The British working class today

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Why is the tide of opinion set against Labour at the present time? The survey suggests three main reasons. The first is that Labour is thought of predominantly as a class party and that the class which it represents is?objectively and subjectively?on the wane.?1

The survey in question is not a recent Marxism Today or New Socialist one. The author of the above remark was Rita Hinden, a Fabian socialist, and it is contained in the book Must Labour Lose? published in 1960 a year after the Labour Party?s third successive general election defeat.

Today another third election defeat in a row is accompanied by similar obituaries for the working class. The bankruptcy of Labourite reformist policies in and out of office is blithely ignored and the problem neatly off-loaded onto the apparently narrowing shoulders of the British working class. Writers such as Hobsbawm, Hall and others have abandoned a Marxist theory of class and have instead developed an obsession with reading the entrails of opinion polls and demographic surveys. They argue that these show that the working class, such as it remains, has become hopelessly ideologically incorporated into the cultural and political priorities of the ruling class and that its material underpinnings are the rewards, to those in work, of ?popular capitalism?. In essence this is little more than the ?embourgeoisment thesis? of the 1950s dressed up in pseudo-Marxist garb.

Of course, in the early 1960s it was ?prosperity? that was used to explain the changing shape of class society. But a simple return to the ?prosperity? argument of the Crossland wing of the Labour Party of the 1960s would hardly be self-sufficient in the very different circumstances of the 1980s. If ?popular capitalism? has eroded the working class from above then ?de-industrialisation? has eroded it from below. For Hall et al the relative decline of the traditional proletariat in industry has permanently removed the industrial working class as an agent of socialist transformation. It is the purpose of this article to show that this scenario is profoundly flawed, to rescue the Marxist theory of class and to locate the objective basis for revolutionary socialism in the working class.

However, we must not be blind to changes in the structure of the working class and their potential consequences. We need an analysis of the objective state of the working class under its current leadership. The bosses have set out purposively to alter the structure of the working class to their own advantage. Increased differentials, flexible working, part-time and temporary employment are all part and parcel of a drive to atomise the working class and break its collective strength. The growth and stratification within the reserve army of labour, the rise of self-employment, and the changing geography of manufacturing and service employment have to some extent eroded the concentration, homogeneity and traditions of the working class. In addition the continued existence of a labour aristocracy is both an important factor in explaining the ability of Thatcher to get the Tories re-elected and the growth within the labour movement of ?new realism? and ?business unionism?. The political and trade union defeats suffered under Thatcher have served to embolden the bosses and the Tories to push through policies
which have reinforced these weaknesses. In and of themselves they present objective problems for the revolutionary left to overcome in the process of leading the British working class to power.

**Marxist theory of class**

It is impossible to find one’s way through the maze of official statistics on occupational categories to arrive at a clear picture of the British working class in the late eighties without first of all orienting oneself with a Marxist understanding of classes under capitalism.

Marx nowhere wrote a systematic account of the nature of the contending classes but is possible to derive a theory from the work of Marx and Engels and, just as importantly, defend it from its twentieth century bourgeois and social democratic critics. Marx, as he himself acknowledged, did not discover the existence of classes or that they struggled against each other. What he did do was to give a scientific explanation of classes and to point to the historic outcome of the class struggle.

There were several elements to this explanation. First, the secret to the understanding of classes lies in the production of the material necessities of life. Different classes stand in different relationships to the ownership and control of the means of production and to the products of labour. In turn this implies that the very notion of class for a Marxist denotes a relationship. One class only has meaning in so far as it finds itself opposed to another, antagonistic class: slave and master, serf and lord, capitalist and wage labourer.

Secondly, the basis of this antagonism is a struggle over the nature and scope of exploitation by one class of the labour of another. Under capitalism the wage labourer is exploited by virtue of the fact that his/her labouring produces more value than it itself contains, the so-called ?secret of the commodity labour power?. This surplus value is the property of the capitalist by virtue of his/her ownership of the worker’s capacity to labour. Unlike the slave in ancient society this ownership is for a fixed duration only and the labourer ?freely? sells the labour power on a regular periodic basis.

Thirdly, for a social group to be a class in the proper sense of the term it has to have a necessary and functional role to play in the mode of production; that is, the mode of production could not reproduce itself without the existence of such a class. So for example the bureaucratic layer that rules over the working class in the USSR in the latter’s name is not a class. Capitalism has been abolished in the USSR and progress towards a socialist society is impeded by the existence of this bureaucratic caste which is increasingly dysfunctional to society, parasitic as it is on the surplus labour of the Soviet working class.

Marx himself noted that if we were to call every social group who shared the same level of reward (i.e. incomes) a class then every occupational category (or even sub-division) would constitute one. The fact is that occupation can cut across class boundaries. Being a member of the Registrar General’s social class 1, the ?professions? unites the senior manager of a multi-national corporation with the lowly paid working class nurse.

Finally, Marx’s conception of class does not depend on what people think of themselves, which class they think they belong to or even aspire to be part of. The fact that someone ?works for a living? does not a working class person make if they happens to be Robert Maxwell, for example, or a prostitute who thinks of herself as a ?working girl?. By the same token a skilled engineer is not ?middle-class? just because he or she aspires to be so.

**Attack on class**

The frontal attack on Marx’s theory of class has taken two forms. In the first instance there have been many attempts to refute Marx’s view that capitalist society would become ever more polarised between its
two key component classes. In the Communist Manifesto Marx stated:

“Our epoch, the epoch of the bourgeoisie possesses, however, this distinct feature: it has simplified class antagonisms. Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other: bourgeoisie and proletariat.”

The growth of white-collar employees between the two great camps in the twentieth century is said to have refuted this prognosis. However, the criticism entirely misses the point that Marx and Engels were making. They were writing in 1847. At that time England was the most advanced capitalist society. Yet even there the industrial proletariat had only just emerged as a distinct homogeneous class of exploited out of the patchwork quilt of pre-capitalist classes. In 1851 some 1.8 million were employed in agriculture and over a million in domestic service. Although over seven million workers (a third of the population) worked in industry some three-quarters were employed in workshops not factories with steam-driven machinery. In these workshops 100 workers gathered together was a very large number.

Hence what Marx was referring to was the process by which the old artisan and craft traditions and non-wage labour occupations were giving way rapidly to an industrial proletariat. And as the Communist Manifesto noted:

“The lower strata of the middle class?the small trades people, shopkeepers, and retired tradesmen generally, the handicraftsmen and peasants?all these sink gradually into the proletariat, partly because their diminutive capital does not suffice for the scale on which modern industry is carried on, and is swamped in the competition with large capitalists, partly because their specialised skill is rendered worthless by new methods of production.”

There can be no doubt that this process was the defining feature of class formation in the second half of the nineteenth century in Northern Europe and North America and, as we shall see, it has continued throughout the twentieth century.

The second front of the attack on class began with the observation that Marx had claimed that the deepening and broadening of capitalism would lead to sharper class conflict and the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism and the bourgeoisie by the working class. Such a revolution would also signal the end of class society.

Certain bourgeois commentators (and a strand of intellectuals within the international socialist movement such as the revisionists? in the German Social Democratic Party) claimed by the turn of the century that in fact certain sections of the working class had not fallen ever lower in their material conditions but had improved their lot. The objective basis for a revolutionary proletarian overthrow of capitalism was said to be unproven. As a result there was no necessary connection between class membership and class action or consciousness. In addition there was a growth of non-manual wage labour in the early twentieth century whose role in production, and their style of life? indicated that they did not identify with the manual proletariat.

