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THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

PAGES FROM A
NEGRO WORKER'S
NOTEBOOK

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The Challenge of Automation

Since 1955 and the advent of automation, overtime has been detrimental to the workers. Again and again workers have been faced with the decision to work overtime or not to work overtime, and the decision has usually been: "To hell with those out of work. Let's get the dollar while the dollar is gettable." The amazing thing is that this has nothing to do with the backwardness of these workers. Not only can they run production and think for themselves, but they sense and feel the changes in conditions way in advance of those who are supposed to be responsible for their welfare. But with all these abilities there is one big organic weakness. Over and over again workers in various shops and industries, faced with a critical issue, only divide and become disunited, even though they are well aware that they are being unprincipled and weakening their own cause as workers. Since the advent of automation there has not been any serious sentiment for striking, particularly if the strike was going to come at the expense of material things that the workers already had in their possession, like cars, refrigerators, TV sets, etc. They were not ready to make any serious sacrifices of these; they would rather sacrifice the issue. Between the personal things and the issue, they have chosen the personal. Most American workers have geared themselves to a standard of living that is based on a five-day week *plus*—either in the form of overtime or another job, part or full time. And any time this standard of living is threatened, it is a personal crisis, which means that more and more decisions are being personalized and individualized rather than collectivized and socialized.

What then happens to the class struggle? At this point the class consciousness of the workers tends to shift from what has traditionally been considered its main quality, hostility to

cf. Doldorpe + Jackson: "instrumental collectivism
+ family-centeredness replace old w.c.'s
solidary collectivism"

the class enemy outside, and to focus on antagonisms, struggles, conflicts among the workers themselves. Fights among the workers begin to sharpen, although they no longer take the form they did in the 30's when the workers were divided by race and nationality prejudices ("Dagoes," "Wops," "Polacks," "Niggers," "Buffaloes," etc.). The division is now between two groupings. On one side are the brown-noses, stooges, and workers who are only looking out for themselves, those who are complacent because of the fringe benefits they assume they have won through the union, particularly those near to retirement, and those who would revolt but are afraid of the union bureaucracy or of being fired and then forgotten or branded as "nuisances" and "troublemakers." On the other side are those who emphasize issues, who raise a cry about rights, who call upon workers to make decisions on principles and issues. Among the latter are the unemployed who picketed the union for agreeing to overtime work and who continue to picket the plants against overtime even at the risk of being considered nuisances and troublemakers by those inside the shop, showing that the only ones who are seriously concerned about unemployment today are the unemployed themselves.

Yet these same workers who call the principled ones "nuisances" know exactly what their own chances are. In the average auto plant today, for example, ex-foremen make up nearly one third of the work force. Although these ex-foremen know they'll never get back on supervision, they still keep hoping and trying to make an impression on the bosses by their work. The same thing is true of a lot of other workers. They know that the speed-up is going to get worse and worse, but they continue to keep up with it rather than sacrifice a few days' pay to show the company how much they resent it. Instead they take the easy way out and blame it on the union. It is true that contract-wise the union has made all this possible. But at a certain point the union simply becomes an excuse, a pretext for not taking a stand on issues. The sell-out that has taken place in the contract between the union and the company does not change the fact of the corruption that has taken place in the workers.

These struggles among the old workers, which are creating

such antagonisms among them, are really only delaying tactics on the part of the old herd. They do not touch the real question. It is automation which is the reality facing them and everybody in American society today. America today is headed towards an automated society, and it cannot be stopped by featherbedding, by refusal to work overtime, by sabotage, or by shortening the work week by a few hours. America today is rapidly reaching the point where, in order to defend the warfare state and the capitalist system, there will be automation on top of automation. The dilemma before the workers and the American people is: *How can we have automation and still earn our livings?* It is not simply a question of retraining or changing from one form of work to another. For automation definitely eliminates the need for a vast number of workers, including skilled, semi-skilled, unskilled, and middle-class clerical workers.

