

WHITE

COLLAR

A Myth Destroyed

A Class Made Stronger

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'WHITE COLLAR'

A MYTH DESTROYED

A CLASS MADE STRONGER

Published by

the Communist Party of Britain (Marxist-Leninist)

PREFACE

As members of the working class, white-collar workers are part of the most progressive force in history. This class, armed with its own ideology and Party, its vision of a new society without the ravages of capitalism, is destined to destroy the system of exploitation which created it. It is the task of our Party to enhance the ideological understanding, to work for the conscious unity of this class; to bring the class and the Party born from it to the strength and maturity necessary for the final conquest of state power.

In Britain, all the struggles currently being waged by both industrial and non-industrial workers are assuming enormous political significance as the ruling class imposes Corporate State measures to reduce our standards of living. It is no time for us to stumble or to waver. Each day makes it ever more imperative that these struggles be fired with the clarity and insight which comes from, and only from, the line of the Party - a strategy based on an understanding of the real balance of forces in our society and the protracted nature of the struggle between them; a programme for action derived from the concrete practice of our class in day-to-day conflict with the bourgeoisie.

If progress is to be made, therefore, it is time to dispense once and for all with all ideas which force a wedge between one worker and another, which attempt to obscure the basis for our unity. It is clearer today than ever before that for the white-collar worker the class struggle is no spectator sport. No longer can we merely watch the distant gladiators in daily battles against unemployment and a plummeting standard of living, against the degradation of our skills and the destruction of the resources of our country. In the working class there are ultimately no privileged sections. We are all in the arena.

1973 has seen the stirring of dormant forces in class struggle in Britain. Throughout the country the actions of white-collar workers give the lie to those who see them as the last hope of the ruling class. Our fellow workers in professional, administrative and clerical sectors, in hospitals and schools, shops, industry and the civil service - many with little or no history of struggle - have engaged in actions of great courage and fortitude, often against almost impossible odds. For many it has been a question not merely of taking on an individual employer, but of facing the State. While elsewhere, other white-collar workers are organising at a rate faster than ever before - recognition that in the end there is no alternative but to unite and to learn from the collective experience of our class.

THE MYTH OF THE MIDDLE CLASS

The lines of struggle are drawn between the two classes of modern society. Yet at the same time it is still argued by some that there is a middle class in Britain - not just a handful of shopkeepers standing between the workers and the bourgeoisie, but a class strong enough to be a significant political force.

All such ideas, whatever their form, have one thing in common: they deny the class position and hence the revolutionary potential of white-collar workers.

This 'middle class' is seen as a 'privileged' sector which has been detached from the working class - 'bribed', either with the crumbs of imperialism or with some other dispensation from capitalism. It includes white-collar and professional workers in general, teachers, students, 'intellectuals', union officials, foremen, etc. etc. Since this list is subjective in origin, it can be extended ad nauseam. All, being 'petit bourgeois', are apparently more or less beyond redemption.

As long ago as 1854, Marx wrote:

"There exist here no longer, as in continental countries, large classes of peasants and artisans almost wholly dependent on their own property and their own labour. A complete divorce of property from labour has been effected in Great Britain. In no other country, therefore, has the war between the two classes that constitute modern society assumed such colossal dimensions and features so distinct and palpable."

(Writing in 'The People's Paper')

No new classes have emerged in Britain since that time.

In Britain, capitalist relations in agriculture preceded those in industry. Nevertheless, the manufacturers (property owners distinct from, and who stood in opposition to, the land-owning interest) were indeed a middle class: but a class whose political advance was to break down the old tripartite division of society which emerged from feudalism,

and simplify the class antagonisms: on the one hand, they absorbed their upper-class rivals, and on the other they destroyed the small owners and craftsmen, dependent as these were on obsolescent, small-scale methods of production.

Today, the term 'middle class' is an anachronism. As more capital is concentrated in fewer hands, an increasing proportion of the population is reduced to selling its labour power in order to live. The capitalist class, ever dwindling in numbers, now stands in opposition to the vast majority of the people, the mass of wage workers. It is an irreconcilable antagonism.

