolutionary action is necessary.[26]

A year after Cliff, Herbert Marcuse, writing from a very different tradition, made similar observations:

> Lenin's retention of the classical notion of the revolutionary proletariat, sustained with the help of the theory of the labor aristocracy and the avant garde,

25 For example, a significant part of the electoral base of the new generation of racist-fascist parties in Europe today, which have risen on the basis of anti-immigrant sentiments, is made up of "lower class" workers. According to one study, 57% of those who voted for the racist Front National (FN) in France in the 2010s were workers, compared to only 39% of Socialist Party voters. In the Netherlands, almost half of the voters for the racist Party for Freedom (PVV) were workers (48%), compared to around a third for the Labor Party and the Socialist Party (34% and 37% respectively). The recent electoral successes of the AfD in Germany, the Conservative Party in Britain and Donald Trump in the United States have been largely due to the working-class vote. Workers who vote for "far right" parties are generally non-unionized, while unionized workers tend to vote for socialist or social democratic parties. On the other hand, non-voting behavior is very common, especially among factory workers (not boycott as an explicit political attitude, but rather indifference, i.e. implicit boycott). See Line Rennwald, *Social Democratic Parties and the Working Class: New Voting Patterns*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, p. 60-1.

26 Tony Cliff, "Economic Roots of Reformism", *Socialist Review*, volume 6, no 9, 1957, https://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1957/06/rootsref.htm.

> revealed its inadequacy from the beginning. Even prior to the First World War it became clear that the "collaborationist" part of the proletariat was quantitatively and qualitatively different from a small upper stratum that had been corrupted by monopoly capital, and that the Social Democratic Party and trade union bureaucracy were more than "traitors"—rather that their policy reflected pretty exactly the economic and social condition of the majority of the organized working classes in the advanced industrial countries. And indeed, Lenin's strategy of the revolutionary avant garde pointed to a conception of the proletariat which went far beyond a mere reformulation of the classical Marxian concept.[27]

Marcuse argues that as the tendency toward "class collaboration" of the organized sections of workers in the core countries grew stronger, the idea of the "proletariat as revolutionary subject", which was the basis of Marxist strategy, was endangered. To overcome this danger, the working class was rethought in terms of an "internal" and "external" proletariat on a world scale, and the external proletariat, consisting of the unprivileged proletariat and semi-proletariat in the countryside and the cities (the bulk of which was actually the peasantry), was baptized as the new historical "subject".[28]

Although starting from different positions, Cliff and Marcuse seem to converge on the same point. In order to explain the objective basis of developments such as party and trade union bureaucracies, reformism, etc. that have emerged in capitalist industrial societies, both authors have taken Marx and Engels' observation of the "working class becoming bourgeois" out of the context of imperialism and applied it directly to class relations within the core country. From such a perspective, Lenin seems to have downplayed the problem of the labor aristocracy, and pushed the course of history a little too far. But while this perspective seeks to extend the labor aristocracy (or the reformism attributed to it) to the working class as a whole, it forgets the "lower strata" that Engels and Lenin emphasized and hoped for. As a result, Marxist political strategy is left without a basis. Thus, in line with his own argument, Marcuse would look for new revolutionary subjects outside the working class (oppressed groups, minorities, the student movement, etc.).

Critiques from Third Worldism

In the post-World War II period, another objection to the classical Marxist position came from the rising Third Worldist movements. The fact that the working class in the West was generally acting along reformist lines shifted the focus of expectations of world revolution to the underdeveloped countries. For example, in *Monopoly Capital*, published in 1966, Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy, two leading figures of the *Monthly Review* school, had argued that the starting point of the world revolution would be the underdeveloped world. The U.S. would do everything in

27 Herbert Marcuse, *Soviet Marxism: A Critical Analysis*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1969, p. 30-1.

28 Marcuse, op. cit., p. 31-35.

its power to suppress new revolutions, but "in this struggle there can be no real victories for the counter-revolutionary side".[29]

Not surprisingly, the idea that the road to world revolution lay through the independence of the "peripheral" countries became widespread at a time when national liberation struggles in the Third World were gaining momentum and winning victory after victory. This idea was defended and developed by writers of the Dependency School, notably Andre Gunder Frank and Samir Amin. In the context of the labor aristocracy thesis, Arghiri Emmanuel's 1972 book *Unequal Exchange* is particularly important. In this work, Emmanuel takes the step that other writers, such as Samir Amin, are reluctant to take and argues that there is no objective basis for workers' internationalism.

Emmanuel points out that capital is mobile across countries while labor is immobile. As a result, while rates of profit are equalized across the world, wage levels remain institutionally different. With the strengthening of the trade union movement in the core countries from the 1860s onwards, differences in wage levels between countries began to widen (even within the same country, wage levels vary widely according to ethnicity). The unequal exchange between countries is rooted in the monopoly position of workers in the core countries, i.e. the privileges of being unionized.[30] Emmanuel notes that, in order not to undermine the international solidarity of workers, Marxists explain unequal exchange in terms of differences in the organic composition of capital. The restriction of the labor aristocracy to the imperialist stage and the upper stratum of the working class (Lenin's view) is based on the same concern. But international workers' solidarity is a historical misconception.[31] Not only the "aristocratic workers", but even the most ordinary workers (even the unemployed) in the core countries have a standard of living far above the average of the world proletariat.

Emmanuel's explanation, based on comparative wage levels rather than on the relationship of exploitation, received much criticism, but it certainly reflected the prevailing mood in the world at the time. The first criticism came in the preface to the French edition of the same book from Charles Bettelheim, who argued that differences in wage levels were not independent variables but a function of differences in labor productivity and labor intensity between countries. Bettelheim also pointed out that Emmanuel's theses implied that ***the working class as a class does not exist in the core countries.***[32] This striking idea is shared by Zak Cope, who today defends the theses of the Dependency School in a more radical way.

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29 Paul A. Baran and Paul M. Sweezy, *Monopoly Capital: An Essay on the American Economic and Social Order*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1968, p. 365-6.

30 Arghiri Emmanuel, *Unequal Exchange: A Study of the Imperialism of Trade*, translated by Brian Pearce, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972, p. 25, 37, 47, 49-50, 64, 116, 119, 121-123.

31 Emmanuel, op. cit., p. 169, 177-178, 189.

32 Charles Bettelheim, "Appendix III: Preface to the French Edition", in Emmanuel, op. cit., p. 352. A much more comprehensive critique of Emmanuel's theses and an alternative model has been presented by Nail Satlıgan in: *Emek-Değer Teorileri ve Dışticaret* [*Labor-Value Theories and Foreign Trade*], Istanbul: Yordam Kitap, 2014, p. 157.

The Dependency School, so influential in the 1960s and 70s at the height of national liberation struggles in the Third World, fell out of favor as the underdeveloped countries embarked on the path of capitalist development and industrialized to some degree. The subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union and other attempts at socialist construction led to a period of frustration for alternatives of all kinds. Once there was talk of "three worlds", but today there seems to be only "one world." However, the misery caused by neoliberal globalization policies, the gradual recognition that Third World industrialization is, in fact, limited to performing labor-intensive manufacturing jobs in the global value chains, and the new Great Depression that opened with the 2008 crisis are paving the way for the resurgence of both socialism and Third Worldism.

The most prolific and provocative figure in this renewed Third World perspective seems to be Zak Cope. Cope argues that the entire "working class" in the core countries should be characterized as a labor aristocracy (actually a petty bourgeoisie), and there is no exploitation in the so-called First World today. Almost the entire population of the core countries lives off the exploitation of the workers in the dependent countries.[33] The "workers" in the imperialist countries (who are actually petty bourgeois) maintain their high wages and standard of living by actively supporting aggressive imperialist policies. This class, which constitutes a de facto "bourgeois working class", has no interest in anti-imperialism (and thus socialism).[34]

How should one interpret the thesis that there is no exploited working class in the imperialist countries, except for minority elements? In the past, socialists who adopted a Third Worldist perspective did not deny that workers in the core countries were exploited. Samir Amin, for example, had no doubt about this,[35] and H.W. Edwards, who wrote extensively on the subject of the labor aristocracy, pointed out that workers in capitalist countries (even the labor aristocracy) were subject to exploitation, while in colonial countries there was super-exploitation.[36] Moreover, at that time the gains of the working class in the core had not yet been eroded by neoliberal policies. Cope, on the other hand, argues that even under today's conditions there is no exploitation in the core. According to him, the peoples of the imperialist countries exploit the peoples of the periphery. In such a framework, there is no point in using the concept of "class" - it functions as a sociological tool

33 Zak Cope, *Divided World Divided Class: Global Political Economy and the Stratification of Labour Under Capitalism*, Montreal: Kersplebedeb, 2012, p. iii, 114, 156; *The Wealth of (Some) Nations: Imperialism and the Mechanics of Value Transfer*, London: Pluto Press, 2019, p. 10, 86. As a parallel example, Marx had written that in the context of the incorporation of female and child labor into the production process, the (male) worker becomes a slave-dealer (*Capital* I, p. 399). But he had not concluded from this that male workers could no longer be considered workers. Cope draws precisely this conclusion.

34 Cope, *Divided World Divided Class*, p. 174, 207-208.

35 For example: Samir Amin, *Class and Nation: Historically and in the Current Crisis*, translated by Susan Kaplow, New York: Monthly Review Books, 1980, p. 229.

36 H.W. Edwards, *Labor Aristocracy, Mass Base of Social Democracy*, Stockholm: Aurora Press, 1978, p. 53, 210.

for classification, not as a means of changing the world.

So what is to be done? According to Cope, it is necessary to abandon hope in the core countries and rely on the national liberation movements that unite all classes (especially workers and peasants) against imperialism in the Third World.[37] In a long process of what Samir Amin calls "delinking", once the peripheral countries break their links with the center and the excessive profits and exploitation that are the basis of imperialism are eliminated, the working classes in the center countries will be able to turn back to socialism.[38] In a sense, since there is no class/social basis for socialism "from within", capitalism/imperialism will be brought to its knees by surrounding it from the outside.