It is quite obvious that the attitudes and relations to their work of the new strata of workers who are already deeply involved in automation, are different from those of the old workers. It is these new relations to their work which have already made it impossible for the union to organize these new workers or for the old herd of workers to establish any relation to the new workers. The old workers regard the new ones as close to management and as part and parcel of the process which is eliminating them. The union can only approach these new workers in terms of economic demands or job classifications. But their salaries are high enough so that they are not concerned about a few cents more an hour. They start at salaries much higher than the old skilled workers ever dreamed of attaining. But they do not think like the old skilled workers in terms of job classifications. Not at all. Rather they welcome constant changes in production as a challenge to their ability, knowledge, and ingenuity. Automation to them is as fascinating as going to school and tackling new problems every day. This interest in their work also makes them quite unconscious of the effect that their work is having on the old workers. But there is more than that. These new workers are not like the old inventor-geniuses who were hired by the company only so that their brains could be picked (e.g. as Henry Ford hired George

Washington Carver at the peak of his abilities). These new workers are part and parcel of the new *process* of production, and at the same time their ideas are so crucial to the direction of the work that they are inseparable from management and the organization of the work. In their attitude to work and in the process of their work they have invaded management to the point of actually controlling the flow of production itself. But at the same time, in much the same way as the semi-skilled workers of the CIO era failed to seize political control, these new workers are leaving the political direction of their work, the purposes for which it is intended, to the old management. And because they lack any experience of struggle, even in getting their jobs, it is unlikely that any initiative for political struggle will come from them. Yet they are the new work force coming into a position of strategic power in production at a time when all the social problems of American society are being posed.

Automation replaces men. This of course is nothing new. What is new is that now, unlike most earlier periods, the displaced men have nowhere to go. The farmers displaced by mechanization of the farms in the 20's could go to the cities and man the assembly lines. As for the work animals like the mule, they could just stop growing them. But automation displaces people, and you don't just stop growing people even when they have been made expendable by the system. Under Stalin the kulaks and all those who didn't go along with the collectivization of agriculture were just killed off. Even then, if they had been ready to go along, Stalin could have used them. But in the United States, with automation coming in when industry has already reached the point that it can supply consumer demand, the question of what to do with the surplus people who are the expendables of automation becomes more and more critical every day.

Many liberals and Marxists say that they should be used to build schools and hospitals and be sent to foreign countries to aid in their development. But such a proposal has as its premise that this is a socialist society when it is in fact a capitalist society, and what motivates a capitalist society primarily is the return on its investment.

There is only a limited number of these old workers whom capitalism can continue to employ in production at a pace killing enough to be profitable. The rest are like the refugees or displaced persons so familiar in recent world history. There is no way for capitalism to employ them profitably, yet it can't just kill them off. It must feed them rather than be fed by them. Growing in numbers all the time, these displaced persons have to be maintained, becoming a tremendous drain on the whole working population, and creating a growing antagonism between those who have jobs and those who do not. This antagonism in the population between those who have to be supported and those who have to support them is one of the inevitable antagonisms of capitalism. And it is this antagonism, brought to a climax by automation, which will create one of the deepest crises for capitalism in our age. In this crisis one section of the population will be pitted against another, not only the employed against the unemployed but those who propose that the unemployed be allowed to starve to death rather than continue as such a drain on the public against those who cannot stand by and see society degenerate into such barbarism. On both sides there will be members of all strata of the population.

Thus automation not only poses the questions of poverty and employment and related economic questions. It brings into sharp focus that element which the Negroes always bring with them when they struggle for their rights. It makes the question social because it poses the relations of man to man.

As automation spreads, it will intensify the crises of capitalism and sharpen the conflicts among the various sections of the population, particularly between those working and those not working, those paying taxes and those not paying taxes. Out of this conflict will grow a counter-revolutionary movement made up of those from all social layers who resent the continued cost to them of maintaining these expendables but who are determined to maintain the system that creates and multiplies the number of expendables. This in turn will mobilize those who begin by recognizing the right of these displaced persons to live, and from there are forced to struggle for a society in which there are no displaced persons.