The implications for the theory of class was that it had to be refined. It was insufficient, claimed bourgeois sociologists such as the German Max Weber, to define class purely in terms of the place of someone in relation to their role in production or the fact that they had nothing to sell but their labour power. Weber’s work is very important since all modern sociological attempts to refute the Marxist theory of class or prove the disappearance of the working class because we are all middle-class now? stem from the work of Weber.
Weber, unlike Marx, defined class not in terms of relations of production but relations of distribution:

We may speak of a ?class? when (1) a number of people having in common a specific causal component of their life chances, in so far as (2) this component is represented exclusively by economic interests in the possession of goods and opportunities for income, and (3) is represented under the conditions of the commodity labour markets.4

Property? for Weber meant possession of goods or skills of which there was an infinite variation. These skills were rewarded differently and this fact was the source of class conflict, and the labour market was the site of this conflict. This was different to Marx who stressed that the fundamental source and nature of class antagonism must be located in the struggle over surplus value production.

The contradiction for Weber?and the flaw in his theory?was that on the one hand he wished to retain the idea that there was an objective (i.e. independent of consciousness) basis to class but at the same time based it in the market and in the fight of distribution of income and wealth. But this last fact robbed the theory of class of any real coherence since no uniformity existed between members of this class. Because of this tension in the end Weber tended to slip back into seeing class in terms of occupation and through this means exclude the ?white-collar? employee from the working class, something the obituary writers on the working class have been doing ever since.

In order to explain the actions of people in the same or different class Weber resorted to the use of the concept ?status?. For him a ??status situation? [is] every typical component of the life fate of men that is determined by a specific, positive or negative, social estimation of honour?.5 Property was only one part of status qualification and in general class and status was only linked in an indirect and complex way. Consciousness and action, including membership of trade unions, voting behaviour etc, was determined largely by subjective perceptions about one?s place in society.

In the years since the Second World War bourgeois sociology and more latterly Eurocommunism have extended the Weberian attacks on Marxism and class theory. Most have retreated further into subjectivist explanations and none have been able to maintain a clear idea of the boundaries between one class and another in capitalist society. Rising incomes, possession of personal consumption goods have not been the determination of class. Predictions for class action (or the lack of it) based on such superficial ideas have proven in the fullness of time to have been undermined by events. The great class battles of the 1970s and 1980s have been fought out in part at least by those who did best out of the post-war boom or who were top of the ?wages league? (e.g. car workers ). The short-sightedness of the Weberian sociologist, who only sees in improved living standards an erosion of class consciousness is nicely illustrated by John Goldthorpe who wrote of the Luton Vauxhall car workers in 1966:

?In spite of the deprivation which their jobs on the line may entail these men will be disposed to maintain their relationship with their firm, and to define this more and more as one of reciprocity and independence than, say, one of coercion and exploitation.?6

Within a month 2,000 workers from this plant stormed management?s offices. At the Longbridge car plant Goldthorpe?s affluent car workers, supposedly with no sense of generalised class identification and sated with material goods, paralysed Birmingham in 1972 in a solidarity strike with the miners.

Only an understanding of class based on the imperatives of production, of the crises wrought by successive waves of capitalist accumulation and re-structuring has proven capable of grasping the significance of the class conflicts in the last two decades. The divisions, the sectionalism and the divided political loyalties of the British working class are to be explained, not with reference to the its
transformation into the middle class, but by grasping the way in which capitalism stratifies the working class between and within industry and the office.

The working class

In a Preface to the 1888 edition of the Communist Manifesto Engels referred to "the class of modern wage labourers who, having no means of production of their own, are reduced to selling their labour power in order to live." This basic definition of the working class was shared by Marx and informs his work from the Communist Manifesto through to the three volumes of Capital. It is an indispensable starting point, rooting the nature of the class in production relations and not in other criteria such as the level of incomes. Ernest Mandel points out that this definition encompasses the "reserve army of labour?, that is the unemployed wage labourers, who are under the same compulsion but who are unable to find a buyer for their labour power.8

This would obviously exclude the capitalist class itself which one recent study suggests that in the UK amounts to a little more than 0.1% of the total population, perhaps 20,000-50,000 people. A still smaller circle concentrated in the City of London wields real power over investment of the mass of capital. These could number little more than 2,000 individuals; those in charge of the institutions which control the bulk all stock in private sector enterprise. Even when we draw the circle a little wider to include all those in the 1% of the population who own some 80% of all quoted stock together with their families, it still would not number above 600,000.9 It would also exclude the layer of top managers and administrators who in transnational co-orporations such as ICI and GEC can earn incomes in excess of £250,000. They form a ?strata? whose salary levels permit accumulation of capital in addition to a ?normal? standard of living?10 whether or not such accumulation actually takes place.

Clearly, salaried workers from this to a considerably lower range, (even as little as a tenth of this which is the average for senior managers) are receiving more than the value of their labour power (i.e. the value of the commodities necessary for the reproduction of that labour power) and in this sense are not subject to exploitation of either surplus value or surplus labour. On the contrary, they receive a portion of the surplus value or labour extracted from others. Salaries of this level in recent years have not only permitted the purchasing of considerable entitlements to a portion of the surplus value produced by the working class at large (in the form of shares of their own and other companies) but have contributed to the phenomenon of the ?managerial buy-out? of ailing companies.

Thus a more precise definition of the working class must include the element of exploitation, of the extraction of either surplus value or surplus labour from this class. This is important because it confirms that it is not only those who produce surplus value (i.e. productive workers) who are part of the proletariat but also those wage labourers who are unproductive.

Productive workers

It is uncontentious that the manual ?blue-collar? worker of manufacturing industry is a productive worker, directly and personally transforming raw materials under the direction of capital into a use-value for profitable exchange. But is often forgotten that Marx did not confine his notion of productive worker to those who cleaned their hands with swarfega at the end of the day. In the first volume of Capital Marx explains how the progressive development of the capitalist mode of production involves the change from a ?formal? to a ?real? domination of labour by capital. By this he meant that in early capitalism the skilled or artisan worker, working in the workshop rather than a factory with a primitive form of division of labour still exercised considerable control over the labour process if not the product of his or her labour; the worker not the machine determined the pace and intensity of work for example. But with de-skilling, with
machinofacture? and an ever more extensive division of labour that comes with the complexity of planning and design of operations before production Marx notes that we witness:

. . . the progressive extension of the concept of productive labour and of the concept of the bearer of that labour, the productive worker. In order to work productively it is no longer necessary for the individual himself to put his hand to the object, it is sufficient for him to be an organ of the collective labourer and to perform any of its subordinate functions.11

Marx explains who can be considered part of this group:

Some work better with their hands, others with their heads, one as a manager, engineer, technologist etc, the other as overseer, the third as a manual labourer or even drudge. An ever increasing number of types of labour are included in the immediate concept of productive labourer and those who perform it are classed as productive workers, workers directly exploited by capital and subordinated to its process of production and expansion.12

One example of such productive workers would undoubtedly include draughts men and lower-grade technicians in the engineering industry. Journalists working on newspapers may be similarly considered.