While Samir Amin is explicit about this strategy involving "at least part of the bourgeoisie",[39] Cope prefers not to focus on such class alliances for the moment. For example, he does not mention which class or class sections within the peasantry will form an alliance with the workers. In fact, he does not even have such a question because, accepting that the main contradiction is between the core and the periphery, he does not see the need to examine "contradictions within the people" separately. In fact, despite the rich historical material he presents and the original methods of calculation he develops, Cope's entire analysis is confined to the limits of the Dependency School framework, which substitutes countries for classes. Moreover, he attempts to do so at a time when the rationale for national liberation wars has weakened considerably. A hundred years ago, Lenin argued that national liberation wars would play an important (if not decisive) role in the defeat of imperialism. Today, Cope argues that they are the only road to socialism.

The basic problem is this: In the 20th century, after the two world wars, humanity experienced huge waves of revolution. A very important part of these revolutionary waves were the national liberation movements. After the First World War, in the process of the disintegration of empires (such as Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire), and after the Second World War, as a result of the loss of power of former colonial empires (such as Great Britain and France), many countries gained their independence. The national liberation movements that built on and strengthened the waves of revolution were part of the socialist strategy to defeat imperialism. In fact, the geography of socialist construction gradually expanded throughout the world. Later examples, such as the Cuban Revolution, showed that democratic revolutions could be transformed into socialist revolutions in a short period of time. In brief, there was synergy and complementarity between the socialist revolution and the national liberation movements. In such an environment, currents such as the Dependency School were objectively within the broad field of socialism.

However, the transition from colonialism to modern imperialism is largely completed as of the last quarter of the 20th century. Unlike colonialism, which was

37 Cope, *Divided World Divided Class*, p. 213; *The Wealth of (Some) Nations*, p. 86, 212.

38 Samir Amin, *Delinking: Towards a Polycentric World*, translated by Michael Wolfers, London, New Jersey: Zed Books, 1990, p. 13, 28, 54-55, 104, 122, 132.

39 Samir Amin, *The Law of Worldwide Value*, translated by Brian Pearce, Shane Mage, New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010, p. 93.

based on direct occupation, and classical imperialism, which also relied heavily on this method, modern imperialism, which became increasingly dominant in the post-World War II period, establishes its dominance through more indirect economic-political mechanisms. Such a framework, in which the capital of the core country can appropriate (through various methods) a large part of the surplus value produced in dependent geographies, also makes the content of the demand for "national liberation" problematic. In a country that has gained political independence and is integrated into the world capitalist system through commodity, money, capital and even labor markets (e.g. Turkey, India, Brazil), the class agent of the call for "national liberation" today is naturally the working class, not the bourgeoisie. In such countries, which produce and export a significant part of the world's industrial production and are integrated with imperialism in many ways, only the working class can lead the break with imperialism. But in this case, we should no longer speak of "national liberation" but of socialist construction. In the absence of a strong world socialist alternative, it seems inevitable that such "national liberation", if it does not meet a revolutionary wave and turn to socialism, will soon turn to re-establishing its old ties with world capitalism. Cope predicts a new wave of "delinking" over a long period, in a sense calling for a stage of "national capitalism" (without using the term) that would precede socialist construction, but wishful thinking aside, he does not discuss how this movement would bring about the end of imperialism. Questions and criticisms can be multiplied. But one point is clear: Cope's analysis ignores the political and scientific achievements of Marxism. His whole work gives the impression that he is trying to prove that class categories are invalid.

Critiques from Neocleous

A third line of criticism of Lenin's conception of the labor aristocracy in the new period concerns what is now usually called "social policy." The work of Mark Neocleous, a British Marxist known for his work on the state, is a case in point.

According to Neocleous, the labor aristocracy is "a concept in search of a theory." This is especially true of Lenin's conception, since Lenin was unable to theorize the incorporation of the working class into the capitalist system because he did not use the concept of civil society and focused on the external relations of the state (imperialism). Like Hegel, Lenin (and Bukharin) failed to foresee that the capitalist state could create the internal political structures necessary to manage class antagonisms. Further, he defined the labor aristocracy as narrowly as possible, basing his analysis not on the modern capitalist state but on the obsolete Russian state.[40]

I think there is a certain anachronism in Neocleous' critique, since he actually bases his critique on "socio-political" developments that were still in their infancy in Lenin's time. For example, he argues that the process of incorporating the working class into the capitalist system was almost complete by 1918 (page x). What he means by this is that workers (only male workers!) were given the vote in Britain at

40 Neocleous, *Administering Civil Society*, p. x, 32-3, 102-106, 170 n.33.

that time. In other words, if Lenin defined the labor aristocracy too narrowly (which is debatable), Neocleous, in trying to criticize it, oversimplifies the integration of workers into the political sphere. And even then, the criticism misses the point, since at the time Lenin wrote *Imperialism*, for example, political participation (in the sense of universal suffrage without property or gender distinctions) was the exception, not the rule, worldwide. Even a generation later, at the outbreak of the Second World War, only eight countries had universal suffrage.[41]

In one of his most important writings on imperialism, Lenin states that the "desertion of a stratum of the labor aristocracy to the bourgeoisie" has matured and "become an accomplished fact" in economic terms. Such a change in class relations will undoubtedly "find political form". The economic privileges provided by imperialism will be matched by political "privileges and sops"; representatives and supporters of the "bourgeois labor parties" will be given seats and rewards in various committees and boards (and later in governments).[42] Lenin goes on to say:

> The mechanics of political democracy works in the same direction. Nothing in our times can be done without elections; nothing can be done without the masses. And in this era of printing and parliamentarism it is impossible to gain the following of the masses without a widely ramified, systematically managed, well-equipped system of flattery, lies, fraud, juggling with fashionable and popular catchwords, and promising all manner of reforms and blessings to the workers right and left—as long as they renounce the revolutionary struggle for the overthrow of the bourgeoisie. I would call this system Lloyd-Georgism, after the English Minister Lloyd George, one of the foremost and most dexterous representatives of this system in the classic land of the "bourgeois labour party".[43]

Contrary to what Neocleous thinks, the integration of the working class into the capitalist system had only just begun at the beginning of the 20th century. Lenin was only partially able to see this process, which he called "Lloyd Georgeism" (he thought that the labor aristocracy, not the working class as a whole, was being integrated into the system).

The late 19th-century discourse on "imperialism and social reform" was an expression of the bourgeoisie's awareness of the need to make certain concessions to the masses in order to gain support for imperialist policies. The debate was over the extent and nature of these concessions. In Britain, now that the "industrial monopoly" had been broken, the debate within the ruling class was between the liberal proponents of free trade and the pro-tariff reform industrialists who wanted to pursue a German-style mercantilist policy. The intra-capitalist alignment was similar to today's, but unlike today, the working class supported the liberals for

41 Ian Gough, *The Political Economy of the Welfare State*, London: The Macmillan Press, 1979, p. 60.

42 In Britain, for example, the bureaucrats of the TUC were on 6 government committees in 1935, 60 in 1949, 81 in 1954 and 115 in 1968. Edwards, op. cit., p. 54, note.

43 Lenin, "Imperialism and the Split in Socialism", p. 117.

historical reasons.[44] Both sides agreed, however, that workers should be given certain rights.

In fact, since the beginning of capitalist production, capital, through the state, has had to make certain arrangements in the face of the organized struggle of the working class. Since the 19th century, the field of social policy, based on the state-bourgeoisie-proletariat triangle, has gradually expanded to include social, economic and political dimensions.[45] This expansion has been carried out in such a way as to foment divisions within the working class. For example, rights such as the right to a pension, unemployment benefits, etc. were practices that started as specific to certain groups of workers and later became widespread. What is important in the context of our subject is that social policy practices have become one of the main sources of working-class reformism.

In this sphere, the economic organization of the working class took the form of trade unions and the political organization took the form of social-democratic parties. At the time of the First World War, social democracy was to break away from the communist movement, integrate with the bourgeois political apparatus and eventually abandon the goal of socialism. Since then, it can generally be said that the unorganized section of the working class in the core countries has tended toward right-wing conservative parties, the organized section toward social democracy, and the most class-conscious "vanguard" section toward communist parties. In other words, the organized labor movement is generally divided on the political level into social democracy (majority) and the revolutionary communist movement (minority).

This influence of social democracy on the organized labor movement has gradually weakened during the neoliberal period. Since the 1990s, with the disappearance of the "threat" of socialism, the main social-democratic parties in Europe (the Social Democratic Party in Germany, the Labour Party in Britain, and the Socialist Party in France) have openly embraced liberalism. (There is no effective social-democratic party in the USA; this role is partly taken over by the Democratic Party, as in the case of the CHP in Turkey). On the other hand, the masses of workers, disorganized in the neoliberal period, have also begun to move away from social democracy. In short, the historical link between the labor movement and social democracy has weakened on both sides, and "the monopoly of social democracy on the votes of the working class has clearly come to an end".[46] This situation is both an opportunity for and a threat to the revolutionary socialist movement. As the post-2008 global crisis environment provides the ground for the strengthening of nationalist currents, some of the workers who distance themselves from social democracy may turn to

44 Semmel, op. cit., p. 133-134, 137-138.

45 In Britain, social service expenditure as a percentage of national income was only around 4 percent before the First World War, but by the 1970s it had risen to almost 30 percent. Gough, op. cit., p. 76.

46 Asbjørn Wahl, *The Rise and Fall of the Welfare State*, translated by John Irons, London: Pluto Press, 2011, p. 197.

racist-fascist movements.[47]

Back to Neocleous, he is right that the modern capitalist state has been able to contain class struggles within an administrative form. Through the establishment of labor ministries, collective bargaining and contracts, labor laws, etc., the state maintains the political stability of bourgeois society by shifting the contradictions of the sphere of production within the state.[48] To be sure, the working class is not merely passive in this process. In fact, it is the working class that forces the transformation of the state. Therefore, the working class must be seen both as the subject that shapes the state and as the object that is shaped by it.[49] The state power of capital makes it possible to shape the gains of the working class according to the interests of the bourgeoisie.