THE CHANGING COMPOSITION OF THE WORKING CLASS

"The Bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them, the whole relations of society."

(Manifesto of the Communist Party)

Nevertheless, this relation between the capitalist and the working classes is sometimes confused with the division of labour within our class.

Two aspects of the development of capitalism in Britain have brought about an important change in the composition of the working class - its changing industrial base and an extension of the functions of the State. The collapse of Victorian industry and the rise of technologically newer ones brought about not only a new industrial geography, but also, as a result of technological innovation and the increasingly large scale of production, profound changes in the pattern of skills required. (Witness the

decline of traditional industries such as cotton goods, ship-building and coalmining, as against the growth of chemicals, vehicles and electrical goods.) The demand of capital was now for growing numbers of administrative, clerical and technical personnel.

In the 19th Century, the non-manual workers were few in number and doubtless largely recruited from the bourgeois strata of society. This was, for a time, still possible. The separation between 'staff' and 'hands' was then very great - though not as great as the divisions between skilled and unskilled in the workshop. But technology, which is, after all, a product of the workers, is a great revolutionary force. The growth of the non-industrial section of the working class between 1911 and 1966 was 176 per cent, whereas the corresponding advance of the industrial sector was merely 5 per cent. Today the non-industrial sector comprise some 10 million workers out of a total of 25 million. Within ten years they will be 50 per cent of the work force. (Note that women make up nearly 46 per cent of this sector compared with 36 per cent of the total labour force.)

a) Education and the Division of Labour

The bourgeoisie was compelled to educate. Meagre as they are, the provisions of successive Education Acts represent the achievements of a century long battle by our class. Nonetheless, in giving ground before these demands, the bourgeoisie did no more than recognise its own social and economic necessity. In this way it hoped to ensure a more flexible workforce, exploitable in the face of any change in production. If son follows his father's trade to-

day it is no longer purely as a matter of course: the division of labour is more broadly based than in 1873 or even 1933. The rigid distinction between mental and manual labour no longer applies to the literate, highly skilled British working class.

"The bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honoured and looked up to with reverent awe. It has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage-labourers."

(Manifesto of the Communist Party)

Science, for example, is no longer the activity of amateur gentlemen, but of vast armies of men and women 'who live only so long as they find work and who find work only so long as their labour increases capital'. Again, the idea of the professional worker, i. e. the "self-employed" doctor or architect, has largely lost its old meaning. This became inevitable once the system of individual payment for education was broken down, and broken down it was as soon as it became a fetter upon the growth of capital, as soon as the old division of labour became incompatible with the requirements of industry.

b) Mental and Physical Labour

It is, of course, a truism that all types of labour require both physical and mental effort. Yet the antithesis between the two was once clearly defined because it was a class distinction - it rested on the exploitation by the latter of the former, in other words upon a social relationship rather than any essential distinction between two forms of labour. The conquest of state power by the bourgeoisie marked the

beginning of the end for such social divisions, being valid only so long as learning is the preserve of the few and is denied to the mass of labouring people.

It is often naively assumed that all office and professional workers are 'intellectuals', whilst those that work in factories are not. This is blatantly false: on the one hand it casts a slur on many a factory worker whose skills and training are superior to those of many office workers; on the other hand the factory system has moved into the office. The bulk of office work is now organised around machines of one form or another - from typewriters to computers - and as a result new skills replace older ones and new patterns of organisation are imposed upon the workers. As the scale of production grows (and a large office may have a hundred or more workers) the general effect is greater centralisation and a more standardised, more impersonal work environment. The natural corollary is that the more workers are concentrated in larger units, the more aware they become of their collective strength and the greater their need to exercise it in their own defence.

c) Exploitation and Productivity

Some say that the non-manual worker is a non-exploited worker, implying usually that he is somehow parasitic: a partner in plunder with the capitalist, living off the surplus produced by the manual workers presumably? This is every bit as facile as the idea that owning one's own house makes one bourgeois. The ruling class is not (and could not afford to be) choosy about whom it exploits; quite adequate profits are made by companies employing only white-

collar workers - not as 'petit-bourgeois intellectuals', but as instruments of labour in the service of capital.