Thus automation is that stage of production which carries the contradictions of capitalism to their furthest extreme, creating and sharpening inside capitalist society the conflicts, antagonisms, clashes between people that make for social progress and the inevitable struggle that goes with it.

The fact has to be faced. Automation is the greatest revolution that has taken place in human society since men stopped hunting and fishing and started to grow their own food. It is capable of displacing as many productive workers from the work force as have been brought into the work force since the invention of the automobile at the beginning of this century. (Today an estimated one out of every six American workers depends, directly or indirectly, on the auto industry for employment.) In fact, so devastating would be the immediate effects if automation were introduced at one fell swoop that those who would appear to benefit most from it (the capitalists) are as afraid of its introduction as the workers threatened with displacement.

Up to now the Marxists have more or less gone along with the old herd of semi-skilled and skilled workers who have resisted automation, at the same time reassuring themselves that private capitalists themselves would not have sufficient capital to go all out for automation. What they have failed to recognize is that it is not private capital as such which is introducing automation. The great bulk of the capital invested in automation today comes from the government and is paid for by every member of the American population, whether he is a worker, a member of the middle class, or rich. This is all done in the name of research and defense, but, whatever it is called, the benefits are as great to the capitalists as if they had put out the capital themselves. Thus the capitalists have found a way to get around the high cost of automation as well as the high cost of scrapping still productive machinery.

One of the major aims of the Kennedy administration is to encourage automation, by granting subsidies to companies who go full-speed ahead on it, both directly and in the form of tax write-offs. Therefore, when workers fight the introduction of automation, they are not only taking on private capitalism but the federal government itself. Yet so great is the con-

tradition generated by automation that the government, while giving it such encouragement, must at the very same time set up a new committee to study what is going to happen to the millions of displaced workers.

There is continual talk of new training programs. Yet those making these suggestions know that training is not the answer. In the very period when individuals are being trained, new machinery is being introduced which eliminates the need for such training. Take, for example, the draftsman. With the old methods the engineer used to present his ideas to a draftsman who would make a rough sketch of these ideas which would then be given to another draftsman to refine. A third draftsman then drew the final blueprint, incorporating in it the exact size, the appearance, and the correct fittings to the millionth of an inch. Today all that this same engineer has to do is talk his ideas into a tape recorder which plays into a computer and the ideas are transformed into a design; the design in turn is fed into a developer and, once developed, can be handed over to the work foreman for building. The three draftsmen have been eliminated from the work process, and only the engineer and the toolmaker remain, each having to know more than before about the other's job.

Marxists have continued to think of a mass of workers always remaining as the base of an industrialized society. They have never once faced the fact that capitalist society could develop to the point of not needing a mass of workers. But this is the dilemma of our time in the United States, and as of now only for the United States. The question before Americans is whether to be for the technological revolutions of automation despite all the people who will be displaced, or to be opposed to this advance, sticking with the old workers who are resisting the new machinery, as workers have done traditionally since the invention of the spinning jenny.

When Marx was writing in the middle of the 19th century, he was dealing with the most advanced countries of his day. But even these countries were underdeveloped in the sense that the great bulk of the people were still engaged in farm work. A large part of the labor force was still needed to produce the

foodstuffs for people to eat and the raw materials (e.g. cotton) for industry.

Today if you told the average worker in a big American city that he ought to go back to the farm, he would give you all kinds of arguments. The only reason why he might go back is to get away from the Bomb. He wouldn't think of going back in order to make a contribution to society in the way of production. He knows enough about the food that is rotting in the warehouses and the taxes he has to pay to store it. He knows enough about the great change that has taken place in the technology of farm production so that farm work is no longer socially necessary for the great majority of people.