Where Neocleous's analysis becomes problematic is in his assertion that the state succeeds in "administering" the class struggle by confining both capital and the working class within certain forms. In effect, Neocleous attributes to the state the organization of capital in the form of corporations and of labor in the form of trade unions.[50] I think there are two problems with this view. The first, and relatively minor, is that the state is presented as an omnipotent power over the classes. This is, of course, a matter of emphasis, and Neocleous can dispel this impression. The second problem is the idea that antagonisms arising from capital relations can be "administered" indefinitely within certain political-economic forms. Given the lack of successful socialist revolutions, especially in the core countries, this claim may have some truth, but it also means absolutizing the social democratic position that the interests of the working class and capitalists can be reconciled. Such a claim might have been understandable (if not accepted) fifty years ago, but after forty years of neoliberal destruction it has gradually lost its meaning. It is certain that the antagonisms between the classes can be softened within a certain *modus vivendi*, that they can be brought into a sustainable form, otherwise the political power of the bourgeoisie would have no meaning; but it is also certain that any such attempt has its limits.

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47 Academic studies that focus on voting behavior find that low levels of education are effective in voting for right-wing parties, while low levels of income are effective in voting for left-wing parties (education level is of course related to income level, but which factor is effective in which decision can be distinguished by statistical methods). It is emphasized that in the neoliberal period, issues such as the environment, women's rights, civil society, etc. have come to the fore in voter behavior, and the basic right-left distinction has gained new content. However, it is noted that in the U.S., for example, there has been no decline in "voting left" for economic reasons. See Dick Houtman, Peter Achterberg, Anton Derks, *Farewell to the Leftist Working Class*, London: Routledge, 2017, chapter 5.

48 Neocleous, op. cit., p. 5-6, 11-2.

49 Neocleous, op. cit., p. 105-6. The conception in the literature on the "welfare state" is very different, and the working class is not seen as an active subject, but as the passive object of social policy. See Gøsta Esping-Andersen, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990, p. 108.

50 Neocleous, op. cit., p. 144-5.

Critiques from Friedman and Post

Another recent critique of the labor aristocracy thesis suggests that this layer is not as reformist as one might think. As far as I know, Samuel Friedman and Charles Post are the authors who have most forcefully voiced this criticism. The critique is laid out in two articles, one from 1986 (Friedman) and the other from 2010 (Post). In Friedman's succinct words: "the labor aristocracy is no less revolutionary than the lower strata; the lower strata are no less reformist than the aristocracy." For Post, too, the idea that the well-paid sections of the North are conservative while the low-paid sections are radical is false. Even if one can speak of a "labor aristocracy", it does not necessarily support reactionary policies.[51]

Both Post and Friedman turn the labor aristocracy thesis on its head by citing examples of struggles led by skilled, unionized industrial workers throughout the 20th century. Friedman, in particular, emphasizes that unionized and "privileged" industrial workers have led the revolutionary wave in Europe immediately after the First World War. Post further argues that most members of the Bolshevik Party during the October Revolution were also urban industrial workers (especially in the metal sector).[52] Moreover, in the second half of the 20th century, it was often the industrial working class that took the lead in mass movements on a large scale, both in the core countries like France and Italy and in peripheral countries like Chile and Argentina.

In my view, this line of critique does a good job of drawing attention to the revolutionary potential of the labor aristocracies in the core countries. What is often forgotten, however, is that this remains a mere potential and that this section also has a certain predisposition to reactionary politics. It is argued that the examples of militant activism of unionized workers in imperialist countries refute the thesis of a labor aristocracy, an argument implicitly based on the opposition between conservative and militant (or radical) attitudes. But this is a misleading point of departure. For in the context of the labor aristocracy thesis, "revolutionary" means going beyond the "economist" or "syndicalist" limits and moving toward proletarian political power. A militant line of struggle is not necessarily revolutionary. For example, the Luddite machine-breaking struggles in the early stages of industrialization were very militant, radical actions, but historically they were events that hardly went beyond an instinctive defensive reflex, showing the immaturity of the movement.

Friedman and Post are not wrong in arguing that skilled, organized, relatively well-paid industrial workers have led many mass movements in the 20th century. They do a valuable job of reminding us of the revolutionary potential of the working class (and labor aristocracy) in the central countries. But they ignore the problem of political mediation, the fact that these mass movements have failed to make the revolutionary leap. (To be fair, Friedman does emphasize the lack of revolutionary

51 Samuel R. Friedman, "Labor Aristocracy Theories and Worker Politics", *Humanity and Society*, no. 10, 1986, p. 129. Post, op. cit., p. 28. For an interpretation close to these two, but less emphatic, see John Evansohn, "Workers and Imperialism: Where Is the Aristocracy of Labor?", *Critical Sociology*, volume 7, no 54, 1977.

52 Friedman, op. cit. p. 129-133; Post, op. cit. p. 30-31.

goals in these mass movements and the negative effects of the labor bureaucracies). Such a leap is only possible with revolutionary political organization that goes beyond the limits of the trade unions. Moreover, as many historical examples show, without such a leap the movement inevitably regresses and ends up in a worse position than before. In the exemplary case of the U.S., the CIO (which actually split from the AFL in 1936), which was able to carry out nation-shaking strikes from the 1930s to the mid-1940s despite the Great Depression and World War, reunited with the AFL during the Cold War and set about undermining revolutionary workers' movements around the world.[53]

In short, the occasional militant mobilization of the core labor aristocracy proves the existence of revolutionary potential. As Post rightly points out, the class struggle has an essentially "episodic" character.[54] Within a general confrontation, maneuvers (or battles) take place from time to time.

It is precisely in periods of such struggles that the revolutionary power of the lower layers of the working class emerges. The course of the class struggle over time can be divided into "normal" periods of stasis and "revolutionary" periods in which the struggle intensifies. The results of the preparations made (or not made) during the "normal" period are realized during the revolutionary periods. The unprivileged layers of workers, who form the main body of the working class, tend to remain unorganized and inactive during the "normal" periods, but they are the real fighting force of a revolution.[55]

Efforts to clarify and update the concept of "labor aristocracy"

In the post-World War II period, in addition to criticisms of the labor aristocracy thesis, there have been attempts to clarify the concept. An important development is the debate about the composition of the British working class in the second half of the 19th century, which began in the 1950s with the work of Eric Hobsbawm.[56] Hobsbawm argues that skilled male workers, particularly in the capital goods, engineering and shipbuilding industries, formed the labor aristocracy, and that this

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53 For the CIO and the US trade union movement in general, see Mike Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream: Politics and Economy in the History of the US Working Class*, London, New York: Verso, 1991.

54 Post, op. cit., p. 34.

55 Wolfgang Abendroth notes that in the context of the German workers' movement in the 19th century "political action was almost always undertaken by a small section of the workers either in co-operatives or in trade unions, led generally by intellectuals … those active in them came mainly from the ranks of the skilled workers who had better opportunities to continue their education because of their higher earnings. Those workers who suffered increasing immiseration, on the other hand, were for the moment only able to demonstrate their militancy and vitality at times of crisis". *A Short History of the European Working Class*, translated by Nicholas Jacobs, Brian Trench, Joris de Bres, New York, London: Monthly Review Press, 1972, p. 25. I think that these remarks can be generalized to other countries.

56 E.J. Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour*, New York: Anchor Books, 1967. For a summary of these debates see H. F. Moorhouse, "The Marxist Theory of the Labour Aristocracy", *Social History*, volume 3, no 1, January 1978.

group gradually expanded over the period. After reaching its peak in the early 20th century, this "old" and conservative labor aristocracy turned to the left as it saw its position undermined and the wage gap between it and unskilled workers closing.[57] In Hobsbawm's analysis, the political attitudes of different sections of the working class were driven by economic reasons, particularly wage levels.

The British debate has, over time, become bifurcated and mired in a mass of empirical data in an academic style. According to historian John Foster, the debate has focused not on political processes but on the (endless) details of class stratification. But interest in the internal stratification of the working class is fundamentally a political, not "sociological" question.[58] In this respect, trying to identify who exactly constitutes the labor aristocracy at any given moment may be illuminating in a limited sense, but it is actually an insufficient approach. What is really needed is to be able to identify the political positions taken, or likely to be taken, by different class sections at different conjunctures. This can provide useful input for political strategy and tactics.

In the second half of the 20th century, another line of development, based on the monopolistic character of imperialism, attempts to prioritize the concept of "monopoly" in the definition of the labor aristocracy. We have seen how Engels spoke of the super-profits of Britain's industrial monopoly on the world market. In the new interpretations, attention is drawn to the super-profits of the giant monopoly corporations and to the fact that these profits are mainly generated in the core country itself.[59] Monopolies are able to pay high wages and provide extra social benefits to their own workers. Firms that produce a new product or apply a new technology can make above-average profits and be more "generous" to their workers, while those that enter the field later face more intense competition.[60] Similarly, there may be huge differences in wage levels and workers' rights between the main firms and subcontractors (or permanent and contract/temporary workers).[61]

However, restricting the labor aristocracy to monopoly firms raises questions about the definition of monopoly and profit rates. For example, many monopoly firms can only make average profits in the long run (in some sectors, such as iron and steel, a huge amount of capital is required for investment, but this large amount of capital, which creates a barrier to entry into the sector, becomes an "exit barrier" in times of crisis, driving down the profit rate). There are also examples of low

57 Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire*, p. 95, 247.

58 John Foster, "The Aristocracy of Labour and Working-Class Consciousness Revisited", *Labour History Review*, volume 75, no 3, 2010, p. 258.

59 Max Elbaum, Robert Seltzer, *The Labour Aristocracy: The Material Basis for Opportunism in the Labour Movement*, Newtown: Resistance Books, 2004, p. 26-7, https://readingfromtheleft.com/PDF/LabourAristocracy.pdf.