The growth of monopoly capitalism has, without question, undertaken a massive expansion in the demand for technical labour as capital has sought to maximise productivity at the same time as the detailed division of labour has become more complex and atomised. Investment in research and development has lagged behind in Britain when compared to its imperialist rivals. Nonetheless there has been a consistent (if recently declining) expansion in the numbers of scientific production workers. They are far from divorced from the shop-floor. Many are directly productive. Even this does not exhaust the category of productive worker for Marx. Those engaged in the transportation and storage of commodities to their point of sale also add to the value of a commodity and are to be considered as productive workers. 13

Proletarian white-collar workers

Marx himself was conscious of the growth of a class of unproductive white-collar workers in the second half of the nineteenth century. As capitalism expanded, more and more workers were needed in the sphere of realisation as well as production. Clerks grew in number and Marx considered them part of the working class:

The commercial worker produced no surplus value directly . . . but adds to the capitalist?s income by helping him reduce the cost of realising surplus value, in as much as he performs partly unpaid labour. The commercial worker in the strict sense of the term, belongs to the better paid class of wage workers?to those whose labour is classed as skilled and stands above average labour.14

As capitalist accumulation proceeds there is a general law that a greater mass of surplus value is produced by expelling ever greater numbers from the labour process. It is further true that a greater and greater number of workers are employed in occupations which involve the realisation of surplus value produced elsewhere. Thus those involved in buying or selling commodities or money, marketing etc, are unproductive for capital as a whole although they are essential to the reproduction of capitalism. They differ from transport workers in that the latter?s labour is essential to the conservation or realisation of the commodity?s use-value and thus adds to that value whereas the former merely help change the form of the exchange value of the commodity (e.g. from a car into £7,000 or vice versa).

These unproductive workers, while they do not produce any new surplus value are exploited in that they produce surplus labour (i.e. over and above that necessary for the reproduction of their labour power as
embodied in their wages). The capitalist who employs them receives a portion of the global surplus value produced elsewhere as his/her profits and has every interest in maximising this by keeping wages of his/her employees to a minimum. Those employed in public administration are also unproductive exchanging their labour against revenue but they too are essential for the reproduction of the system.15

It is generally accepted by most writers working in a Marxist framework that routine clerical and other lower-grade non-manual white-collar workers make up up to three in every five white-collar jobs.16 The Labour Force Survey for Spring 1984 estimated that the numbers in clerical and related jobs (non managerial or professional) amounted to 3.57 million (15% of all jobs) of which 2.28 million were women. Nearly 30% of all female labour was concentrated in these jobs.17

The massive growth in lower clerical jobs this century and especially since the war is due to the growth in commercial work which has become more and more routinised and de-skilled and, as a result, relatively low-paid.18 Richard Hyman has shown19 that after 1950, despite unevenness and a fluctuating trend, there has been a general narrowing of the wages/salary differential which expresses this trend. The top one-third of manual workers earn more than the bottom half of non-manual workers and the top 50% of manual earn more than the lowest third of the non-manual group.

The average for the whole group (see table 1) is £181.4. If we exclude the supervisors the average is even lower, below the average manual wage of £185.5 a week. It is clear that this section of the working class performs considerable surplus labour, cutting the cost of realisation of surplus value, and has no supervisory or disciplinary role over the labour process.

Nevertheless, important differences continue to exist with the manual working class. There is a lot of evidence that white-collar trade unionism is dominated in numbers and in the nature of the activists by the middle and upper grades of white-collar workers and not by the routine grades. This partly reflects the fact that many of the workers in the lower grades are women who do not intend to stay in employment for life or may change jobs frequently; many may be part-time. Also the career structure of white-collar employment is often such that even the low paid feel that it is something they can endure for a year or two in the knowledge that they will secure steady and regular advance up the ladder. This contrasts with the assembly line worker, for example, who knows that there is little hope of advancement. For all these reasons revolutionaries have to recognise that the stability of employment, the traditions of struggle, as well as the centrality of surplus value producing workers makes the manual working class in general (still about 50% of the workforce), and the manufacturing proletariat in particular the strategically important core of the British working class.

**The shape of the British working class**

With these considerations in mind we are able to turn to the question of the size of the working class. Mandel cites favourably some figures which suggest that the size of the working class including the unemployed in the United Kingdom in 1974 was as large as 92.3% of the economically active population, having grown from 88.1% in the 1930s.

This is undoubtedly too high, passing over as it does the real nature of the upper two fifths of the ?managerial and professional? class in government statistics. If we exclude the lower supervisory employee upwards from our figure then the manual and non-manual working class amounts to at least 75% of the working population.

Without doubt the three decades of the post-war boom witnessed an absolute growth in the working class. But as Table 2 shows the size of the employee population has shrunk over the last ten years. This is
largely accounted for by the increased number of unemployed and self-employed. In fact the total number of employees fell as low as 20.56 million in the summer of 1983. Since then the growth in employment has been wholly in services.

In gauging the objective strength of the British working class?the ?class-in-itself??as it approaches the 1990s it is not merely the size of the working class that is important. We need to look at what sectors of the economy it is concentrated in and what the implications are for its objective social power, its ability to disrupt the reproduction and of capital, the production and realisation of profits.

It is obvious from the figures that the surplus value producing core of the British working class has shrunk, in particular in manufacturing. The Department of Employment figures show this has been a pronounced tendency since 1966. Against an even broader canvas it can be seen that the decline of the industrial proletariat in Britain has been accompanied after the Second World War by a massive expansion of this class in the semi-colonial countries, first in Latin America (especially Brazil, Mexico and Argentina) and later in south east Asia (especially South Korea, Singapore and Malaysia). United Nations statistics indicate that this process may well have slowed down significantly with the onset of the 1979-82 recession and even begun to reverse. Between 1976 and 1983 the size of the industrial proletariat in the 35 main capitalist industrial countries of the world fell from 91 million to 89 million.20 If this is so then it is a testimony to the fact that imperialism is ceasing to be capable of developing the productive forces on a world scale and surplus value producing labour power in the first instance.

In September 1987 the total number of manual operatives in all manufacturing industries in Britain (full-time and part-time) was 3.75 million. Just over a million of these were women. This is out of a total employed labour force of 24.9 million in June 1987. If we add to this about a half of the 895,000 workers in transport who transport goods,21 and some part of the 989,000 who are employed in construction (remembering the large numbers of self-employed in this industry) and the between one quarter and one half of a million scientific and technical workers22 we can rightly consider to be a part of the ?collective worker? in the sense explained by Marx, then we can probably estimate the size of the surplus value producing sector of the working class to be in the region of no more than 4-5 million.

Partly the decline in numbers is a result of the natural general law of the capitalist accumulation process and the growing productivity of labour, whereby the same volume or value of goods and services is produced with a reduced workforce. Chris Harman has tried to make much of this point, arguing that the shrinking size of the industrial working class is not too problematic because with rising productivity of those who remain it means that ?each of them is more important, not less important, than eight years ago? and their collective power that much greater.23

Harman?s view is a little too complacent. He sidesteps the first noticeable fact he draws attention to, namely, that manufacturing output is now just back to 1979 levels and is still way below 1976 levels. The proportion of GDP and profits generated by the British working class from within manufacturing firms located in Britain, as compared to its profits generated abroad or siphoned off from the profits of other capitalist countries for its financial services, has been reduced significantly over the last 15 years. In that sense the social power held directly in the hands of the manufacturing working class has declined.

At the very least we should recognise that the restructuring of the industrial and manufacturing working class ?in itself?, leaving aside its union organisation and militancy, has not been particularly advantageous. New virgin industries, based on technology have not by and large risen on the ashes or reduced foundations of the old ones in the sense in which this could be said to describe the process of the transformation of the working class from the mid-1930s through to the mid-1960s. New technology industries experienced a fall of 27,500 in employment in the four years after 1982 for example.
Industrial production has continued to grow while manufacturing has declined. This implies a greater shift in importance to the non-manufacturing industrial sectors such as energy and water supplies as well as mining. If we assume that the proportion of national income going to profits and wages has remained stable between sectors then clearly the energy and water workers have become proportionately more important.

**Structural weaknesses**

Chris Harman of the British Socialist Workers Party (SWP), in his attempted refutation of the “goodbye to the working class?” thesis is altogether too complacent about the changes in the structure of the working class. It is not disappearing but is being reshaped, goes the argument. Unfortunately, this is only the beginning of wisdom. It begs the question: what is the nature of this re-shaping? Is it strengthening the cohesion and social power of the class or not? In the concluding section of his article, “The Working Class After the Recession?”, Harman states that:

> The history of the the working class is a history of continual change, as the accumulation of capital leads to the growth of new industries and the contraction of others.  

