

The Class Struggle

by Marta Harnecker

1. *The concept of class struggle.* 2. *The different kinds of class struggle.* 3. *The forms of class struggle.* 4. *Strategy and tactics in the class struggle.* 5. *Revolution: the ultimate form of class struggle.*

1. The Concept of Class Struggle

At the level of the political conjuncture the social classes can only be conceived through their "class practices," and since classes are groups with opposing interests, these class practices have the character of class struggle. And it is precisely this *class struggle*, going on within the limits fixed by the social structure, which, in class societies, is the motor of history.

Of course Marx did not discover either classes or class struggle. His great contribution was to pass from the description of the existence of social classes to knowledge of the origin of these classes, and, therefore, he was able to give us the LAW which rules the class struggle.

This is what Engels tells us in the following text:

It was precisely Marx who had first discovered the great law of motion of history, the law according to which all historical struggles, whether they proceed in the political, religious, philosophical or some other ideological domain, are in fact only the more or less clear expression of struggles of social classes, and the existence and thereby the collisions, too, between these classes are in turn conditioned by the degree of development of their economic position, by the mode of their production and of their exchange determined by it. This law, has the same significance for history as the law of the transformation of energy has for natural science.¹

Let us see now what is meant by class struggle. Is class struggle the confrontation which takes place between the workers of one factory or trade and their bosses? Let us look at how Lenin responded to this question:

No, this is only a weak embryo of it. The struggle of the workers becomes a class struggle only when all the foremost representatives of the entire workingclass of the whole country are conscious of themselves as a single workingclass and launch a struggle that is directed, not against individual employers, but against the *entire* class of capitalists and against the government that supports that class. Only when the individual worker realizes that he is a member of the entire working class, only when he

recognizes the fact that his petty day-to-day struggle against individual employers and individual government officials is a struggle against the entire bourgeoisie and the entire government, does his struggle become a class struggle.²

CLASS STRUGGLE is the confrontation which is produced between two antagonistic classes when they are struggling for their class interests.

The class struggle appears when one class opposes another *in action*, and, therefore, it only appears in a given moment in the development of a society. In other phases of its evolution the class struggle can only appear in embryonic forms as in the case of the isolated struggles between the workers of some factories and their bosses, or in the struggles which, although they mobilize the whole class, do not succeed in raising the struggle to the level of its true class interests; or as in *hidden, latent* struggles when there is not open struggle but latent discontent, silent opposition.³

The class struggle takes place on three levels, which correspond to the three levels or regional structures which form part of the overall social structure.

CLASS STRUGGLE

- (a) *Economic struggle* (at the level of the economic structure).
- (b) *Ideological Struggle* (at the level of the ideological structure).
- (c) *Political Struggle* (at the level of the political structure).

2. The Different Kinds of Class Struggle

(a) The *economic struggle* is the confrontation which is produced between the antagonistic classes at the level of the economic struggle. This confrontation is characterized by the resistance which the exploited classes put up at this level against the exploiting classes.

Lenin defines the economic struggle of the proletariat in the following way:

The economic struggle is the collective struggle of the workers against their employers for better terms *in the sale of their labor power*, for better living and working conditions. This struggle is necessarily a trade-union

struggle, because the working conditions differ greatly in different trades, and, consequently, the struggle to improve them can only be conducted on the basis of trade organizations.⁴

(b) The *ideological struggle*. The class struggle is also present at the ideological level as a struggle between the ideology of the exploited class and the ideology of the exploiting class.⁵

In capitalist society, this struggle is a struggle between *bourgeois ideology* in all its manifest forms and *proletarian ideology* based on the marxist theory of history.

This struggle, to be successful, must, in contrast to the other forms of struggle, attack the enemy where he is strongest, that is, where the best exponents of ruling class ideology are to be found. Often this ideology is criticized by oversimplifying it or choosing its weakest supporters. This frequently allows the enemy to advance rather than forcing him to retreat.⁶

(c) The *political struggle*. The political struggle is the confrontation which is produced between the classes in their struggle for political power, that is, in the struggle to make state power their own.