60 Beverly Silver, *Forces of Labor: Workers' Movements and Globalization Since 1870*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 78-9; see also Sungur Savran, "Sınıfları Haritalamak: Sınıflar Birbirinden Nasıl Ayrılır?" ["Mapping Classes: How are Classes Separated from Each Other?"], *Devrimci Marksizm*, no 6-7, Spring-Summer 2008, p. 31 (English translation in this issue).

61 For the examples of Germany and Japan, see Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011, p. 41.

wages in "monopolistic" firms and vice versa.[62] In particular, most of the workers, such as architects, engineers, doctors and lawyers, who come from the ranks of the new petty bourgeoisie and become workers, are already part of the labor aristocracy, regardless of the nature of the company they work for.

Another interpretation, again based on the concept of monopoly, is that the labor aristocracy itself is a monopoly. In the 19th century, workers in predominantly artisanal trades were joining together and attaining bargaining power.[63] Such unions were exclusive, unlike the modern unions that try to cover all workers in a sector. They were therefore organizations that sought to limit competition between only one group of workers. According to Martin Nicolaus, a labor aristocracy is a monopoly within a monopoly, i.e. workers with monopoly privileges in an imperialist country with an industrial monopoly.[64] However, this interpretation does not shed much light on the present, since it implies that with the disappearance of the old-style craft unions, the labor aristocracy has effectively disappeared.

Rethinking the labor aristocracy

We have seen various criticisms of Lenin's interpretation and attempts to update the concept of the labor aristocracy. The critics agree that this interpretation defines the labor aristocracy in the imperialist countries too narrowly and underestimates the integration of the working class as a whole into the "system." In this regard, it can be said that while the critiques emphasize the "working class becoming bourgeois" phenomenon, the stratification within the class and its political consequences are generally relegated to the background. On the other hand, in the attempts to clarify and develop the content of the concept, we do not encounter very enlightening insights into the present.

In the remainder of the paper, I will first discuss intra-class stratification at the national and international levels, to update the labor aristocracy thesis. The discussion of the labor bureaucracy will complement this framework. I will then briefly assess the transformation of the working class and labor aristocracy in the neoliberal era and try to draw some conclusions.

Stratification within the class

It is difficult to define the labor aristocracy in a given conjuncture because this group does not constitute a class segment with definite boundaries. Since intra-class stratification is both a relative and dynamic process, the boundaries of the strata cannot be precisely defined. The axes that divide the working class hierarchically are many and varied. Wage levels are obviously important, but factors such as occupational position, ethnicity, gender, age, skills and geography also have the potential to create privileged sections within the class.

Moreover, these axes of class division interact with each other. For example (and

62 See Friedman, op. cit., p. 126-7; Post, op. cit., p. 25-28.

63 Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire*, p. 134.

64 Nicolaus, op. cit., p. 95.

many examples can be given), in the post-World War II period, Japanese industrial firms employed a small number of skilled workers with relative security and subcontracted out the rest of the work. Most of the low-paid subcontracted workers were the wives of skilled male workers in the main company. The class division was thus reinforced by gender differentiation, and the two axes fed each other within a patriarchal division of labor. Over time, with the exhaustion of additional labor resources within the country and the increased bargaining power of workers, the lower layers of the subcontracting pyramid were shifted to East and Southeast Asian countries. Thus, the dual structure that characterized the labor process ceased to be a "family issue" and acquired new dimensions such as nationality and ethnicity.[65]

Sometimes even those who do not receive high wages can find a place in the labor aristocracy. In Turkey, the wages of civil servants are only slightly above the average, but due to their "privileges" such as job security, weekends, pensions, etc., they are and see themselves as different from the general mass of workers. However, these differences have not prevented civil servants from carrying out very powerful actions in some periods.

A group that is part of the labor aristocracy in one period (e.g. the bricklayers mentioned by Engels) may later lose that position because of technological and other developments. It is more productive to think of the labor aristocracy not as a fixed class segment, but as elite elements that act as a kind of intermediary or "transmission belt" between the working class and the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie, undermining or diverting the workers' independent and united class struggle. Such "aristocratic" elements can sometimes carry out very militant actions. But especially in revolutionary periods, they can also act as a kind of brake, holding back the masses. The political equivalent of this attitude is the social-democratic approach which seeks to keep the struggle within its usual limits when the working masses rise up.

To think of the labor aristocracy in this way is not to define it (in the style of Poulantzas) in terms of political and ideological levels. What makes the labor aristocracy a labor aristocracy is precisely its relatively privileged position within the relations of production. Because of this position, it seems to have a direct interest in maintaining the status quo. Thus, it seeks to limit the struggle of the working class as much as possible, preferably to purely economic struggles, and it acts as an agent of the bourgeoisie within the class. However, to the extent that it is part of the working class, it is also capable of transcending these narrow sectional interests, and uniting its destiny with that of the class as a whole. Therefore, it is both possible and necessary to partially "win over" or at least neutralize this aristocratic section, the most organized component of the working class.

The historical record supports this judgment. Metalworkers (especially autoworkers), for example, have led mass labor movements in many countries, even though they tend to be a highly paid, well-organized "aristocratic" minority.[66] Since

65 Silver, op. cit., p. 70-72.

66 Silver, op.cit., p. 72-3; Alex Callinicos, "Introduction", in Alex Callinicos and Chris Harman, *Neo-liberalizm ve Sınıf:* İşçi *Sınıfı Değişti mi?* [*The Changing Working Class: Essays on Class*

the labor aristocracy is not a stable layer, it can be drawn into violent struggles when its position is shaken. "Moreover, since this layer is usually the most educated, skilled and unionized part of the class, its entry into the struggle is of great importance for the course of the class struggle".[67]

This is the main difference between the labor aristocracy and the labor bureaucracies (party and trade union): While it is possible to mobilize or neutralize certain elements within the labor aristocracy, the labor bureaucracies cannot be won over. They are, by definition, elements whose task is to suppress the revolutionary aspects of the class struggle.

Labor bureaucracies and social democracy

Working-class bureaucracies take two main institutional forms: political party and trade-union bureaucracies. In many European countries, there are social-democratic or now openly liberalized parties that were born as mass workers parties (including parties that bear the name "communist" but are *de facto* social-democratic). Such parties and their cadres (the party bureaucracy) are openly hostile to the revolutionary workers' movement. The tendency toward opportunism, already identified by Lenin, has spread like a cancer throughout the body of the workers' movement in the imperialist world over the past hundred years.

Historically, the formation of trade unions has been followed by the formation of trade union bureaucracies. These are elements that come from within the working class but rise above it and begin to represent it.[68] Just as the state emerges from within society and rises above it, so the union bureaucracies form a ruling segment, with its own interests, separate from the masses. The institutionalization of the class struggle brings organizational permanence, but it also places the masses in a passive position. The representatives, who negotiate with the employer on behalf of the masses and often make decisions on their own initiative, are in an active position (in cases like Germany, union bureaucrats are even given seats on the company board). Over time, the trade union bureaucrat (usually male) distances himself from the masses he represents. He now has a secretary, an office car, a daily allowance, etc. and has joined the ranks of the ruling elite. In Turkey, there have been many deputies and ministers with a trade union background in both the ruling and opposition parties and in the governments. The appointment of the Minister of Social Security (Sadık Şide) from the trade union Türk-İş by the military junta after the 1980 coup is one of the most striking examples.

Due to the circumstances, the union bureaucrats can be forced to lead mass or even historical struggles (the president of Maden-İş, Şemsi Denizer, who led the "Great March" of the Zonguldak workers at the end of 1990, was a typical example of a corrupt union bureaucrat, and had the union buy a Jaguar luxury car). In such cases, the union bureaucrat tries to meet the expectations of the mobilized masses

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Structure Today], translated by Osman Akınhay, Istanbul: Salyangoz, 2006, p. 24.

67 Savran, op. cit., p. 33.

68 See Adam Przeworski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993 [1985], p. 14; also, Savran, op. cit. p. 31, 33.

at least minimally and, at the same time, tries to weaken the movement. It is well known that many great historical strikes have been realized ***against*** the opposition of the trade union leadership.

One of the greatest successes of the modern capitalist state has been to contain and tame the class struggle. This is where the labor bureaucracies come in. Within the economic-political distinction between these two complementary institutional forms, trade unions generally focus on economic demands in the narrow sense, while social democratic parties pursue reformist policies. Undoubtedly, many revolutionary, socialist and Marxist people participate in such organizations. In the capitalist society, however, the labor bureaucracies basically fulfill the task of "confining the consciousness and struggle of the working class within the limits of capitalist society." This task becomes particularly important at "revolutionary" junctures: "At sensitive turning points, when the question of the survival of the state and the order is at stake, the integration of the labor aristocracy and the trade-union bureaucracy into the state forces the trade unions to side completely with the order".[69]

The labor aristocracy and the labor bureaucracies are like the "threshold guardians" who in myths have the task of preventing the hero from crossing into unknown realms.[70] When a revolutionary situation arises, both try to prevent the crossing, to return the working class to "normal" methods of struggle. Mythological heroes defeat the threshold guardians with a variety of different tactics (some are defeated in battle, some are neutralized with magic words, and some are even won over to this side). Without stretching the literary analogy too far, it can be said that the working class must also eliminate the threshold guardians through appropriate tactics. One (the labor bureaucracy) must be defeated and the other (the labor aristocracy) must be neutralized or drawn into the struggle. In this context, recognizing and fighting the labor bureaucracy is a relatively easy task, since the "aristocratic" elements can easily disguise themselves in various forms.

Revolutionary situations are chaotic and confusing periods when the rules of normal everyday life no longer work and are even reversed. In such situations, not only the labor aristocracy but even the petty-bourgeois masses, though inconsistent and unstable, can side with the working class. But the fundamental question is who is leading whom, which classes or sections of classes are at the forefront of the revolutionary process.