Today there is not a single occupation that may not serve as a source of profit, for it is the essence of wage labour that the worker sells not the value created by his own effort, but the ability to create that value for someone else. And he sells it at cost price - the cost of its maintenance and reproduction. But the daily cost of labour and the daily output of labouring power are two very different things. Ownership of the means of production empowers the employer to extract from the workers unpaid-for labour time. There are no exceptions. All workers are exploited. Wage labour, like any commodity, is saleable only in so far as it satisfies a social need - the demands of capital. Transport workers, for example, are required because even Mr Ford's products are incapable of finding their own way to market. Clerks, telephonists, technicians, administrative staff in general, are employed because capitalism cannot do without them. As soon as they become dispensable, they become unemployed. The more varied the relationship of the individual worker to the collective product, the more remote a part he or she may seem to play. nevertheless all their contributions are required for the final product, all are directly involved, all, being socially necessary, are productive.

Productivity in a bourgeois economy means only one thing - the growth of capital. Any commodity, tangible or not, may serve as a convenient vehicle. Capitalism is not particular what it turns out in the way of merchandise, computers, aircraft, motors, fuel ships or candyfloss.... the common denominator is profit. Of course, there are many workers who seem unproductive because their product is apparently never brought to market. But this is not a question of job content and is true of manual and non-manual

alike. Besides, we should understand this issue in terms of the requirements of capital in its general aspect, of the class of employers rather than the needs of a particular employer and a particular capital. All workers are employed solely on the basis that, directly or indirectly, they increase the productivity power of capital as a whole. Doctors and teachers are good examples: their 'products' are educated and healthy workers, capable of providing bigger and better profits.

INTO STRUGGLE

There is an uneven development of political consciousness throughout our class: in both industrial and non-industrial areas there are sections whose clear understanding, whose tactical skill and ingenuity in struggle is shown daily: there are others who are slow to organise, or who, once organised, simply pay their dues and sit back waiting for some distant person at Head Office to produce results: for whom struggle at the local level is still new and frightening.

Within the white-collar sector, these differences are no less marked. Yet what we are seeing over the sector as a whole, particularly vividly in the early months of 1973, is a catching up operation by a relatively passive section of our class. It is an evening out of consciousness, as lessons learnt through many years of struggle by our fellow industrial workers are painfully relearnt, and as we begin to apply them to the specific conditions of our own workplaces.

This development is full of potential, characterised by great reserves of untapped energy, tenacity and determination. Yet it must be neither over- nor underestimated. We

are new combatants, relatively lacking in class practice. We must ensure that every movement is a forward movement to clearer understanding and greater strength. We must not simply ride the current when it comes, and founder on the rocks of demoralisation and defeat. The enthusiasm of fresh troops is a quality not to be squandered in futile and pointless sacrifices.

For many of us entering the battlefield means the first faltering steps towards the formation of a union; for others, a difficult struggle for recognition. At the other end of the scale, teachers, civil servants and hospital workers have had to undertake massive confrontations over pay and conditions. For them the issue is very clear: no longer a question of whether to fight or not, but of when and where.

In all areas the issues around which we are fighting find some parallel in other sections of our class: redundancies and bad pay, deskilling, rationalisation and the preservation of grading, inadequate resources with which to do our work, understaffing and high overtime, health and safety. Recent surveys show that the wages of non-industrial workers lag far behind those operating in industry - a measure of the reluctance until recently in our sector to fight to maintain and improve conditions. As a recruitment poster in the United States says, 'You can't eat air conditioning'. Women workers remain at only 80 per cent, on average, of the male rate. Again, teachers and hospital workers have found that if you wish to serve people, under capitalism this will lead only to your dedication being exploited.