He points out that in 1844 when Engels wrote the Condition of the Working Class in England the class was overwhelmingly one of textile workers. Seventy years later the core of the working class was to be found in the heavy industrial sectors. In the 1930s the centre of gravity was shifting to the car industry and light industry in general. Another shift has occurred in the last decades he observes. But in each period the re-emergence of combativity and class consciousness in different sectors?usually manual in the first instance, have given the lie to those who have written it off.

The problem with this one-sided emphasis on action and consciousness is that it implies that the “reshaping” of the working class is a fundamentally neutral process which leaves its essential overall strength undiminished even if the process of uneven and combined development merely shifts the centre of this strength. The weakness in Harman’s argument is that he abstracts from the question of the nature of the period and even epoch in which this reshaping is taking place. The expansion of capitalism in the nineteenth century or after the Second World War produces different effects to the reshaping in a renewed period of crisis, faltering growth and regular deep recessions.

The growth of mass unemployment, the rise in the proportion of part-time and temporary workers, the diminishing numbers of surplus value producing workers, the renewed growth in small-scale industrial establishments; all these give rise to objective difficulties. We must be aware of what they are. The working class can only become a “class-for-itself” by first grasping the nature of the “class-in-itself”.

Certain features have been strengthened over the last ten years which indicate that it is not just a question that the reshaping of the working class has not been to the advantage of the class. The first and most obvious factor is the growth of unemployment. This reached a peak of registered unemployed in November 1982 when 3.3 million were signing on. This was some 13% of the workforce and was one of the highest in Europe. To this we have to add the numbers forced temporarily off the register and onto fake training schemes and the many women who want a job but do not register for benefit. In 1982 this pushed the figure up to, at or near five million. The existence of such a large reserve army of labour, still at about 9% in December 1987 has a depressing effect of the level wages at the unskilled and semi-skilled manual workers. Real wages for all manual workers in the period 1979-86 rose by a mere 5%. The figure for semi-skilled and unskilled was less again.

The lumpenisation of the unemployed at worst, or marginalisation from the employed working class and
especially the trade unions at best is a weakness within the working class as a whole. These dangers are all the more acute when one considers the structural changes within unemployment. In June 1987 42.2% of the unemployed had been so for over a year and some 10% of these have never had a job. A contributory factor to the alienation between the employed and unemployed lies in a difference between the nature of unemployment now as compared to the 1930s. Fifty years ago most of those on the dole were older workers, not teenagers. They had experience of the labour movement, its discipline and traditions of collective struggle. It in part explains the existence of organised unemployed movements in the 1930s and the difficulty of building them today.

Core and periphery

In his article Harman is at pains to deny that the tendency of capital to divide the workforce into a core and periphery is either far-reaching or permanent. While he admits that “if this were happening, it would clearly have very dangerous implications indeed for the strength of the working class?,”26 he insists that “the evidence suggests that it is not happening, and cannot, short of a prior catastrophic defeat for the whole trade union movement?.”27 Harman makes the analogy with Japan after the Second World War when the working class was prostrate before big business, and argues that such a defeat would be necessary here before the bosses could introduce an extensive ?dual labour market?.

Harman introduces a red herring with this analogy. The introduction of a “core-periphery” is not about destroying the trade union movement; it is about forcing it to come to terms with the needs of capitalism in a period of shallow growth, desperate competition and imminent recession. Harman accepts that as a result of the 1979-82 recession there has been a further impetus to temporary and part-time labour, subcontracting, casualisation and self-employment, as a response to “growth in demand which may not last?.. However, he argues that this situation “will not last indefinitely?.. Why? He answers:

“If output rises permanently [sic], then the firm will require a stable, reliable, permanent workforce and is likely either to expand the workforce?turning temporary workers into permanent workers and part-time workers into full-time workers? or to increase output from existing workers.?28

But it is precisely because output cannot and will not rise permanently in these crisis racked decades that these changes are sought by the bosses. They will allow firms to deal with cyclical fluctuations.

A major factor since the mid-1970s has been the growth of part-time working on temporary or full-time contracts. In 1976 the proportion of all jobs that were part-time was 19.4% and in 1984 22.1%. This average hides considerable variations. In 1984 in the UK as a whole only 1.4% of all manufacturing jobs were part-time male; the figure for women was 20.3%. Yet some 46.9% of service sector jobs that year were part-time women.

The rate varies between industries too. Some 18% of female labour in sub-assembly electronics was part-time. In retail 55% of women? s employment is part-time. Obviously the growth of part-time employment as a proportion of all jobs has negative effects on trade union organisation given the passivity of the trade union bureaucracy and the turnover of labour. Usdaw calculates that it has to recruit over 50,000 a year to stand still. It must be stressed that this difficulty does not arise because they are women but because they are part-time. Full-time women workers are as likely to be union members as male full-time workers.

However, it is the case that 90% of part-time workers are women. The proportion of new jobs that have been created in the last eight years under Thatcher that are part-time is in excess of 80%. One projection suggests that between 1971 and 1990 some 3.5 million full-time jobs will have been lost and 2.3 million part-time ones gained. At the start of the 1980s one in five jobs was part-time and by the end of the decade it will be one in four.29 Not only do these jobs have worse conditions of employment, no security and little
labour legislation protection, but their wages on an hourly basis compare badly with full-time workers in the same or similar jobs.

Moreover, contrary to Harman, the employers have plans to deepen this trend in hitherto immune sectors in conditions where output and profits have recovered considerably (if not permanently!) since the recession. In 1984 only about 0.5% of all jobs in motor vehicles were part-time. Companies like Fords UK are aiming to force the unions to accept that 10% of all jobs in the 1990s be part-time so as they can adjust rapidly to the major shifts in demand that are famous in the car industry. Such companies aim to consolidate and deepen the productivity gains by taking advantage of the effects of the recession on union organisation.

The growth of temporary labour has been less dramatic but marked nevertheless. A survey published in the Department of Employment Gazette (January 1986) stated that temporary work has been on the increase since the mid-1970s and that today some 7.6% of the workforce (more than 1.5 million) are in temporary employment. Harman’s comparison with Japan rebound on him when one takes into account the fact there it is not much more?10.2%?that are employed on a temporary basis. Whereas in 1977 just 6% of vacancies filled by job centres were for temporary work by 1984 it had risen to 32%. Today it is 35%. The benefits to the capitalists of temporary working is illustrated by the fact that nearly 40% of such contracts are for periods of three months or less which gives virtually no protection to the worker. An LRD survey indicates that most temporary workers are under 25 and taken together with the various government training schemes the bosses use temporary contracts increasingly to screen potential permanent workers.

The main reason for temporary contracting is mainly to deal with seasonal peaks in manufacturing. It is important not to exaggerate the trend. For example, only one in seven of these workers has replaced permanent workers. But the limitations on the process of temporary working have been less the needs of the bosses and more the resistance of the unions to date. But the bosses in those industries (e.g. consumer durables) which experience considerable ups and downs in demand during the course of a year would dearly like to introduce temporary working more extensively.

Intimately related to the rise of temporary contracts has been the growth of self-employment, something actively sponsored by the Tories. It obviously undermines proletarianisation. Between 1979 and 1986 there was a 46% increase in self-employment. In the first six years of Thatcher’s government the number of employees in manufacturing industry fell by 1.83 million. In the same period the number of self-employed (mainly in the service sector) increased by 708,000.