Stratification on a world scale

The stratified structure is similar when we look at the global working class. The workers of the core countries form a privileged segment compared to the workers of the underdeveloped world. Therefore, it would not be wrong to say that all the

69 Trotsky quoted by Sungur Savran, "Sendikal Hareketin Krizi mi, Sosyalistlerin Krizi mi?" ["Crisis of the Trade Union Movement or the Socialists?"], *Devrimci Marksizm*, no 8, Winter 2008/2009, p. 18, 21, 37. Savran gives examples of the betrayal of the unions at critical junctures (p. 36-7).
70 Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004, p. 71.

workers in the imperialist countries form a labor aristocracy ***in this relative sense.***

The entire population of a country can benefit from imperialist relations. Lenin also states: "The export of capital, one of the most essential economic bases of imperialism, still more completely isolates the rentiers from production and sets the seal of parasitism on the whole country that lives by exploiting the labor of several overseas countries and colonies".[71] Workers in the core can derive benefits from imperialist exploitation other than higher wages. For example, their job prospects increase and they enjoy relative prosperity thanks to the cheap consumer goods that flow into the country. But such benefits do not necessarily come from monopoly profits. It is also important to remember that the "welfare state", which is seen as a symbol of the relative prosperity of workers in the center countries, is in fact essentially a mechanism for redistribution within the working class.[72]

The workers of the core countries form the aristocratic section of the world working class. But one cannot go directly from the national to the international scale. This is because the "world working class" is an abstraction; it expresses an abstract unity, not an organic, living unity. It does not consist of elements that can directly relate to each other, such as the "Japanese working class." The borders between states also divide the world's working class into different national "compartments." Beyond the national level, workers cannot relate to each other directly, but only indirectly.[73] This mediation is basically provided by three institutions: capitalist states, corporations, and labor bureaucracies. (The International as a revolutionary mediator against these three institutions must, of course be added to the picture, but unfortunately, these experiences were short-lived).

Basically, the first mediation (states) makes the workers of different countries enemies, and the second mediation (corporations) makes them rivals. Both formations are enemies of the international unity of the working class. They try to prevent it and if they cannot, they try to put it under forms they can control. In this context the third mediation comes into play. This third mediation consists of the international organizations of reformist trade unions (today the ITUC, ETUC, Global Unions, etc.) and political structures such as the Socialist International. Their main task is to keep the labor movement in order throughout the world.[74]

In short, today capital is highly organized at all levels on a global scale, while the working class is unorganized. The fact that workers can only relate to each other indirectly at the international level means that they remain permanently

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71 Lenin, *Imperialism*, p. 277.

72 Gough, op. cit., p. 114.

73 In the words of Beverly Silver, in indirect relational processes "the affected actors are often not fully conscious of the relational links", *Forces of Labor*., p. 27.

74 Especially during the Cold War, unions in newly industrialized countries such as Turkey were trained by AFL-CIO cadres to be anti-communist. It is known that during this period the AFL-CIO, in close cooperation with the CIA, focused its energy on the fight against communism worldwide. On international trade union organizations in general, see Dimitris Stevis, "International Labor Organizations, 1864-1997: The Weight of History and the Challenges of the Present", *Journal of World-Systems Research*, no 4, 1998.

unorganized, unconscious, and weak in this sphere. As the historical experience of the Internationals has shown, no formation other than a revolutionary International (and a "Red Trade Union International" to coordinate with it) that overcomes the national isolation of the workers will be able to expand the political horizons of the workers beyond the national level. A revolutionary international is also necessary to draw the workers of the imperialist centers into the struggle, i.e. the sections of the global labor aristocracy in a relative sense.

Undoubtedly, national borders can be and are constantly crossed through processes such as migration between countries. But this is a marginal phenomenon and does not provide a permanent organization that transcends state borders. In its "normal" functioning, the working class in each capitalist country is isolated by national borders and stratified into privileged sections (the labor aristocracy) and other (lower) layers. This is the basic level. It is worth emphasizing once again that this is a dynamic and relative process: Capital has no tendency to create privileged layers of workers in a country or in the world; on the contrary, one can speak of a negative tendency to constantly "create" new sources of cheap labor, which leads to the movement of some sections from the ranks of the labor aristocracy (or petty bourgeoisie) to the lower strata of the proletariat and vice versa.

Engels and Lenin attached particular importance to the organization of the unprivileged layers of workers in the struggle against the labor aristocracy. If, on a world scale, the workers in the imperialist countries have stuck to the reformist line for so long, one of the most important reasons is the inefficiency of the international structures (a revolutionary international could have promoted the organization of the unprivileged layers of workers in many countries; Stalinism, which abandoned the internationalist perspective and liquidated the Comintern, has a major share in this deficiency). Only with the fulfillment of two conditions, (i) the organization of the unprivileged layers of workers and (ii) a revolutionary international organization, will the masses of workers in the core countries be able to break out of the reformist lethargy. These two conditions are certainly mutually reinforcing.

If the workers in the core countries constitute the international labor aristocracy, those in the dependent countries are undoubtedly the lower layer of the "world working class." Nevertheless, we can say that privileged sections of workers have emerged in every country that has embarked on the path of capitalist development. In the post-World War II period, in the context of the internationalization of capital, there have been significant changes in the composition of the world working class (a new phenomenon that Lenin did not have the opportunity to see). First, the world's working class expanded quantitatively. Along with this expansion, especially in late industrializing countries (such as Turkey), new layers within the class have emerged and existing ones have been transformed. In these countries, it can be said that the unionized, well-paid industrial workers and white-collar workers, especially those working in the industrial enterprises of multinational companies, constituted a new labor aristocracy.[75] Undoubtedly, these workers had a much lower level of welfare than their counterparts in Western countries, but they were clearly

75 See Savran, "Mapping Classes", p. 31.

"privileged" strata in the societies in which they lived. Moreover, in many cases, it was this group that organized the first and most violent workers' struggles (e.g., the metal workers in Turkey).

Compared to the core, the labor aristocracies in the late industrialized world are much smaller in number and much more fragile in terms of their position within the production process. This fragility has become more apparent in the neoliberal period. As industrial production shifted to the periphery, informal, precarious, low-wage jobs became the rule in these new geographies, and the overwhelming majority of the working class suffered wage and rights losses. It can be said that the labor aristocracies in the periphery -where they existed- have today been considerably weakened.

In 1980, half of the world's industrial workers were in Europe, Japan and North America. Today, 80 percent are in the periphery. This ongoing shift is driven by low wages and weak social rights in emerging markets. Workers in countries like China and India earn 10 to 20 times less than those doing the same work in the center. The majority of India's nearly half a billion industrial workers work informally, and the majority of China's nearly one billion industrial workers work in precarious conditions.[76]

The migration of industry from the center to the periphery has been accompanied by a huge wave of internal migration in these peripheral countries, with hundreds of millions of new proletarians entering the cities and industrial zones as a result of the dissolution of the countryside. In the same process, women workers have also been drawn into the sphere of production in large masses, in a way that can also be called "internal migration." All these processes have been characterized by precarious, unregistered, informal forms of work. But the same developments have also provoked mass protests in the new centers of world industry. The scope not only of capitalist production but also of class struggle has expanded.

Neoliberal destruction and the labor aristocracy

After forty years of neoliberal aggression, is it possible today to speak of a labor aristocracy? If so, which groups does it include? In this section, I will try to make some observations on this question.

"Traditional" labor aristocracies and social democracy

In some studies of contemporary capitalism, one finds the observation that the traditional labor aristocracies in the imperialist countries have vanished or are on the way to dissolution.[77] This is generally true, but there have also been changes in

76 John Smith, *Imperialism in the Twenty-First Century: Globalization, Super-Exploitation, and Capitalism's Final Crisis*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 2016, p. 138; Immanuel Ness, *Southern Insurgency: The Coming of the Global Working Class*, London: Pluto Press, 2016, p. 29-30, 85-6.

77 For example: Ernesto Screpanti, *Global Imperialism and the Great Crisis*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 2014, p. 80, 208: Alp Altınörs, İmkânsız *Sermaye: 21. Yüzyılda Kapitalizm, Sosyalizm ve Toplum* [*Impossible Capital: Capitalism, Socialism and Society in the 21st Century*],

the composition of the working class.

In the 19th century, the first "labor aristocrats" were skilled male workers with high bargaining power, united in craft unions. In Britain, the old type of unions that Engels referred to were exclusive organizations based on occupations and did not aim to include all workers in a trade. By the early 1870s, only half a million workers were organized in unions. Despite a revival of trade unionism in the 1880s, by the early 1890s the unionization rate was barely above 10 percent (1.5 million out of some 14 million workers).[78]

The shift from craft unions to mass unions (the AFL was formed in the U.S. during this period) allowed the labor movement to take a truly revolutionary turn for a time. The first mass working-class parties emerged in this context. In Britain, at the turn of the century, the Independent Labour Party, socialist associations, and trade unions united under the TUC (Trades Union Congress) brought their forces together to form the Labour Party, which won 30 seats in Parliament in the 1906 election. At the time, the SPD in Germany had more than one million members (mostly skilled male union members) and the trade unions had more than 2.5 million.[79] Even in the U.S., socialist presidential candidate Eugene Debs had won 6 percent of the vote in the 1912 election.[80] The path of socialist politics based on the labor movement seemed open. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, despite the economic depression, workers' wages in the Western world had risen for the first time in a long period, while the countries of continental Europe were launching one "social reform" program after another.

Beverly Silver, who has studied labor movements around the world, notes that two peaks of action occurred in the two years following the two world wars.[81] Usually, mobilization begins to increase just before the wars, is partially interrupted by the war, but then picks up where it left off and turns into a full-blown storm. But we also know that the central countries have somehow managed to weather these storms. Social democracy played an important role in this "success." (No doubt the specific strategic calculations of the Soviet Union also played a role. It is well known that the communist parties under the influence of Stalinism, especially in the center countries such as France and Italy, adopted a moderate attitude in the post-Second World War conjuncture).