But as yet few people have been ready to face the fact that, with automation and cybernation, we are reaching the stage where work in the factory is also no longer going to be socially necessary for the great majority. It is easy to accept that a man should move from one form of labor to another form, but it is hard to accept that there will no longer be a mass demand for *any* labor. It is so taken for granted that the production of goods is man's fundamental role in society that, even when technology is making this unnecessary, most people from the politicians and economists down to the man in the street still try to dream up schemes that will require a lot of people to play a material productive role.

Yet, unless the Bomb falls and throws what is left of mankind back to the stage of hunting and fishing, society can't go backward technologically. Once man has gone on from the stage of hunting and fishing to that of agriculture, it makes no sense for him to go back to hunting and fishing as a means of making his livelihood. If man no longer needs to drive a mule in order to live, you just can't make him drive a mule. Why then should people keep looking for work in order to justify their right to live if there is no longer a social and economic need for them to work?

Marx envisaged a long period of industrialization during which the number of workers would be constantly growing. He believed that in the course of the conflict between labor and capital in the productive process, a new force would be created with human values of organization, cooperation, and

discipline, in sharp contrast with the individualism, competition, and greed of the capitalists. This new force he called "socialized labor" and he said that it was the new society growing up within the old.

In this country during the 30's Marx's perspectives were realized to an astonishing degree in the organization of the CIO. The work force had grown in numbers to meet the needs of the mass industrial production, and now came its co-operation, organization, discipline, and revolt. True, this work force did not actually take over power from the capitalists, but in the crisis of the Depression the pressures it exerted compelled the capitalists to establish the Welfare State with many of the social benefits that Marx had advocated.

That was a generation ago. Today when automation and cybernation are shrinking rather than expanding the work force, many people still think in the same terms. They still assume that the majority of the population will be needed to produce material goods and that the production of such goods will still remain the heart of society. They have not been able to face the fact that even if the workers took over the plants they would also be faced with the problem of what to do with themselves now that work is becoming socially unnecessary. They have not been able to face this fact because they have no clear idea of what people would do with themselves, what would be their human role, or how society would be organized when work is no longer at the heart of society.

I don't think Marx would have had any difficulty in facing this fact if he were living today. Marx saw more clearly than anybody that men's ideas are determined by the stage of production. However, Marx is dead and one cannot continue to quote him as an all-time solution for social problems brought on by the development of production. A new theory must be evolved and it is likely to meet as much opposition as Marx's has met.

CHAPTER 3

The Classless Society

The United States is a Warfare State.

The United States is an inseparable part of Western Civilization.

The United States is the citadel of world capitalism today.

The basic philosophy with which all radicals have approached the analysis of the United States has been centered around what the workers would do, ought to do, would have to do, etc., usually ignoring the power of the state and the bureaucracy which are today such an essential part of American capitalism; ignoring the fact that when Marx wrote 100 years ago, and even up to 30 years ago, there was no mass standing army, navy, and air force, and no universal draft in this country; and sometimes realizing but more often forgetting that their own ideas are shaped by no less a fact than that they themselves are by-products of Western Civilization.

Today this philosophy is at the crossroads. The emerging nations of Asia and Africa, which have all these years been dominated by a little corner of the globe known as Western Civilization, are clashing head-on with that civilization. The Marxists themselves, who have done very little since the time of Marx to understand the rest of the globe, merely pigeon-holing it in their minds as colonial and semi-colonial, must now do some serious re-evaluating.

American Marxists, like Marxists all over the world, believe in Karl Marx's ideology. They believe, first, that capitalist production and capitalist society are organized for the benefit of the capitalists and against the masses; and second, that at a certain stage in the development of capitalism, the people living under it will be forced to revolt against it because their conditions will become intolerable and because there will grow up inside this society the embryo of a socialist society, united,

disciplined, and organized by capitalist production itself.

In America, the Marxists have found their role more challenging than in any other place on the globe. For inside this country are all the necessary material ingredients which could make socialism possible, and yet it all seems so remote.