This is what Lenin says:

Every class struggle is a political struggle. We know that the opportunists, slaves to the ideas of liberalism, understood these profound words of Marx incorrectly, and tried to put a distorted interpretation on them. Among the opportunists there were, for instance, the Economists, the elder brothers of the liquidators. The Economists believed that any clash between classes was a political struggle. The Economists therefore recognized as "class struggle" the struggle for a wage increase of five kopeks on the ruble, and refused to recognize a higher, more developed, nation-side class struggle, the struggle for *political aims*. The Economists, therefore, recognized the embryonic class struggle but did not recognize it in its developed form. The Economists recognized, in other words, only that part of the class struggle that was more tolerable to the liberal bourgeoisie, they refused to go farther than the liberals, they refused to recognize the higher form of class struggle that is unacceptable to the liberals. By so doing, the Economists became liberal workers' politicians. By so doing, the Economists rejected the Marxist, revolutionary conception of class struggle.

To continue, it is not enough that the class struggle becomes real, consistent and developed only when it embraces the sphere of politics. In politics, too, it is possible to restrict oneself to minor matters, and it is possible to go deeper, to the very foundations. Marxism recognizes a class struggle as fully developed, "nation-side," only if it does not merely embrace politics but takes in the most significant thing in politics—the organization of state power.

On the other hand, the liberals, when the workingclass movement has grown a little stronger, dare not deny the class struggle, but attempt to narrow down, to curtail, and emasculate the concept of class struggle. Liberals are prepared to recognize the class struggle in the sphere of politics, too, but on one condition—that the organization of state power should *not* enter into that sphere. It is not hard to understand which of the bourgeoisie's class interests give rise to the liberal distortion of the concept of class struggle.⁷

From what has been said above we can conclude that

there are three fundamental kinds of class struggle: economic, ideological and political.

Nevertheless, these different kinds of struggle do not exist, separated from one another, but are fused into a single unity which constitutes the class struggle as such or the confrontation of one class with another.

Thus, in every conjuncture there is a given form of fusion of these different kinds of struggle, in which one plays a dominant role. In a given historical moment the ideological struggle can be the strategic nodal point of the class struggle, in other cases it can be the political or economic struggle. How, then, should we interpret Marx's statement that all class struggle is a political struggle?

We think that this statement must be understood in the sense that the definitive confrontation of the antagonistic classes is only produced when the oppressed class comes to question the system of power which makes its condition of exploitation possible. In order for there to be a real class confrontation neither the economic nor the ideological struggle alone is sufficient. It is necessary to advance to the level of political struggle, of the struggle for power. It is only in this moment that the class struggle acquires its full meaning. Until then it is only a question of partial confrontations which do not question the system which allows for the reproduction of the antagonistic classes such as they are. For this reason, Lenin says that the:

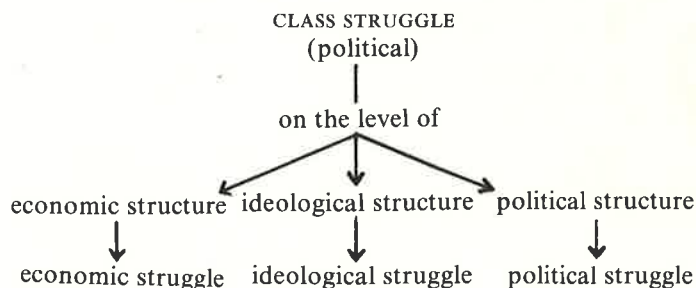
struggle of the workers becomes a class struggle only when all the foremost representatives of the entire workingclass of the whole country are conscious of themselves as a single workingclass and launch a struggle that is directed, not against individual employers, but against the *entire class* of capitalists and against the government that supports that class.⁸

But to affirm that the political struggle is the class struggle *par excellence* does not imply denying the importance of the economic struggle. The necessity of this struggle has been recognized from the beginning by Marxism.

Marx and Engles criticized the utopian socialists for deprecating this kind of struggle. In the resolutions of the Congress of the International Working Men's Association in 1866 they warned against two deviations: to underestimate and overestimate its importance. Before going on to the next point, let us clarify two concepts that are commonly confused: "politics" and "the political structure."