Social democracy's betrayal of the working class and socialism is undeniable, and became clear with the start of the First World War. But the betrayal has deep structural causes. In Germany, the process signaled by the revisionism debate within the SPD was that the working-class party was becoming part of the bourgeois

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Istanbul: Yordam Kitap, 2019, p. 219.

78 Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire*, p. 128-9; Jonathan Strauss, "Engels and the Theory of the Labour Aristocracy", *Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal*, no 25, January-June 2004, http://links.org.au/node/45.

79 Abendroth, op. cit., p. 43, 56, 63.

80 Debs came from a railroad union background. In the last quarter of the 19th century, the Knights of Labor organization took that sector by storm. See Davis, op. cit., p. 30-32.

81 Silver, op. cit., p. 128.

political order. The SPD's votes were steadily increasing: 125,000 votes in 1871 had risen to 4,250,000 just before the world war. The SPD had become a mass party, but at the same time, it had lost its class identity. The mechanism of parliamentary democracy, which transformed the "worker" into a "citizen", was precisely the negation of class identity and its replacement by a universal identity. If you wanted votes, if you wanted to come to power, you had to flirt with everyone, even if you alienated your own audience a little. In such a political context, the theme of "class contradiction" was inevitably weakened.[82]

In the interwar period, with another turn of the screw, social democracy began to participate in governments in Europe. This was a period when the Soviet Union had become a serious alternative, and Rudolf Hilferding, who famously wrote that "taking possession of six large Berlin banks would mean taking possession of the most important spheres of large-scale industry, and would greatly facilitate the initial phases of socialist policy during the transition period" was appointed finance minister (in Germany) for two terms.[83] In practice, however, there was no significant difference from bourgeois parties. Adam Przeworski notes that in the interwar period, social-democratic governments in Western Europe did not nationalize any enterprises (except for the armaments industry in France in 1936). With the emergence of Keynesianism during the Great Depression, social democracy would find the economic program it was looking for, and a new era would begin in which the implementation of economic policies that favored aggregate demand would be considered "left-wing".[84]

The decline of the industrial worker at the center

From roughly the late 19th century to the mid-20th century, the labor aristocracy consisted mainly of unionized factory workers. During this period, the "white-collar unionist" was not a common figure. The spread of the "Fordist" assembly line from the turn of the century onwards brought with it both the decline of the skilled workers of the old era and the rise of the semi-skilled (usually first- or second-generation immigrant) factory worker. In the new system, a relatively small

82 Przeworski, op. cit., p. 13, 18, 28, 71; Esping-Andersen, op. cit., p. 46. For communists, elections are processes that must be evaluated according to the concrete political context. It is essential for the working class to go beyond its own narrow class interests and to lead other classes and oppressed sections, and thus to become massive in the political sphere; elections and parliament are only moments in this general movement. The class-mass dilemma that social democracy faces is precisely related to it turning its back on this Marxist insight. However, a revolutionary electoral strategy that does not surrender to "parliamentarism" is possible. In Leninist political accounting, which starts from the assumption that the decisive events in politics usually take place outside parliament, taking part in elections is of value to the extent that it advances the independent action of the working class, and "the costs outweigh the benefits" when it hinders it. August H. Nimtz, *Lenin's Electoral Strategy From Marx and Engels Through the Revolution of 1905: The Ballot, the Streets – or Both*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p. 135.

83 Rudolf Hilferding, *Finance Capital: A Study of the Latest Phase of Capitalist Development*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981, p. 368.

84 Przeworski, op. cit., p. 33, 36-37, 208-209.

number of strategically located workers could disrupt the entire production process. U.S. autoworkers won one major victory after another, most notably in the wave of sit-down strikes of 1934-37.[85]

That time is long gone. Industrial capital has taken a number of steps to break the organized power of the workers. One of the most obvious strategies has been to locate new factories in places where trade unions are weak. In the industrial restructuring after World War II, the conservative "Sun Belt" in the central regions of the U.S. and the south of England in Britain were the favored areas.[86] But class struggle intensified even in the new industrial centers. In the early 1970s, the international migration of capital accelerated because of the general crisis in which profit rates were steadily falling. For example, automobile production, which peaked in the U.S. in the first half of the century and then in Europe and Japan, moved from the 1970s to countries such as Brazil, South Africa, South Korea, India and China.[87] Looking at total industrial production, not just automobiles, in 1970 more than half of the world's production took place in Western countries and one-fifth in Asia (including Japan), while today these percentages are 37 (Western) and 43 (Asian), respectively.[88]

The decline of industry in the imperialist center is undeniable. The decline is very large at the level of employment and relatively small at the level of production. In the U.S., for example, while manufacturing output tripled between 1972 and 2016, the sector's share of national income fell from two-thirds to two-fifths and the number of workers employed halved. In the 1980s, McDonald's employed more workers than the U.S. steel industry.[89]

Today, the service sector accounts for about three-quarters and manufacturing for between one-fifth and one-sixth of total employment in the core countries. In the neoliberal era, labor-intensive manufacturing jobs in particular have been relocated to low-wage Asian countries such as China, India and Vietnam. This has intensified the class struggle in the late industrialized countries and led to wage increases.

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85 Silver, op. cit., p. 15, 52; Davis, op. cit., p. 52.

86 Capital's only response is not simply to shift production to other regions. Firms can turn to capital (technology) intensive investments that reduce the amount of live labor used in production. They can leave one branch of production and move to another (the shift from textiles to automobiles is a historical example). They can leave industry and turn to finance (there have been many examples of this since the 1970s). They can use direct pressure to break the power of the unions. In short, capital can use many different methods to defeat workers' resistance. See Silver, op. cit., p. 48, 95-6, 131-2; see also Davis, op. cit., p. 121; Callinicos, "Introduction", p. 23; Michael Zweig, *The Working Class Majority: America's Best Kept Secret*, Ithaca, London: ILR Press, 2nd edition, 2011, p. 187; Dennis L. Gilbert, *The American Class Structure in an Age of Growing Inequality*, 10th edition (epub version), London: SAGE Publications, 2018, p. 279.

87 Silver, op. cit., p. 45, 72.

88 Between 1990 and 2016, the average annual growth rate of per capita income was 8 percent in China, 6 percent in Vietnam and only 2 percent in the United States. See Branko Milanovic, *Capitalism, Alone: The Future of the System that Rules the World*, Cambridge, London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2019, p. 9, 86.

89 Gilbert, op. cit., p. 80; Davis, op. cit., p. 215.

Indicators such as per capita income show that some countries, such as South Korea and China, have been able to close the gap with Western countries. For example, the gap between per capita income levels in Britain and China increased from the 1820s to the 1970s and then decreased; today we are back to where we were in the 1820s (about 3:1, or by some calculations 4:1).[90]

The working classes in the center (the international labor aristocracy) have maintained their relative advantages in the neoliberal period, but these advantages are gradually diminishing. An interesting development is that the global auto monopolies have resumed production in the countries of the center, where they had previously fled.[91]

There are many interrelated reasons for this historic decline of the industrial proletariat in the center. These include the migration of capital, the reorganization of the labor process (such as lean production techniques) and automation, the relentless pressure on trade unions, the heavy reliance on immigrant labor and, finally, the global discrediting of socialism after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the U.S., for example, union density exceeded one-third of the workforce in 1955, when the AFL and CIO reunited, but began to decline rapidly thereafter, especially from the late 1970s onward. In the U.S., a new four-billion-dollar industry has sprung up to provide legal services to corporations to prevent unionization. More than 80 percent of employers buy such "services".[92] This process is complemented by laws that make it more difficult to form unions, and lobbying and attacks against trade unionists. In short, the American bourgeoisie gives no respite to the working class in its own country. Today, only 10 percent of all wage earners in the U.S. are unionized, and in the private sector the rate drops to 6 percent (4 percent among young people). Unionization rates are higher in the public sector. In fact, while overall unionization rates have been declining for four decades, they have surprisingly been rising among public sector workers.[93]

In the U.S. and in the core countries in general, we are witnessing a gradual erosion of the position of the "classical" skilled, unionized industrial labor aristocracy that characterized the 20th century. With the internationalization of production, the reorganization of the work process, automation, de-skilling, subcontracting, de-unionization and the consequent decline in wages, workers in industries such as metal, chemicals and oil have both become fewer in number and lost most (if not all) of their privileges. The labor aristocratic character of these groups, which used to be the leading elements of the trade union movement, has

90 However, these developments do not justify the claim of economists such as Branko Milanovic and Thomas Piketty that "Asian countries are catching up with the West." Imperialist exploitation, the transfer of surplus value from the periphery to the center is continuing. Moreover, "national income" is a category that hides inequalities between classes, whereas income inequalities within each country are increasing. Finally, it is worth remembering that the level of inequality between countries in 1820 was already high (as a legacy of the classical colonialism that preceded it).

91 Silver, op. cit., p. 66.

92 Wahl, op. cit., p. 68.

93 Zweig, op. cit., p. 163, 183; Gilbert, op. cit., p. 281.

weakened. In the coming period, this group, with its high fighting power, is likely to play an important role in the organized revolutionary movement.

The rise of public sector workers

Sectorally, the decline of industry in the central countries has been accompanied by the expansion of the service sectors. But in terms of class positions, the rise of public employees has been remarkable. Indeed, Beverly Silver, an expert on labor movements, has argued that in the new century teachers will take over the leading role played by textile workers in the nineteenth century and auto workers in the twentieth.[94]

I think it is more accurate to speak of public sector workers in general rather than a single occupational group such as teachers. Silver rightly points to the strategic position of educators in the social division of labor, the fact that they make up a significant part of public sector employment, the fact that education, unlike manufacturing, is less affected by technological developments, and the advantages of dealing with a single employer (the state). These advantages have led to an increase in activism in education, while it has declined in other sectors in the new era. But, since the 1990s, privatization, subcontracting, precariousness, etc. have also accelerated in the education sector, and the position of teachers (and academics) has been weakened by technological developments such as computers and online lectures.