This increase and shift is not due to the sacked worker who puts his or her redundancy money into a sweet shop. One survey estimates that about half (i.e. 300,000) of the increases in employment in the service sector between 1979 and 1985 was a result of sub-contracting from the manufacturing sector. In other words firms are deliberately turning parts of their production work from wage labour employed by themselves to self-employed. This has happened to about a third of a million jobs since 1979 and undermines the cohesiveness and collectivity of the working class. It is a partial dissolution of the proletariat into the petit bourgeoisie. To this we have to add the fact that self-employment? often means casualisation of labour, or ?lump? labour as it is known in the building industry. For example, in construction between 1979 and 1983 when employment fell by 200,000 the numbers describing themselves as self-employed? rose by 70,000. The fragility of employment and the reckless disregard of safety standards by employers are well known consequences of the ?lump?.

Recognising the growing trend towards a core-periphery divide in the working class does not involve any
suggestion that those who are part of the core are some sort of homogenous ?labour aristocracy? with jobs for life and control over the job. Far from it. One study describes the relationship between the two in the following way;

?Peripheral groups are brought in mainly to achieve greater flexibility in the number of workers employed [numerical flexibility]. The firm simply needs more or less of them to match fluctuations in the level of output . . . The firm does not want such numerical flexibility from its core workers; rather it wants versatility and adaptability in what such workers do and how they do it.?34

Unions such as the AEU and the EETPU have conceded a great deal under the Tories along these lines. Maintenance fitters and electricians are increasingly expected to fill a place on the assembly line in the car plants when the need rises.

Concentration and location

For most of this century the tendency of capitalism has been to concentrate a growing proportion of workers in larger units and for these units to be found in the main urban conurbations. Over time this has led to a greater degree of collective organisation and action and the flowering of a labour movement tradition in the main urban centres of the country; Clydeside, South Yorkshire, South Wales, for example, during the first half of the century established a working class culture of solidarity and struggle based on heavy industry, engineering or mining.

During past periods of capital restructuring the bosses have consciously tried to break down this cohesion by relocating industry in areas that were believed were immune to the infection of labour movement tradition. For example, Fords established a car plant in Halewood, in south Liverpool in the 1960s for this reason. In time, of course, the objective conditions of capitalist production re-create a new labour movement, new communities, new traditions of struggle.

The long term decline of manufacturing employment in Britain generally conceals important differences in the regional and even local patterns of job loss. Greater London, for example, experienced a loss of 600,000 manufacturing jobs between 1961 and 1976. In the midst of the last recession the north west lost in excess of 200,000 jobs in four years, mainly concentrated in engineering.36 Between 1975 and 1981 more than 20% of the manufacturing jobs in the West Midlands were slashed.37

New developments in technology and communication have allowed for increasing decentralisation of production, administration and even individual parts of these, thus breaking up the ?collective worker? into smaller elements. This is one factor behind the disproportionately large fall in the number of workplaces employing more than 1,000 workers. Between 1974 and 1983 the total number of manufacturing workplaces employing more than 19 people fell by 42.1%.38 This is important in the sense that all the evidence suggests that trade union membership and strike activity is more pronounced in the larger workplaces. Nevertheless, the fact remains that 42.6% of all workers are still employed in establishments of 500 or more so we are far from seeing a wholesale return to the small workshop so
characteristic of early nineteenth century British capitalism.

This combined relocation of industry and population has, however, created new obstacles in the way of generating collective organisation and action. It poses anew the task of building up this organisation again in many areas. As Table 4 indicates the shift in manufacturing location provides the material basis for a cohesive labour movement in previously ?underdeveloped? areas such as rural Scotland or East Anglia.

This is not an automatic process, however, and to date these parts of the country have neither replaced the heartlands of labourism or the advanced guard of militant trade unionism. In the late 1970s and early 1980s the incidence of strikes remained two to three times as high in the North, Yorkshire, the West Midlands and Scotland compared to East Anglia, the South East and South West.39

The nature of the middle classes

Since the very origin of industrial capitalism there have been many occupations whose function, despite having the form of wage labour, have the content of enforcing the exploitation of others. How do we distinguish between those blue and white-collar workers who might legitimately be called wage slaves and those are on the other side of the class divide?

As was noted earlier Marx often referred to the ?middle classes? who were really relics of a feudal era or operated outside the capitalist mode of production (e.g. self-employed, peasants etc). Marx did not analyse the role of these classes in the economy, though the same can hardly be said for his rich writings on current politics where fractions of classes and the middle classes often play a pivotal role in struggles.40

By and large Marx was not concerned in his political economy with the ?intermediate strata? between the industrial proletariat and the bourgeoisie within capitalist production or exchange although he was aware of the constantly growing number of the middle class, those who stand before the workman on the one hand and the landlord on the other.41 So ?middle classes? were either disappearing classes from a past era or extensions of the main classes outside the realm of capitalist production but integral to realisation or the security of bourgeois property.

The massive growth of a whole range of white-collar employment in the twentieth century has led to a renewed debate about the question of the middle class and in particular the so-called ?new middle class?. Braverman in 1974 analysed the nature of the so-called ?new middle class? as a heterogeneous layer which finds itself simultaneously on ?both sides? of the class divide. On the one hand it shared the ?prerogatives and rewards of capital? and on the other they suffered ?subordination as so much hired labour?.42 In the 1970s two Marxists?E O Wright and G Carchedi?have attempted to show that this new middle class is not a simple extension of the main classes into new occupations outside commodity production but rather can be understood best as a proper class itself, with a distinct role to play in capitalist production, that can not be identified with either the proletariat or the capitalist class.43 Rather, the new middle class has a contradictory nature stemming from its contradictory role in the labour process whereby it combines functions of capital and labour which in an earlier epoch were separated out. Wright and Carchedi?s work has been taken up and developed by writers on the new middle class44 (the ?new working class?45 and Callinicos and Harman of the SWP).46

In general while the work has some insights the boundaries of the ?new middle class? have been drawn too wide. We will show that many of the occupations considered as part of this class are best still understood either as extensions of the capitalist class or as part of the new labour aristocracy. In so far as there is a definable layer called the ?new middle class? it is not a stable class with its own interests but one feeling the pressure of the interests of the main classes in society.
About a hundred years ago there was a pronounced shift in the nature of the ownership and control of the means of production. The rise of the joint stock company meant that the "family firm", with the capitalist owner taking a direct interest and role in the supervision of the labour process, began to give way more and more to a specialised breed of delegate managers with no direct stake in the ownership of the company. Another pressure leading in the same direction was the very concentration and centralisation of capital itself which expanded the division of labour, breaking down the production process into smaller specialised units each needing or benefiting from specialised management.

As Marx noted this manager "performs all the real functions of capital pertaining to the functioning capitalist as such". The function of capital in the production process are numerous. Amongst the most important are ensuring that the quantity and quality of the means of production and labour power needed are not better or worse than the average necessary for the product or service under consideration; that the means of production are used up efficiently and productively and are not squandered. Marx argued:

It is here that the supervisory responsibility of the capitalist enters . . . He must see to it that the work is performed in an orderly and methodical fashion and that the use-value that he has in mind emerges successfully at the end of the process. At this point too the capitalist's ability to supervise and enforce discipline is vital.

Why should the capitalist agents described above not be seen simply as an extension of the capitalist class? The answer most often advanced to this is that at the lower levels of management or supervision some people perform in one and the same job, not only these functions of capital, but also certain essential functions of the collective worker as described by Marx earlier, the performance of which actually contributes to the total amount of surplus value produced. In the modern labour process the task of coordination, planning and preparation of the production of physical goods is an essential and value-producing occupation. Of this work Marx noted:

On the one hand all labour in which many individuals cooperate necessarily requires a commanding will to co-ordinate and unify the process, and functions which apply not to partial operations but to the total activity of the workshop, much as that of an orchestra conductor. This is a productive job, which must be performed in every combined mode of operation.