We understand "political structure" to mean the juridico-political structure of a society. In this sense, the political struggle is a struggle in the field or level of the "political structure."

We mean by "politics" the political terrain of action, that is the class struggle in a determined, political conjuncture.



3. The Forms of Class Struggle

Each one of these kinds of struggle which develops in a given front or level can take different forms: legal or illegal, peaceful or violent.

For example:

On the economic front: strikes, hunger marches, slowdowns, factory takeovers, etc.

On the ideological front: publications, radio and television broadcasts of a revolutionary orientation; revolutionary utilization of political concentrations and electoral campaigns, etc.

On the political front: electoral struggle, armed insurrection, popular war (with its different forms: guerilla war, wars of position, and war of movement, etc.).

Now let us look at what, according to Lenin, are the fundamental requirements which every marxist must meet when examining the question of the forms of struggle.

In the first place, Marxism differs from all primitive forms of socialism by not binding the movement to any one particular form of struggle. It recognizes the most varied forms of struggle: and it does not "concoct" them, but only generalizes, organizes, gives conscious expression to those forms of struggle of the revolutionary classes which arise of themselves in the course of the movement. Absolutely hostile to all abstract formulas and to all doctrinaire recipes, Marxism demands an attentive attitude to the *mass* struggle in progress, which, as the movement develops, as the class consciousness of the masses grows, as economic and political crises become acute, continually gives rise to new and more varied methods of defense and attack. Marxism, therefore, positively does not reject any form of struggle. Under no circumstances does Marxism confine itself to the forms of struggle possible and in existence at the given moment only, recognizing as it does that new forms of struggle, unknown to the participants of the given period, *inevitably* arise as the given social situation changes. In this respect Marxism *learns*, if we may so express it, from mass practice, and makes no claim whatever to *teach* the masses forms of struggle invented by "systematisers" in the seclusion of their studies. We know—said Kautsky, for instance, when examining the forms of social revolution—that the coming crisis will introduce new forms of struggle that we are now unable to foresee.

In the second place, Marxism demands an absolutely *historical* examination of the question of the forms of struggle. To treat this question apart from the concrete historical situation betrays a failure to understand the rudiments of dialectical materialism. At different stages of economic evolution, depending on differences in political, national-cultural, living and other conditions, different forms of struggle come to the fore and become the principal forms of struggle; and in connection with this, the secondary, auxiliary forms of struggle undergo change in their turn. To attempt to answer yes or no to the question whether any particular means of struggle should be used, without making detailed examination of the concrete situation of the given movement at the given stage of its development, means completely to abandon the Marxist position.

These are the two principal theoretical propositions by which we must be guided.⁹

Therefore, Marxism holds that the class struggle can take different forms. It maintains that the role which a given form

of struggle can play can only be judged according to the political conjuncture of that moment, and, finally, that it is the Marxist-Leninist party which must "generalize, organize, and give a conscious character to the revolutionary class struggles." The party must decide in each moment which form of struggle should occupy the principal role, and how the other forms ought to be subordinated to the principal form. To proclaim that Marxism accepts all forms of struggle does not exempt the revolutionary party from deciding which of these forms should be preponderant and how to organize the rest of the forms to support this.

4. Strategy and Tactics in the Class Struggle

But a Marxist-Leninist party cannot limit itself to following the forms of struggle which arise spontaneously from the working masses. It must raise these forms of struggle so that they are transformed into the most adequate means to meet their class interest.

Class interests cannot always be realized immediately. Often it is necessary to go through a first stage where you can only prepare the groundwork for fulfilling those interests. In a first stage, for example, the proletariat could unite with the peasantry and certain popular sectors to complete bourgeois-democratic tasks. Later, in another stage, after having demonstrated its capacity as the leading force in bourgeois-democratic tasks, the proletarian party based in the popular masses could begin to carry out the tasks of the definitive suppression of social exploitation. This was the case, for example, of the Chinese and the Cuban revolutions.