The rise of the civil servant began with the "welfare state" after World War II and became more pronounced over time. The expansion of government intervention led to an increase in the number of teachers, health workers, social workers and so on. In fact, these are relatively labor-intensive sectors that are less conducive to mechanization. In the core countries, the public sector now employs more workers than manufacturing (one-third of the total workforce in the Nordic countries). Compared with other sectors, the public sector also has a higher proportion of female workers and unionized workers. Public sector workers, like all workers, have been hit in the neoliberal period, but they are still the best-organized and ***relatively*** well-paid section of the working class. Today it can be said that public sector workers are perhaps the largest component of the labor aristocracy in the imperialist countries.[95]

Because public workers, by virtue of their position in the relations of production, often deal with public institutions rather than "private" capitalists, they tend to solve their problems through the channels within the system. Public workers, whose superiors are also "public servants" like themselves, are perhaps the most conscious and advantageous group in terms of protecting their rights. In fact, it is precisely because of this situation that they have in many cases fought fierce battles. But to the extent that this line of struggle is limited to the protection of rights and privileges, it is doomed to decline, and indeed it has declined in the neoliberal period. The petty-

94 Silver, op. cit., p. 113-8.

95 On the "welfare state" and public workers, see Gough, op. cit., p. 82, 106, 142; Esping-Andersen, op. cit., p. 149; Standing, op. cit., p. 52.

bourgeois lifestyle and level of affluence of this section have not prevented its class consciousness from being relatively advanced.

Hegel had once described the bureaucracy as a "universal class" because he believed it had the capacity to rise above narrow group interests and see things from the point of view of the state. It is well known that the young Marx, in contrast to Hegel, saw the proletariat as the "universal class". Today, it is safe to say that public servants (especially teachers, health workers, etc.) have the capacity to rise above narrow group interests and see issues from the perspective of society (not the state). Precisely because of their position in the social division of labor, they are able to develop a "social" perspective. In revolutionary periods, some elements of this group can provide the most militant sections of the working class. In "normal" periods, however, they can be expected to play a negative role in the class struggle, with patterns of behavior typical of labor aristocracies.

Petty bourgeoisie, old and new

In the neoliberal period, we witnessed the rapid proletarianization of the traditional petty bourgeoisie (artisans of all kinds, as well as self-employed small producers and peasants). The petty-bourgeois workforce, such as grocers, butchers, greengrocers, and even taxi drivers, is now employed mostly in non-privileged jobs, mainly in the service sectors like retail, transportation, and logistics. In addition, with the waves of rural-urban migration that have accelerated again since the 1990s, a significant part of the peasant smallholder class has also become workers by moving to the cities or industrial zones. As a result, the traditional petty bourgeoisie has recently largely melted into the lower strata of the proletariat. In countries like China and India, this mass is in the hundreds of millions.

On the other hand, members of professions such as lawyers, engineers, physicians, etc. who come from higher income groups (i.e. from the "new petty bourgeoisie") and become proletarians are included in the new labor aristocracy. For these people, the opportunities for self-employment are much greater; a significant number of them move back and forth between the petty bourgeoisie (or even the bourgeoisie) and the working class throughout their "careers." For this reason, they never see themselves as full members of the proletariat; their class consciousness is weak. They prefer to rely on their personal skills and have more opportunities to emigrate to other countries. This group, which has a high visibility in social struggles and a high potential for radicalization, is nevertheless an obstacle to a united and independent workers' movement. This is because they glorify disorganization, see struggle only as protest, do not value equality and see themselves as superior in many ways. Many recent movements around the world (including the Gezi uprising in Turkey) have been characterized by the influence of this group.[96] It can be said that this is one of the main reasons why these movements have failed. The identity of the social segments (and the organizations representing these segments) leading

96 See Sungur Savran, "Arap Devriminin Dirilişi: Türkiye İçin Dersler" ["The Resurgence of the Arab Revolution: Lessons for Turkey"], *Devrimci Marksizm*, no 39-40, Summer/Fall 2019, p. 41-43.

the uprising is crucial for the course of the movement. This will continue to be the case in the coming periods.

Lower layers of the proletariat

As a result of the neoliberal offensive against the working class, the lower layers of this class have grown enormously in the neoliberal era, both in the core and in the periphery. In the last four decades, proletarianization has accelerated all over the world, with most of the new entries into the working class taking place in precarious, temporary, low-paid, flexible forms. It is fair to say that the once important distinction between white-collar and blue-collar workers has become virtually meaningless. There are undoubtedly many differences between the office and the factory, between manual and intellectual work. Within the white-collar workforce, however, there is a deep differentiation between highly-paid administrative positions and low-paid routine work, mostly done by women workers.[97] Workers, the overwhelming majority of the population in capitalist countries, form a heterogeneous community differentiated along many axes. But in the "egalitarian" perspective of capital, these distinctions lose their meaning. Just as the minimum wage has now become the "average" wage for the majority of the workers in Turkey. The majority meets at the bottom.

Marxists have sometimes distinguished between the "working class" and the "proletariat", using the term proletariat to refer to the politically active, revolutionary elements. This raises the question of which sections should be considered the proletariat, the revolutionary subject. For example, Nicos Poulantzas's attempt to limit the proletariat to productive workers (factory workers in the narrow sense) was the product of such a search. Accordingly, a worker at Wal-Mart, for example, would be considered outside the proletariat.[98] In my opinion, it is more correct to take the opposite approach and consider all wage earners as the proletariat, and then "subtract" elements such as managers, the union bureaucracy and the labor aristocracy. Contemporary capitalism actually shapes the potential revolutionary subject with its own hands, destroying the "middle" layer and driving large sections of the working class into the lower layers.

Today, wage earners make up 80-90 percent of the working population in capitalist countries. Over the past forty years, not only has their share of national income fallen, but this falling share has become more unequally distributed. In the U.S., for example, the bottom 90 percent of wage earners received 42 percent of total wages in 1980, compared to 28 percent in 2011. Workers are forced to borrow to meet their consumption needs, while personal debt continues to rise.[99]

Despite widespread criticism that the U.S. working class has become bourgeois

97 Chris Harman, "Resesyondan Sonra İşçi Sınıfı" ["The Working Class After the Recession"], in Callinicos and Harman, op.cit., p. 105-106.

98 Nicos Poulantzas, *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism*, translated by David Fernbach, London: NLB, 1976, p. 20, 210-212; also, Savran, "Mapping Classes", p. 27.

99 Milanovic, op. cit., p. 24; Smith, op. cit., p. 148, 155. Real labor wages have hardly changed since the 1970s: Zweig, op. cit., p. 88-9.

by acquiring assets such as stocks and shares, the reality is that more than 90 percent of financial assets are owned by just 10 percent of the population. One in five households has zero or negative net worth. More than half of all households own no stocks. For three out of five "wealthy" households, their only assets are their home (which they have often borrowed against) and their pension fund, if they have one.[100]

Thomas Piketty, who has analyzed the dynamics of income and wealth inequality in the core countries over the last two centuries or so, cites the emergence of a "middle class" in the West in the 20th century, which acquired a significant share of social wealth, as one of the most important developments. Undoubtedly, for someone like Piketty who adopts a social-democratic perspective, the "middle class" is politically important. But the same author also points out that this so-called "considerable" wealth is in fact crumbs, and that inequalities have deepened over the last forty years. In short, the "middle class", or rather the petty bourgeoisie and labor aristocracy, is disappearing.[101]

As the middle class disappears, the lower layers of the proletariat are growing. Since the 1980s, some have used the term "precariat" to describe the group of workers in temporary, precarious, low-wage jobs. (Guy Standing, who introduced the term to the world, sees this group, wrongly in my view, as a new layer outside the proletariat). In Japan, for example, one-third of the workforce is in temporary and irregular work, while in South Korea it is more than half. In the U.S., more than thirty million people were working part-time in 2009 (after the crisis). Standing estimates that in many countries a quarter of the adult population is in the precariat.[102]

In Britain, the home of the labor aristocracy, low pay is the new normal. A third of the working population, 19 million people, live below the minimum wage. Working poverty is widespread, with more than half of poor households having someone in paid work. In more than one million households, at least one parent works on both Saturday and Sunday.[103]

In the European Union, 17 percent of the population lived below the poverty line before the 2008 crisis (although there are large differences between countries). In the United States, the rate was about the same, with one in six people living in poverty. The poverty rate for children was slightly higher, at about one in five in both the EU and the U.S. More specifically, 550,000 people (one-fifth of them children) sleep on the streets every night in the U.S. More than 40 million people

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100 Milanovic, op. cit., p. 26, 31; Zweig, op. cit., p. 98. In fact, this is the general picture of the central countries. Indeed, Piketty's work also reveals the depth of inequalities. For example, in France in 2010-2011, the richest 10 percent received 62 percent of the total wealth, while the poorest 50 percent received only 4 percent. In the same years in the U.S., the top one-tenth of the richest 10 percent owned 72 percent of the total wealth, while the bottom 50 percent owned only 2 percent. See Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, translated by Arthur Goldhammer, Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014, p. 257-8.

101 Piketty, op. cit., p. 262, 336-7, 346.

102 Standing, op. cit., p. 15, 24-5, 35-6.

103 Claire Ainsley, *The New Working Class: How to Win Hearts, Minds and Votes*, Bristol: Policy Press, 2018, p. 16, 57, 93, 160.

face hunger, with one in nine relying on food stamps.[104]

One can give many examples of the fact that a significant part of the population in the imperialist countries does not really live in good conditions. But it is the comparative perspective that gives the most important insight. A temporal comparison shows that today, compared to forty years ago, inequalities have increased and workers have suffered real losses in income and rights. A geographical comparison, on the other hand, shows that the gap between workers in the center and those in the underdeveloped countries has narrowed slightly, but still exists.