One job—if not the only one—which in Carchedi's words is "partly on the side of capital and partly on the side of labour", has this character is that of foreman, or on-line supervisor. As can be seen from Table 5 they can amount to as many as one in ten of shop floor personnel in the factory.

We should deduct technical workers and draughtsmen from the first category and consider them part of the working class. Smith calculates that in 1979 they made up 17.5% of the white-collar workers in engineering. We should also recognise that some 30% of this group are routine clerical. This would make 76.3% of the workforce working class, nearly 5% foremen and the rest extensions of the capitalist class in the form of management. In fact if we also include a percentage of the white-collar lower supervisory staff from the latter group then we may get a total figure for this strata nearer 10%. This role is not just performed in industry. Check-out supervisors in supermarkets play the same role, as do members of Nacods in the mining industry.

Foremen in numerous industries have forged collective organisation which, despite its primary purpose of defending sectional privilege, has brought lower-supervisory labour into conflict with higher level management and the firm itself. The conflict between Nacods and British Coal is one recent example. This is not to sweep aside the acute hatred workers on the shop floor and in the offices often feel for their immediate supervisors as bosses? lackeys, but rather to stress the contradictory pressures to which the
more than half a million on-line supervisors are subject to.

It would be an error to stress their distinct class nature (from the main classes above and below), implying as it does a distinct class interest economically and politically. Unlike the old middle class the new one has no independent ownership of the means of production. The fact may be that they occupy contradictory class positions but the key question then becomes which side of the contradiction predominates? Outside of the context of significant class struggle from below, which may place pressure on the new middle class to side with the workers and see the solution of their own problems in the context of the solution of the workers? problems, the structural position of employees in these occupations will involve them being regarded correctly as extensions of the capitalist class.

Carchedi and Wright, however, wish to include more than foremen in their ?new middle class?. After all there is hardly anything new in this group. According to them a distinct layer of management should be considered part of this new middle class, a layer which owes its existence to developments within capitalism at the turn of the century.

Carter?s book is useful in documenting the way in which managerial functions have changed during the epoch of monopoly capitalism.52 At the start of the century managers of firms were generally responsible for running a whole single enterprise on behalf of the owners, and as such they merged with the ruling class above them. But particularly since the Second World War managerial functions have been formalised, restricted and parcelled up into smaller areas.

This has resulted in many spheres of management. At the top the corporation the key strategic decisions over products, staffing, opening up or closing down plant are taken. Most managers are debarred from this level of control and are responsible for implementing these decisions over a small part of the labour process. Carter states:

?There is evidence of an increasing tendency for managers to perceive clearer divisions emerging within companies between those with allocative control and those with operational control . . . between the effective controllers of the means of production and the new middle class.?53

While this is true it is wrong to claim, as does Carchedi of this layer, that ?even when they find themselves on the side of capital, they are both exploiters (or oppressors) and oppressed.?54

It is not just that differential salaries, less threat of unemployment, and lots of ?perks? mark them off from the working class. Neither Carchedi nor Carter make it clear that the decisive criteria must be at that point when none of the labour can be considered that of the ?collective worker?, even if they do lack overall ?operational control?.

Managers and supervisors who only serve capital but are confined to operational (and not strategic) control should still be regarded as nothing other than extensions of the capitalist class in the sense outlined by Marx. It would be a mistake therefore to regard the ?new middle class? as a whole as a natural ally of the working class, to be wooed and feted. It is a heterogeneous strata shading into the labour aristocracy at the bottom and open managerial agents of capital above it. Only the ruthless, confident and determined struggle of the genuine proletariat will convince sections of the middle class to throw in its lot with the working class. Otherwise, the alternative road that will be put before the middle class?given that it lives by virtue of the surplus labour of the working class?will be to intensify the exploitation and oppression of the working class as a method of guaranteeing its own social existence.

There is a strong indication that the growth of managerial trade unionism in the last thirty years can in large
measure be explained by lower management reaction to its loss of powers and the limited alienation it
feels towards the top layers of the managerial structure. But this growth in managerial trade unions (and
even better expressed in the form of the staff association) does not at all mean that they adapt the
methods of the class struggle, cease to identify with the aims and objectives of the capitalist or even
renounce their hostility to manual or lower-clerical workers.

There is no doubt that the work of Carchedi and Wright have genuinely attempted to refute the Weberian
challenge to a Marxist theory of class. It rejects the notion that we have to focus on the ?life-styles? of
foremen, lower management or the class room teacher in order to arrive at an understanding of their
respective class positions. Only by firmly rooting the idea of class structure in the sphere of capitalist
production and realisation is it possible to arrive at a scientific answer.

However, the work of Carchedi, Carter and the more recent Wright has not broken fully from a subjectivist
view of class. Carchedi, for example states . . . that the analysis given here is limited to the economic
aspects of the new middle class . . . Yet no class, when analysing concrete society, can be defined only on
the economic level. We are asked to recognise . . . the change the definition of class undergoes due
to the class struggle and superstructure? Agreeing with this Carter states that the class struggle
between the bosses and the workers could have a major effect on the new middle class, pulling it one way
or the other. Then . . .Such a move would signify a change in the consciousness, practice and class position
of such groups'.

This is a serious mistake. One cannot escape the contradictions of ones class position by identifying with
the struggles of the working class. One is what one does. If a bank manager joins a revolutionary party it
does not change his or her class position. Their politics are in sharp contradiction with their class position
to be sure, a contradiction which may be manageable without gross political betrayal, or may not. If so then
it becomes incompatible with membership of a revolutionary party and the contradiction is resolved
negatively. It may be possible to ?live? the contradiction depending on what the tasks of the period or the
person are, as Engels did. But Engels, one of the greatest ever Marxists and revolutionists, was
nevertheless a capitalist for much of his life. He embraced proletarian politics but it did not make him a
proletarian.

Such a mistaken conception would have serious consequences for political strategy if adopted by a party,
obscuring from view that fact that it is the working class as it objectively exists, even if it is trapped for the
while in false consciousness, sections of it thinking and acting against its own historic class interests, that
must be orientated to and won over. No amount of members of the ?new middle class? with the right
?class consciousness? can be the vehicle for a revolutionary socialist transformation of society precisely
because of its role and function in the relations of production.

Labour aristocracy or new middle class?

Little or no attention has been given in recent writings on the modern class structure to the question of the
labour aristocracy today in Britain. Yet without an appreciation of its role as a strata within the working
class one is driven inevitable in the direction of explaining conservatism of sections of workers by recourse
to the argument that they have ceased to be working class at all. Wright?s work exemplifies one form of
this mistake. Using his concept of ?contradictory class locations? Wright ?discovers? the existence of the
?semi-autonomous employee?:

?In their immediate work environment, they maintain the work process of the independent outsider while
still being employed by capital as wage labourers . . . many white-collar technical employees and certain
highly skilled craftsmen have at least a certain limited form of this autonomy in their immediate labour
The weakness of Wright’s position is not that he mistakenly attributes a limited form of autonomy to a certain category of workers within the production process but rather that he sees this as a result of residual islands of petit bourgeois relations of production?. He conveniently ignores the decisive fact that these workers?an aristocracy of labour within the working class?do not own their own means of production, as do the petit bourgeoisie, but are skilled wage slaves.

Not surprisingly, in the accounts offered by SWP members Alex Callinicos and Chris Harman60 there is no consideration of the labour aristocracy. In fact Callinicos borrows from Wright’s idea of the ?semi-autonomous employee? which flows from his rejection of the labour aristocracy.