It is not a question of whether socialism can or cannot be imported. It is only the specific conditions of a country at a particular time that make people struggle. The fundamental point is that it is impossible for an American Marxist movement to build itself on the ideas of mass poverty and the abolition of private property which have played such an important role in the development of the European Marxist movements. This alone makes the challenge to American Marxist groups more severe than in any other country. For although the poverty-caused misery of the American masses has by no means been eliminated, it is so dispersed and scattered among various segments of the population that it does not constitute a fundamental and unifying issue to mobilize the masses of the people in struggle.

Thus the question, "What is socialism?" finds the American Marxists constantly seeking a new formula to fit in with the ever-changing conditions of the country. So that today when one asks an American Marxist point-blank, "What is socialism and why should the people struggle for it?" he is baffled and has to fumble around for an answer.

Marx in the 19th century said that there would have to be a transitional society between the class society of *capitalism* and the classless society of *communism*. This transitional society, which he called *socialism*, would still be a class society but instead of the capitalists being the ruling class, the workers would rule. It was this rule by the workers which, for Marx, would make the society socialist. As the ruling class, the workers would then develop the productive forces to the stage where there could be all-around development of each individual and the principle of "from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs" could be realized. At this point there could be the classless society or communism.

In the United States the forces of production have already been developed to the point where there could be the

classless society which Marx said could come only under communism. Yet ever since the Russian Revolution, all kinds of socialists have differentiated themselves from the Communists in terms of political policy and political organization but have never tackled this question of Marxist theory that socialism is just a transitional society on the way to communism and that only under communism can there be a classless society.

How have the revolutionary socialists arrived at just being for socialism while still claiming to be Marxists? The turning point was the Russian Revolution. If the Russians had never won the revolution, socialism and communism, with communism as the ultimate goal, would have remained a part of Marxist ideology, and Marxist organizations all over the world could have kept on struggling against capitalism without having to clarify what they were struggling for.

It was after the Russian Revolution and on the basis of examining what emerged from it that American Marxists began to split and decline. They were always splitting over the question of the correct policy for the socialist, i.e. the workers', state in Russia—instead of advancing their theory to keep step with the advances of capitalism which, in the United States in particular, were creating the productive forces to make possible a struggle far beyond what was possible in Russia. They tried to make the Russian blueprint fit the United States when the United States was developing productivity to the point where the workers, through economic, political, and social pressure but without political power, were deriving from capitalism the economic benefits which elsewhere the workers would have had to take political power in order to achieve.

What then is still lacking in the United States where capitalism has achieved its highest form? What is it that the American people want, which they find lacking in capitalism, and which will mobilize them to fight against capitalism and for another society, call it what you will?

A social revolution in the United States has to mean control of production by the producers. A social revolution in the United States has to mean production for the use of those who need it. But beyond these goals the social revolution in the United States has to mean the classless society—a so-

ciety in which the antagonisms and divisions between classes, races, and people of different national backgrounds are eliminated and people can develop among themselves civilized and cooperative relations, relations which are possible today as never before because there need no longer be any problem of scarcity of material goods and services. All the problems of scarcity which up to now have required the exploitation of various races and immigrant groupings have now been outmoded by the technological advances of production.

The horizons which the social revolution in America open up are more tremendous than anywhere else in the world. But the path which the revolution will have to take in this country is also more difficult and vicious than anywhere else in the world. First of all, it is the Warfare State with its huge forces which has to be challenged. And second, inside each American, from top to bottom, in various degrees, has been accumulated all the corruption of a class society which has achieved its magnificent technological progress first and always by exploiting the Negro race, and then by exploiting the immigrants of all races. At the same time the class society has constantly encouraged the exploited to attempt to rise out of their class and themselves become exploiters of other groupings and finally of their own people. The struggle to rid themselves and each other of this accumulated corruption is going to be more painful and violent than any struggles over purely economic grievances have been or are likely to be.