The specific conditions which characterise our areas of work differ widely between large and small firms, large

and small offices within them, between hospitals and schools, between the gigantic bureaucracy of the civil service and the relative informality of the firm where your boss may sit in the same room with you, be on first name terms and relatively accessible to individual approach. In some cases the person with the practical hiring and firing powers is a worker by all objective standards, a member of the union, but without the consciousness of a worker; in others, such hurdles are rapidly swept away in the process of struggle and a clear understanding emerges. There are aspects, some peculiar to our areas of work, which can hamper the development of struggle - for example, isolation from fellow workers so that the contact and exchange of opinions which even precedes the formation of union branches is very difficult to achieve. And nowhere more clearly than in our sector has the membership of a trade union been an excuse not to struggle, placing reliance on national agreements and the outward show of bureaucracy. Self deceptions, elusive prospects of advance through promotion or changing one's job, remain. The organisation of a union can be hampered by an attitude of mind which maintains secrecy over pay and is unwilling to turn to a collective approach rather than the well-entrenched habit of individual requests.

Nevertheless, while such problems may affect the pace of development, the trend is clear. Struggles for union recognition abound throughout the country, from journalists to women cleaners. There are examples where the winning of basic demands by white collar workers has led to organisation of the manual workers of the same firm. In struggle, divisions along all dimensions break down. Printers support white collar publishing staff in struggle, and vice versa. Students and the catering staff of their university struggle

side by side. In national protests against government policy, white collar and industrial unions march together.

For some, the unwillingness to struggle that remains results from a belief that they have no real economic power – they cannot bring the machines to a halt and cost the employer millions overnight. But everywhere, successful struggles, sometimes involving only four or five people, are proving that even without obvious economic power, if you have the political consciousness, you will find a way. There is no sector that capitalism does not need.

THE WAY FORWARD

There are only two classes in Britain. If further proof is needed, tomorrow will furnish it. Workers, be they 'white' or 'blue' collar, because they are workers and cannot survive except by selling their labouring power, because the governing class must attack us in order to ensure its own continuation, must and will come to understand this.

But have we sufficient humility to learn from the more advanced sections, or must we strive to rediscover the wheel? In particular, can we learn the most important lesson of all: that the struggle to live with capitalism is the struggle of the perpetually beleaguered, and that in order to break the siege, we must be armed with the theory that does not assume its eternal perpetuation; in a word, with Marxism-Leninism.

The task that lies before us all is to build the confidence and the understanding, the political clarity which comes only through struggle, that will enable the class to take on and defeat not only the individual employer, but the class of employers. This will tax our ingenuity – but in so far as we are employed, capitalism has a need for us, and this is the

crucial point. New ways, new forms of fighting relevant to our areas of work will have to be found. Even if, for the present, the opposition is strategically overwhelming, once the possibilities are grasped and the terrain understood, we may take and hold the initiative tactically.

It will require courage and perseverance, and if for the moment our section is weak, we must be the more careful for that. The struggle must take on its economic clothing before the political content becomes clear. No issue is so petty that organisational and ideological gains cannot be made: every such gain, however small, is an advance for our class.

"Guerrilla action is essential to the winning of a struggle, to prevent demoralisation and setback, and is, in effect, the only course, the only strategy open to us. There is no other way at this time because of all the forces arraigned against us. It becomes imperative to grasp this and to act now. For us, the workers, it is not a tactical question, it is an ideological one, not simply a question of how to win tomorrow's battle, but of how to win the war."

(Guerrilla Struggle and the Working Class)

Once and for all we must dispense with damaging leftist sneers that our section is too backward.

"Today it is transparently clear that the whole working class is the embryo army, the only army for revolution, with a tremendous capacity to beat the enemy when and where he is weak, withdraw when he is strong, and to harry him when he pursues - supreme tactics of active defence. The source of knowledge is in the previous struggles of our class, and, most important, the experience in struggle of all workers today."

(Guerrilla Struggle and the Working Class)

If, therefore, we Marxist-Leninists work correctly, gathering round us what support we may (remembering that support will grow as clarity emerges) and avoiding all snares and pitfalls - then in future battles with the ruling class - be they in office, laboratory, wherever - we may say with justice: where we are, there the class is that bit stronger and more resolute !

'The Worker'

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