Tony Cliff, leader of the forerunner to the SWP, argued in the late 1950s61 that the theory of the labour aristocracy was an irrelevance. He argued that in the first half of the twentieth century the gap between a small layer of prosperous labour aristocrats and the rest of the working class virtually disappeared. Reformism was thus the natural consciousness of all workers until the day capitalist crisis took their general prosperity away. The re-emergence of crisis within capitalism was destroying the prosperity upon which concessions were granted, and reformist consciousness sustained. Their political perspectives implied as a result, an inevitable spontaneous break with reformism by the working class as capitalism descended into crisis.

Engels and Lenin, on the contrary, both recognised that the existence of an ?aristocracy of labour? was an important part of the explanation of reformism. While reformism has its ideological roots in the spontaneous consciousness generated within the wage labour/capital relationship, this is insufficient to explain the growth and survival of political reformism or even of the material roots of the existence of a distinct, bureaucratic layer within the trade union movement.62

When Eric Hobsbawm was still a Marxist historian his analysis of the labour aristocracy in nineteenth century Britain provided many insights into the formation and role of this layer within the working class.63 He argued then that there was ?no single, simple criterion of membership of the labour aristocracy?64 but rather at least six factors needed to be held in view: the level and regularity of earnings; the prospect of social security; the conditions of work; relations with those above and below; the general conditions of living and the prospect of future advancement. Of these, however, ?the first is incomparably the most important? in regard to the nineteenth century.

Before the 1840s the only layer that could be called an aristocracy was the old pre-industrial crafts; factory production was only just emerging and with it an industrial proletariat. As factory production strengthened in the second half of the century the continued existence of these trades, untouched by the industrial revolution, turned these layers (tailors, bootmen, jewellers) into a ?super-aristocracy?.65

But in general the centre of gravity of the labour aristocracy shifted after the 1850s towards the factories and within them ?to a sizable labour aristocracy . . . where machinery was imperfect and dependent on some significant manual skill?.66 Within industry the greater part of the labour aristocracy was located in the metal industries (some 70-75% of labour was skilled in engineering) and other high value-added industries. The lowest numbers were to be found in sectors such as food processing.

According to various studies of pay or union membership at the time Hobsbawm estimates their total size during the period 1850-1914 to be between 10-20% 67 With the advent of the imperialist epoch and the domination of monopoly capitalism great changes occur within this layer. Between the First and Second
World Wars the collapse of the old heavy industries, the de-skilling process in manufacture (see Braverman) and the growth of white-collar employment bring about a fundamental shift. Hinton estimates that between 1914 and 1933 the proportion of skilled workers in engineering workshops declines from 60% to 32%. One consequence of this process was to markedly narrow wage differentials between skilled/craft and semi-skilled/unskilled workers.

However, it would be a serious mistake to conclude from this that the old traditional layers of the labour aristocracy in engineering has disappeared. In fact Labour Force Studies estimated that in Spring 1984 there were some 4.03 million workers classified as craft or some 17% of all occupations. This is an overestimate because it includes line foreman who should not be regarded as part of the labour aristocracy. But a survey published in January 1988 by the Engineering Industry Training Board (EITB) found that of the two million employed in engineering in Britain in 1987 some 327,000 were craft workers or 17.1%. This compares with 18.1% in 1978 on the eve of the last recession which decimated manufacturing jobs. The Labour Market Quarterly Review (LMQR) for November 1987 estimates the size of the craft and skilled sector as 19% in 1971 and 17% in 1986. This stability is largely accounted for by the fact that de-skilling of the labour process is only one part of the picture. Braverman, for one, failed to appreciate sufficiently that new skills are always being created or added to existing ones (computer lathes for example).

In fact the ‘mini-boom’ of 1987 in Britain given rise to complaints of skill shortages again. The EITB report stated that employer determination to erode demarcation lines has led to a ‘blurring of the occupational boundaries? and a skill shortage. The LMQR estimates that while unskilled and semi-skilled manual labour will continue to fall by 12% up to 1995 craft workers will rise by some 5%. Within this the ‘super-aristocracy’ with special skills in electronics and semi-conductor technology will be in special demand. All of this puts this layer of the working class in relative security and as Table 6 shows they are able to command higher wages as a result of their position in the labour market. This is not to say that all those who are better paid are part of this aristocracy. Some, like the miners, have achieved higher pay through class action. An indispensable part of the aristocracy is the ability to resist the dictates of the on-line supervisor, because of the autonomy given to it due to its skills over the machine. The labour aristocracy, therefore, cannot be considered as part of the new middle class, as it does not carry out supervisory functions. It was and remains a fraction or layer within the working class.

Some of the workers at the top of the pay league have been part of the traditional labour aristocracy for years, namely, the skilled workers in the metal industries and locomotive drivers. Others, such as the miners were badly paid up until the 1970s when class struggle and high oil prices put them at the top. Table 6 averages out at £221.4 a week which is 19.4% above the average weekly manual gross wage of £185.5. Indeed, it approaches the average level for foremen of £232.0 a week.

As Hobsbawm pointed out in 1968, in the epoch of monopoly capitalism it ‘may no longer be possible to make it [i.e. the labour aristocracy] simply an analysis of the best paid strata of the British working class.’ Pointing to the emergence of ‘the new labour aristocracy of salaried white-collar, technical and similar workers’ we have to recognise that it is a feature of many of these workers employed in the welfare state, local government and the state bureaucracy that they have often traded high wages for secure jobs for life. In turn trade union consciousness has been eroded or stifled by a ‘professional ethic’ which has accompanied this situation.

Up until the mid-1970s, and increasingly in the 1980s, when attacks on local government, education and to a lesser extent the civil service, have reversed the trend, large sections of the non-routine clerical workers have to be considered part of this labour aristocracy. Its conservatism is well reflected in unions like the
NUT and Nalgo whose activists or official leaderships are dominated by the middle to higher grades. More specifically they represent a merger of interests between the labour aristocracy and management which has resisted to this day, among other things, affiliation to the Labour Party.

It is difficult to determine precisely the number of white-collar labour aristocrats from among the skilled, non-supervisory employees. This is especially so given that official figures include occupations such as firemen in this category! It must include, however, the higher grade technicians, scientific production workers, some teachers and certain non-supervisory, but non-routine grades, in local government and the civil service. This would probably mean that at the height of the post-war boom the size of the new and old labour aristocracy combined was 20-25% of the workforce and possibly as much as 30-35% of the working class. The large size of this strata speaks volumes for the nature of the post-war boom in the 1950s and 1960s. Since then it has been the subject of attack and erosion, increasingly merging with layers below.

It is not just that the labour aristocracy today is located within a broader range of occupations compared to the nineteenth century. Its economic power has changed and with it changes in political consciousness have occurred. In the nineteenth century a layer of the skilled working class within the manual trades were able to translate their relative strength within the labour market of an expanding British capitalism (especially after 1850) into permanent organisational gains in the form of trade unions. Unions like the engineers were able to control entry into the trade and thereby also sustain the conditions of relative scarcity for their labour and skills. This generally made the unions politically conservative with respect to the mass of the semi-skilled and unskilled working class whom it regarded with fear and suspicion. This stratification within the working class had positive benefits for the ruling class as it enabled them to ?buy-off? sections of the working class.

The dilution of the aristocracy from below gradually forced it into a break with the Liberals and to embark on the formation of a Labour Party. Unlike the ?new middle class? the labour aristocracy?s objective position as an exploited class means that it can never be permanently bought off by the bosses. It can never rely upon an unending perspective of improved living standards. Just as with the working class as a whole, gains once acquired are under permanent threat of attack. Defence or gradual improvement of wages and conditions even in conditions of ?boom? in the economy will pit the labour aristocrat against the bosses.