A very large portion of the lower strata of the proletariat consists of migrants and women. Migrants (in the form of internal or external migration) are perhaps the most important group in the history of working-class movements. For example, many of the workers who fought so hard in Turkey in the 1960s and 70s were actually first-generation industrial workers who migrated from rural to urban areas. More generally, in many cases the first- or second-generation migrants rely on solidarity networks (fellow countrymen, kinship, neighborhood ties, various communities, and etc.) in their actions, and carry the class struggle forward.[105]

In *Capital*, Marx talks about the tendency of capitalist development to create a surplus population and to send this surplus population to colonial countries.[106] In the second half of the 19th century, one-sixth of Europe's population of 400 million (70 million people) emigrated, half of them to the United States. The U.S., however, halted the flow of emigrants around 1920 over the objections of labor unions, particularly the AFL. However, the "new immigrants" (Italians, Jews and Slavs) who had come to the U.S. since the 1890s, and their children, became the bearers of the radicalism of the 1930s and 40s. A significant proportion of factory workers at that time were first- and second-generation immigrants.[107]

As John Smith aptly observed, capital seeks to increase its rate of profit by attracting immigrants to its own location, or alternatively, it can itself migrate abroad.[108] In short, there are different ways of combining production with cheap labor.

After the Second World War, the expansion of capitalist production has been accompanied again by large migratory flows. During this period, millions of workers moved from neighboring countries (Italy, Spain, Portugal, Turkey, and Yugoslavia) to Western European countries. New migrants from the countryside in countries such as Italy and Japan, and women drawn into the production process in the United States, also provided the huge reserves of labor needed by industry. In many countries, these internal and external migrations played an important role in the new wave of labor

104 Wahl, op. cit., p. 99; Gilbert, op. cit., p. 138, 291, 299; Standing, op. cit., p. 46-7.

105 Silver, op. cit., p. 45-6.

106 "By constantly making a part of the hands 'supernumerary', modern industry, in all countries where it has taken root, gives a spur to emigration and to the colonisation of foreign lands", *Capital* I, p. 454.

107 Smith, op. cit., p. 108; Davis, op. cit., p. 55, 57; Gilbert, op. cit., p. 65, 68.

108 Smith, op. cit., p. 188.

protests in the late 1960s.[109]

Since the 1970s, and especially since the 1990s, the United States has again attracted a large influx of new immigrants (mainly from Mexico and Latin America). Today, about one-fifth of the U.S. workforce (28 million people) was born abroad, of which about eight million are immigrants and 30 percent are illegal. The proportion of whites, who make up about three-fifths of the population, is steadily declining. Blacks and Hispanics generally occupy what can be called the "lower strata" of the working class. In Germany, another core country, one-fifth of the population (16 million people) is of immigrant origin, and in the United Kingdom one in ten people is an immigrant, with two million immigrants arriving in the first decade of the 21st century. But migration is not confined to the core countries. Indeed, in a late-industrializing country like Turkey, both internal migration (the new wave of rural-urban migration since the 1990s) and migrant labor have reached significant levels in the last decade. Both processes play a crucial role in the spread of cheap labor. Similarly, the manufacturing industries of countries like China, Indonesia and India employ hundreds of millions of people forced to migrate from the countryside (one-fifth of China's industrial proletariat of one billion people).[110]

In today's world, the lower strata of the proletariat include women as well as migrants (the incorporation of women into production can also be seen as a form of internal migration). In Japan and South Korea, for example, more than half of women and less than one-fifth of men (one-third in South Korea) are precariously employed. In Japan, nearly half of female workers earn less than the minimum wage. Globally, women are paid between two-thirds and four-fifths of what men are paid for the same work. These ratios are even lower for temporary or part-time work. However, women are also more likely to be employed in the public sector. Teaching, nursing and social work stand out as the public sectors with the highest concentration of female workers.[111]

Conclusions

There is no doubt that the masses of workers in the core countries, however relatively poor they may be in their own countries, are much better off than the masses of workers in the Third World, even with the crumbs of social welfare that are left to them. In this sense, they are part of the labor aristocracy. However, to the extent that the struggle is not directly between the "world working class" and the "world bourgeoisie", in other words, to the extent that it takes the form of a class struggle within national borders, it is necessary to look at the internal class relations and dynamics of each country. The organization of unprivileged workers in the core countries, which Engels once emphasized, is perhaps the most important issue in this context. In this regard, second-generation immigrants, especially those in unskilled jobs, are candidates to play an important role in the socialist struggle. If

109 Silver, op. cit., p. 51-2.

110 Standing, op. cit. p. 91, 106; Gilbert, op. cit. p. 270; Zweig, op. cit. p. 52, 116; Ainsley, op. cit. p. 119.

111 Standing, op. cit., p. 61-3; Gilbert, op. cit., p. 82-3.

the international organization of the working class complements such a process, it is possible to mobilize in the socialist direction or at least neutralize some components of the labor aristocracy in the imperialist countries.

One of the main features of contemporary capitalism is that democracy, even minimally defined as voting every few years, is now weakened and in retreat. One hundred and seventy years ago, the main demand of the Chartist movement was universal suffrage. The British bourgeoisie initially reacted strongly to this, but over time it adopted a different strategy and turned to integrating the working class into the system. At the turn of the 20th century, the integration of trade unions and social democracy into the capitalist political order began in the context of social policy; this process gained further momentum in the form of the so-called "welfare state" after the Second World War. All of these developments represented both important gains for the working class and a growing detachment of the movement from its ultimate goals.

In the neoliberal era, however, we have seen these gains erode day by day. At this point, a significant portion of the working class, who gave their lives for the right to vote one hundred and seventy years ago, no longer bother to vote in elections that they consider meaningless. In fact, the very event called "elections" has become a mechanism for the negation of democracy. For example, in the 2016 U.S. election, which Trump won, 40 percent of all campaign contributions came from the top 1 percent of the top 1 percent (one ten-thousandth of the population).[112]

Today it is vital that the working class, which is the overwhelming majority of the world's population, develop a new political perspective, and to do this it must first begin to think in class terms. Liberals, conservatives and Third Worlders all insist on referring to the working class in the core countries as the "middle class". But workers have no problem thinking of themselves as workers.[113] This tendency must be strengthened.

The weakness of the organizations, which play a fundamental role in the development of class consciousness, is a clear phenomenon in today's conditions. But there are signs that the situation is beginning to reverse, especially in the newly industrialized countries. Generally speaking, in the imperialist countries, unionization rates have fallen to such an extent that even being unionized can be considered a privilege. In fact, unionized workers form the most important part of the labor aristocracy. Among them, the industrial proletariat has declined in the last sixty years or so, while public sector workers have become more prominent. The classic skilled, unionized, aristocratic section of industrial workers has been considerably weakened in the neoliberal period. In short, the traditional section of the labor aristocracy has lost power in recent times, but new aristocratic elements have emerged.

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112 Standing, op. cit. p. 147-8; Milanovic, op. cit. p. 57.

113 In a *Fortune* magazine survey in 1940, most respondents identified themselves as "middle" class when given three options (upper, middle, lower), but answered "working class" to an open-ended question. Similar polls were conducted in 1996 (*New York Times*) and again in 2016. In short, even in a country like the United States, where the ideology of the "middle class" is pumped from morning to night, most workers see themselves as part of the "working class". Zweig, op. cit., p. 82; Gilbert, op. cit., p. 260-261.

The central question of the world revolution is still to win the proletariat of the core countries to the revolutionary struggle. The reformism of the labor aristocracy and labor bureaucracies has of course developed and taken root over the last hundred years. However, the class transformations in the neoliberal period (the extraordinary expansion of the lower layers, the loss of some privileges of the upper layers, etc.) show that some progress can be made in this sphere. For example, precarious workers are looking for non-union organizations. It is very important to link these new forms to the political movement. On the other hand, social democracy, which used to be the main rival of revolutionary politics, has largely left the field in the last thirty years. In the coming period, a larger part of the working class, especially the newly proletarianized lower layers, will turn to communism than before, but a significant part will also turn to racist-fascist movements. The turn of the masses to fascism in the core countries is a real threat, especially in the context of the post-2008 economic depression. In both the U.S. and Europe, racist-fascist formations are gaining strength on the basis of anti-immigrant sentiment.

It is certain that the labor aristocracy will not join the revolutionary movement as a whole. In fact, it is not very surprising that some of the most advanced and organized sections of a mass class movement can side with counterrevolution in "revolutionary" periods. Therefore, we should not have the illusionary expectation of uniting the whole class. However, the revolutionary movement does not have the luxury of excluding any section of the workers (unless they openly mobilize against it). After the Cuban Revolution, for example, about two-thirds of the engineers, physicians, accountants, etc. went abroad, but another third chose to stay and serve the revolution. The labor aristocracy can be partially won over to the cause of socialism, or at least neutralized.

Again, the organization of the "lower layer" is crucial. This substratum is large, disorganized, divided into a thousand pieces, underdeveloped in class consciousness. But it is also, almost "instinctively", the main element of the revolution. How this section can be organized today, of course, requires a more sophisticated, concrete analysis.

After forty years of neoliberal destruction, under the new conditions of the Great Depression since 2008, the working class is slowly waking up. It goes without saying that socialists have a big duty in the given conjuncture. At the same time, it is worth remembering that for a revolution to take place, the masses do not need to experience a tremendous ideological enlightenment; on the contrary, the revolution itself advances the consciousness of the masses. The masses in general, and the workers in particular, learn through practical action. Ideological prejudices, individualistic attitudes, and racist-sexist-religious illusions can be overcome through action. More precisely, they can only be overcome through collective, practical action. A hundred years ago there was racism, conservatism, and sexist prejudice among the masses who made the revolution in Russia. They were also among the masses who made the Chinese and Cuban revolutions. What is really important is that the masses are organized, that the leading elements in these organizations do not give in to racist, sexist, etc. tendencies, and that they define a truly revolutionary line and mobilize the energy of the masses along that line.