Therefore, assuming the necessity for a first stage of struggle, a stage which probably would not be necessary in the advanced capitalist countries, every revolutionary party must establish a minimum program* in which the goals of the first stage would be represented and a *maximum program* which would aim at finally bringing about the suppression of all exploitation.

* A minimum program which is the best program for that stage and, therefore, the only truly revolutionary program since it is the only one which lets the process advance. Many programs more revolutionary on paper can become a brake for the revolution if they try to be carried out immediately. To clarify what we mean, we shall pose an example: if a patriotic army still not sufficiently strong is trying to liberate its country from a very powerful enemy army which has invaded it, it must concentrate all of its forces to win. It would be incorrect to try to liberate the whole country all at once, dispersing its scarce forces. To truly liberate the whole territory and not face defeat in the first battle, the army must first liberate certain strategic zones, which permit it to most rapidly weaken the enemy, while still leaving, for the time being, other zones in its hands.

The ideal would be to liberate all the zones at the same time, but when the ideal does not correspond to the reality of the balance of forces, to try to do it, no matter the cost, becomes, in the last analysis, the principal obstacle to victory. Only by advancing through stages can the final objective be reached: to liberate all the zones in the enemy's hands. This in no way implies that it is necessary to demobilize the non-strategic zones, so that they wait with arms folded for their final liberation. Quite the contrary, these zones must be mobilized, but their actions must be coordinated with and subordinated to the principal objective.

After having established the minimum program appropriate to the first stage of development of the class struggle, it becomes necessary to devise a *general strategy of struggle* to achieve the program's objectives.

But it is not enough to formulate a general strategy. In order to achieve these strategic goals, it is necessary to be able to mobilize the masses, since *without the participation of the masses there can be no revolution*. And to mobilize the masses it is necessary to begin with their spontaneous, immediate interests. You cannot offer abstract formulas to the masses, you must provide concrete proposals for action that correspond to the political conjuncture of each moment.

These concrete proposals for action constitute the different *tactics* of a party. *Political slogans* are only short phrases in which the party synthesizes these concrete proposals for action. Only a party which has contact with the masses, which recognizes their immediate interests, which recognizes their revolutionary potential and which knows where it must lead them can establish adequate slogans for each historical moment. The correctness of the tactical positions of a revolutionary party leads the masses to recognize it as its vanguard.

The parties which lack contact with the masses tend to put forth *abstract slogans* which can be correct from a strategic point of view but which lack meaning for the masses since they do not appear related in any way to their immediate, spontaneous interests.

It is, therefore, in struggle and not in declarations where the true revolutionary vanguard is recognized.

5. The Social Revolution: the Ultimate Form of the Class Struggle

To the degree to which the contradictions of a society develop the class struggle acquires a sharper character, until the moment comes when the oppressed classes succeed in seizing political power and begin to destroy the old relations of production.

The conscious and violent process of destruction of the old relations of production and, therefore, of the social classes which are their bearers, is what Marxism calls *social revolution*.¹⁰

Every social revolution is the result of a combination of subjective and objective factors. The objective factors are the objective changes taking place in the national and international conjuncture. They are the material base of the revolution. The totality of objective factors necessary for the unleashing of a revolution constitute what Lenin called the **REVOLUTIONARY SITUATION**.

Let us see what he says in respect to this point in his article, "The Collapse of the Second International," written two years before the October Revolution:

To the Marxist it is indisputable that a revolution is impossible without a revolutionary situation; furthermore, it is not every revolutionary situation that leads to revolution. What, generally speaking, are the symptoms of a revolutionary situation? We shall certainly not be mistaken if we indicate the following three major symptoms: (1) when it is impossible for the ruling classes to maintain their rule without any change;

when there is a crisis in one form or another, among the 'upper classes', a crisis in the policy of the ruling class, leading to a fissure through which the discontent and indignation of the oppressed classes burst forth. For a revolution to take place, it is usually insufficient for 'the lower classes not to want' to live in the old way; it is also necessary that 'the upper classes should be unable' to live in the old way. (2) When the suffering and want of the oppressed classes have grown more acute than usual. (3) When, as a consequence of the above causes, there is a considerable increase in the activity of the masses, who uncomplainingly allow themselves to be robbed in 'peace time', but, in turbulent times, are drawn both by all the circumstances of the crisis and by the 'upper classes' themselves into independent historical action.