It has to be recognised that with the defeats inflicted upon the trade union movement over the last ten or so years the labour aristocracy has not been able to defend its labour market privileges in the form of more lasting gains (control over entry, manning etc). Increasingly, they are having all these labour aristocratic attributes taken from them. The examples of the Fleet Street printers and of flexibility deals in engineering indicate this. More and more the privileges of this layer are due solely to its place in the job market. Lack of unionisation, short-term contracts and other measures tend to ensure that both the old and new labour aristocracy is being transformed into the ?core? workforce. Those workers who do retain significant control over their pace of work and are not forced into doing a range of jobs (e.g. sectors of the ?sunrise industries?) are not yet sufficiently well organised to so entrench their position in a way that would enable them to prosper through several phases of the business cycle.

Yet the erosion of the position of the skilled layers in the working class has not been an even or automatic process. Government policy has been an important factor in reshaping the allegiances of the labour aristocracy. The attacks on the working class in the 1970s and 1980s, by Labour and Tory governments have served to further divide the working class along sectional lines. The 1974-79 Labour government?s pay policy severely eroded the political support of the labour aristocracy for Labour and played into the hands of the Tories. The nurturing of those labour aristocrats who retained their jobs after 1979, by the
Thatcher governments? boosting of real take home pay, has been a key factor both in British electoral politics and the re-alignment within the trade union movement, despite the fact that on other fronts (e.g. flexibility deals, productivity drives) it has been subject to attack by the bosses.

In the late 1980s the Tories aim to build on the ?natural? effects of the business cycle on the structure of the working class. No sector of the British working class is immune from the bosses? desire to deepen the divisions within the workforce. It starts with the permanent reserve army of labour. Fake job training schemes and, in the future, even compulsory labour for the unemployed make those on the dole merge into the peripheral workforce; the bosses aim to make sure that they continue to enjoy few rights and remain difficult to unionise.

The core and periphery duality will continue to be a programatic goal of the employers. It does not just correspond to the recessionary phase of the economic cycle but corresponds to their needs under conditions of permanent instability for world capitalism. Within the core workforce, a shrunken labour aristocracy will only remain to the extent that the bosses can still afford it, find it politically desirable to sustain one or are forced to bow to the imperatives of technological renewal to create one. None of these divisions are insurmountable by the working class precisely because what unifies the whole working class is the need to resist the intensified drive to increase its own exploitation.

Endnotes

1 Rita Hinden, Must Labour Lose?, (Harmondsworth 1960) p100
2 Karl Marx, Communist Manifesto, Collected Works (CW) Volume 6, p485
3 Ibid, p491-92
5 Ibid, p186-87
6 John Goldthorpe, ?Attitudes and Behaviour of Car Assembly Workers?, British Journal of Sociology, (September 1966)
7 Karl Marx, Communist Manifesto, Preface to 1888 edition, CW Vol 6, op cit, p482
8 Karl Marx, Capital, Vol 2, (Harmondsworth 1978) p51
9 See J Scott, The Upper Classes, (London 1982) p181
10 Ernest Mandel in the introduction to Capital, Vol 2,op cit, p47
11 Karl Marx, Capital, Vol 1, (Harmondsworth 1976) p643-44
12 Ibid, p1040
13 Karl Marx, Capital, Vol 2, p226-27. Beyond this who else can be considered a productive worker has been a matter of great controversy, fueled by the contradictotry statements of Marx himself. On the one hand it is very clear that Marx considered that a productive worker had to be someone who exchanged wage labour against capital and not against revenue. Someone who is employed by the state and paid through taxation (that is, siphoned off profits or wages drawn from surplus value) is not thereby adding to the mass of surplus value. On the other hand it is much less clear whether it is also essential that productive labour must involve the production of material goods or whether the provision of immaterial services is sufficient.

In Vol 1 of Capital (see p283) Marx includes teachers and other providers of services who are employed by private capitalists as productive as he does in Theories of Surplus Value (See p218). In Vol 2 (see p134-35) Marx includes transport workers employed by private capital to transport people as productive, the use-value of the commodity service being consumed as it is produced.

It is possible, as Mandel has pointed out, that the discrepancies can largely be accounted for by the fact that Marx skips back and forth from a consideration of what is productive for an individual capitalist and for
the capitalist system considered as a whole.
14 Karl Marx, Capital, Vol 3, Harmondsworth 1981 p200
15 We must also add to the ranks of the working class a large part of those actually included in the
?professional? category such as most nurses, class room teachers, etc.
16 Chris Harman, ?The Working Class After the Recession?, reprinted in Chris Harman & Alex Callinicos,
The Changing Working Class, London 1987 p76
17 The official categories make some bizarre judgements about which occupations come under the white-
collar/non-manual category. The 1981 Labour Force Survey included within the ?clerical and related?
section workers such as petrol pump operators as well as check-out till operators!
18 See H Braverman, Labor and Monopoly Capitalism, New York 1974 for an excellent account of this
process.
19 R Hyman, introduction in R Hyman & R Price, The New Working Class? White-Collar Workers and their
Organisations, London 1983 p7
21 In 1985, for example, there were 383,000 road transport workers.
22 See C Smith, Technical Workers, London 1987 p76
23 See Chris Harman, op cit, p55
24 The weakness of British capitalism can be seen in this fact when taken together with the fact that the
industrial proletariat continued to grow in absolute size into the early-to-mid 1970s in West Germany,
France and Italy as well as the USA. In Japan such an expansion continued into the early 1980s.
25 Chris Harman, op cit, p80
26 Ibid, p66
27 Ibid
28 Ibid, p65
29 V Beechy, ?The shape of the workforce to come?, Marxism Today, August 1985 p11
30 See Financial Times, 21 January 1987
31 Quoted in Temporary Workers, Labour Research Department, London 1987 p3
32 Ibid, p22
33 Labour Market Quarterly Review, June 1987
36 D Massey, ?The shape of things to come?, in R Peet, op cit, p110
37 K Cowling ?The heartland of depression? in Marxism Today December 1982) p27
38 C Harman, op cit, p57
39 OPCS, Regional Trends, HMSO 1982, p117
40 See The 18th Brumaire of Louis Napolean; Class Struggles in France, in Marx and Engels, Selected
Works
41 Quoted in R Carter, Capitalism, Class Conflict and the New Middle Class, London 1985 p10
42 H Braverman, op cit, p407
43 E O Wright, Class, Crisis and the State, London 1978 and G Carchedi On the Economic Identification
of Social Classes London 1977
44 R Carter, op cit
45 C Smith, Technical Workers London 1987
46 Chris Harman and Alex Callinicos, The Changing Working Class, op cit
47 Karl Marx, Capital, Vol 3, p388
48 Karl Marx, Capital, Vol 1, p986
49 Ibid, p383
50 G Carchedi, op cit, p90
51 C Smith, op cit, p76
52 C Carter, op cit, Chapter 3
53 Ibid, p122
54 G Carchedi, op cit, p90
55 C Carter, op cit
56 G Carchedi, op cit, p45
57 Ibid, p49
58 C Carter, op cit, p150
59 E O Wright, op cit, p80-81
60 Harman and Callinicos, The Changing Working Class, op cit
61 Tony Cliff, Economic Roots of Reformism, (London 1957)
64 Ibid, p273
65 Ibid, p281
66 Ibid, p282
67 Ibid, see pp279, 285 & 290
68 J Hinton, Labor and Socialism, (London 1983) p128
69 H Braverman, Labour and Monopoly Capitalism, (New York 1974)
70 Eric Hobsbawm, op cit, p301
71 Ibid, p302

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