Without these objective changes, which are independent of the will, not only of individual groups and parties but even of individual classes, a revolution, as a general rule, is impossible. The totality of all these objective changes is called a revolutionary situation.¹¹

This revolutionary situation is defined by Louis Althusser as "an accumulation and exacerbation of historical conditions"¹² which fuse into a ruptural unity. But history has known numerous cases of revolutionary situations which were not turned into victorious revolutions, for instance in Germany in the 1860s, in Russia in 1905, in the first year of the first imperialist world war in various countries in Europe, etc. This shows us that objective conditions are not enough. In order to move from a revolutionary situation to a victorious revolution it is necessary to add the *subjective conditions* to the objective conditions:

... it is not every revolutionary situation that gives rise to a revolution; revolution arises only out of a situation in which the above-mentioned objective changes are accompanied by a subjective change, namely, the ability of the revolutionary *class* to take revolutionary mass action *strong* enough to break (or dislocate) the old government, which never, not even in a period of crisis, 'falls', if it is not toppled over.¹³

It is important to point out that these objective and subjective conditions which were for Lenin the necessary conditions for the triumph of a general insurrection cannot be used, therefore as a criterion to decide at what moment a prolonged popular war ought to begin, which has as one of its objectives, precisely, the creation of the conditions for a social revolution.

Summary

In this chapter we have looked at what we mean by class struggle, the different kinds of class struggle (economic, political, and ideological), the different forms in which these struggles can take place: legal or illegal, peaceful and violent, what should be the attitude of a Marxist-Leninist party towards them, and the strategy and tactics of the class struggle, concluding with an analysis of the objective and subjective conditions of the social revolution, the highest form of class struggle.

Questions

1. What is class struggle?

2. What is economic struggle?
3. What is ideological struggle?
4. What is political struggle?
5. What is the "political structure"?
6. What do we mean by 'political'?
7. What do we mean by kinds of struggle?
8. What do we mean by form of struggle?
9. What is the marxist thesis about forms of struggle?
10. What is a minimum program?
11. What is a maximum program?
12. Is only a maximum program revolutionary?
13. When is a political party carrying out a correct tactic?
14. What are the considerations which we must take into account in order to put forward a correct political slogan?
15. What is a social revolution?
16. What is a revolutionary situation?
17. What are the objective conditions of a revolution?
18. What are the subjective conditions of a revolution?

Themes for Reflection

1. Is it possible to combine electoral struggle with armed struggle?
2. When is a minimum program a revolutionary program?
3. What elements should you take into account to formulate the strategy which the revolution in your country ought to follow?
4. What are the minimum conditions necessary to successfully launch a prolonged popular war?

continued from 8

Notes

- ¹ Hallgren, Mauritz, *Seeds of Revolt* Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 1933. Hallgren has chronicled these spontaneous acts of militancy.
- ² *Daily Worker*, Jan. 11, 1930, p. 10.
- ³ *Communist*, Sept. 1930, Vol. 9, No. 9. "Our Failure to Organize the Unemployed," p. 793.
- ⁴ *Daily Worker*, Feb. 24, 1930, p. 1.
- ⁵ These are CP figures. *Communist* June 1930, Vol. 9, No. 6, p. 500.
- ⁶ *Party Organizer*, Nov. 1931, Vol. 4, No. 10. "For Clarity on the Forms of Organization of the Unemployed," pp. 2-6.
- ⁷ Quoted in Seymour, Helen. *When Clients Organize*. American Public Welfare Association: Chicago, date unknown (1937?), pp. 14-15.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 15. Seymour quotes a Philadelphia worker.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 14. Seymour quotes Herbert Benjamin, head of the National Unemployment Council.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 15. Seymour quotes *Call to Action*, a paper of the Port Angeles, Washington Unemployed Council and Affiliated Action Committee.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.
- ¹² *Party Organizer*, Aug. 1931, Vol. 4, No. 7. "How the Unemployed were Drawn Into Strike Activity," pp. 15-16.
- ¹³ *Party Organizer*, Aug. 1931, Vol. 4, No. 7. "Miner's Relief and the Steel Workers," pp. 28-29.
- ¹⁴ *Party Organizer*, Sept.-Oct. 1931, Vol. 4, Nos. 8-9, "Work Among Women; Attitudes Which Hinder Work," p. 30.
- ¹⁵ *Party Organizer*, Jan. 1932, Vol. 5, No. 1. "Uniting the Struggle of Employed and Unemployed," pp. 3-7.

NOTES

- ¹ Engels, Preface to the Third German Edition of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.
- ² Lenin, *Our Immediate Task* (1899).
- ³ Nikolai Bukharin, *Historical Materialism*.
- ⁴ Lenin, *What is to be Done?* Section III, part A.
- ⁵ In the chapter on ideology we saw how the existence of different ideological tendencies correspond to different social classes.
- ⁶ "In the ideological struggle . . . the defeat of auxiliaries and lesser figures has an almost insignificant importance; here it is vital that ones most eminent opponents be combatted . . . A science obtains proof of its effectiveness and vitality when it demonstrates that it knows how to confront the great champions of opposing tendencies, when it resolves, by its own means, the vital problems which they have posed, or otherwise shows that these problems are false ones." Antonio Gramsci, *Historical Materialism and the Philosophy of Benedetto Croce*.
- ⁷ Lenin, *Liberal and Marxist Conceptions of the Class Struggle* (1913).
- ⁸ Lenin, *Our Immediate Task*.
- ⁹ Lenin, *Guerrilla Warfare* (1906).
- ¹⁰ This has nothing in common with the simple process of achieving political independence (the independence of Latin American countries) nor with a simple change in government through a military takeover.
- ¹¹ Lenin, *The Collapse of the Second International* (1915).
- ¹² Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, p. 95.
- ¹³ Lenin, *The Collapse of the Second International*.
- ¹⁶ For a complete description of the March, see Baskin, Alex. "The Ford Hunger March—1932" in *Labor History*, Summer 1972, Vol. 13, No. 3, pp. 331-60.
- ¹⁷ Quoted in *The Literary Digest*, March 19, 1932, Vol. 112, No. 9, p. 9.
- ¹⁸ *Daily Worker*, Nov. 16, 1932, p. 1.
- ¹⁹ *Party Organizer*, Jan. 1933, Vol. 16, No. 1. "National Hunger March and the Next Step," pp. 1-3.
- ²⁰ *Communist*, May 1931, Vol. 10, No. 5. "On the Use of 'Transmission Belts' In Our Struggle for the Masses," pp. 409-23.
- ²¹ *Party Organizer*. Almost every issue contains a reference to overorganization.
- ²² *Communist*, Oct. 1931, Vol. 10, No. 9. "Resolution on Work Among the Unemployed," p. 838. *Communist*, "On the Use of 'Transmission Belts' . . ." pp. 409-23.
- ²³ *Communist*, "Resolution of Work . . ." pp. 838-50.
- ²⁴ *Communist*, Jan. 1932, Vol. 11, No. 1. "The Struggle Against Unemployment and the Communist Way Out of the Crisis," p. 18.
- ²⁵ Gannes got help from Comrade Nauman in the *Communist International*, Vol. 14, No. 1.
- ²⁶ *Communist*, April 1932, Vol. 11, No. 4. "The Role of American Finance Capital in the Present Crisis," pp. 325-37.
- ²⁷ *Communist*, "The Struggle Against Unemployment . . ." p. 18.
- ²⁸ *Communist*, June 1931, Vol. 10, No. 6. "Demagogy and Unemployment Insurance in the U.S." pp. 532-33.
- ²⁹ *Communist*, "The Role of American Finance Capital . . ." pp. 325-37.
- ³⁰ Karsh, Gorman. "The Political Left" in Derber and Yound, ed. *Labor and the New Deal*. University of Wisconsin Press: Madison, 1961.