

# RED HORIZON



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# INTERVIEW WITH AN RWU MEMBER

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*Within the past eight months, two major news stories have brought the working conditions of railroad workers in the U.S. into national headlines. In December of 2022, the U.S. federal government, under the auspices of the 1926 Railway Labor Act, stripped railroad workers of their legal right to strike against the heavily-monopolized Class I rail carrier companies, and then sent them back to work without any of the main provisions they had been demanding. Shortly thereafter, early this February, a Norfolk Southern (NS) freight train derailed while passing through the town of East Palestine, OH, spilling large quantities of toxic chemicals into the local land, air, and waterways. NS employees in the area were forced to help clean up the contaminated debris without proper protective equipment.*

*We spoke with Brian Lewis (“BL” in the interview), a founding member of Railroad Workers United (RWU), about how these stories fit into the longer history of class struggle in America, and what they can tell us about broader political and economic dynamics today. We are publishing an abridged version of the interview here; the full audio and transcript can be found at <https://marxiststudents.wordpress.com/red-horizon/> under Issue 3.*

# History of Labor Struggles on U.S. Railroads

[BL:] The railroads were one of the first industries to be somewhat organized, going back to the original, what they called, “brotherhoods.” Everything was sort of craft-oriented, so your switchmen, or your brakemen, or your engineers or firemen. It was pretty much an aside from a union in the sense that you negotiate the contract, because back then they didn’t even listen to unions for the most part, but it was a way for you to ensure that the people you were working with were good people and safe people, and also, if something bad happened to you, to provide a financial security net to maybe your spouse and your children.

You know, cause people were killed regularly back then; it was not easy, I mean you had to run across the top of the cars to put handbrakes on. That was the only way to stop the train back then, and it was based on the whistle from the steam engine who’d say, “OK!” and he blew the whistle out and you knew that meant, you knew you had to hit how many brakes, and how quickly, and then he’d whistle off and you’d have to go back and release them all, you know, and they were just on a pole that you hit on. And so, even if you had a train of 20 cars or something, you might have 3 or 4 brakemen, and each of the 3 or 4 brakemen would be in charge of 5 or 6 cars, just for him alone, you know. And you might start off with 4 brakemen on a nice icy night, and you’d only end up with 3, you know—what happened to the other guy? Trains didn’t go very fast back then, you might survive, but a lot of times you didn’t.

So those original brotherhoods were really there to make sure you were sober, a lot of it had to do with that. And they would determine whether or not you got into the union, or the brother-

hood. And in a way it really helped the railroad, too, because it kept accidents down, basically; you had the brotherhood actually making sure that you had good, upright standing citizens doing the work for them, safely, and they actually benefited from.

And then of course there was the Great Railroad Strike of 1873 [sic] . That was one of the first big upheavals in the United States, it just shut everything down. It’s a long story about that, but it basically had to do with a big crash in the market in 1873, and so there wasn’t a lot of jobs, a lot of money, and all that happened very quickly. And so the railroads decided, in order to survive, they were gonna have to reduce everybody’s pay. And, you know, everybody went, “you can’t!” In those days, if you got a job as a brakeman, you would make so much money to go from this city to that city. And then, if you didn’t have a job, you’d have to find your own way back. And if you took public transportation, sometimes the public transportation cost more than what you’d earn going the other direction. That’s how bad it was, just as an example.

So it really did shut down everything, and the big strike in 1873 [sic] really—the big area was West Virginia and Pennsylvania. And whole railroad yards were burned to the ground in Pittsburgh. So that really got the attention of the government. And they started worrying that, you know, this could happen again. Grover Cleveland, I think was involved ... and so, then you had a situation where unions were forming to negotiate contracts. And one of them, of course, in 1894, was Eugene V. Debs , who everybody’s heard of. And he said, all this business of running separate brotherhoods, and only caring about yourself, is a big mistake—we all work in the same industry, we should all honor each other’s picket lines, and all of that sort of thing, and so he would actually try to negotiate

and strike using the entire workforce of a given [company].

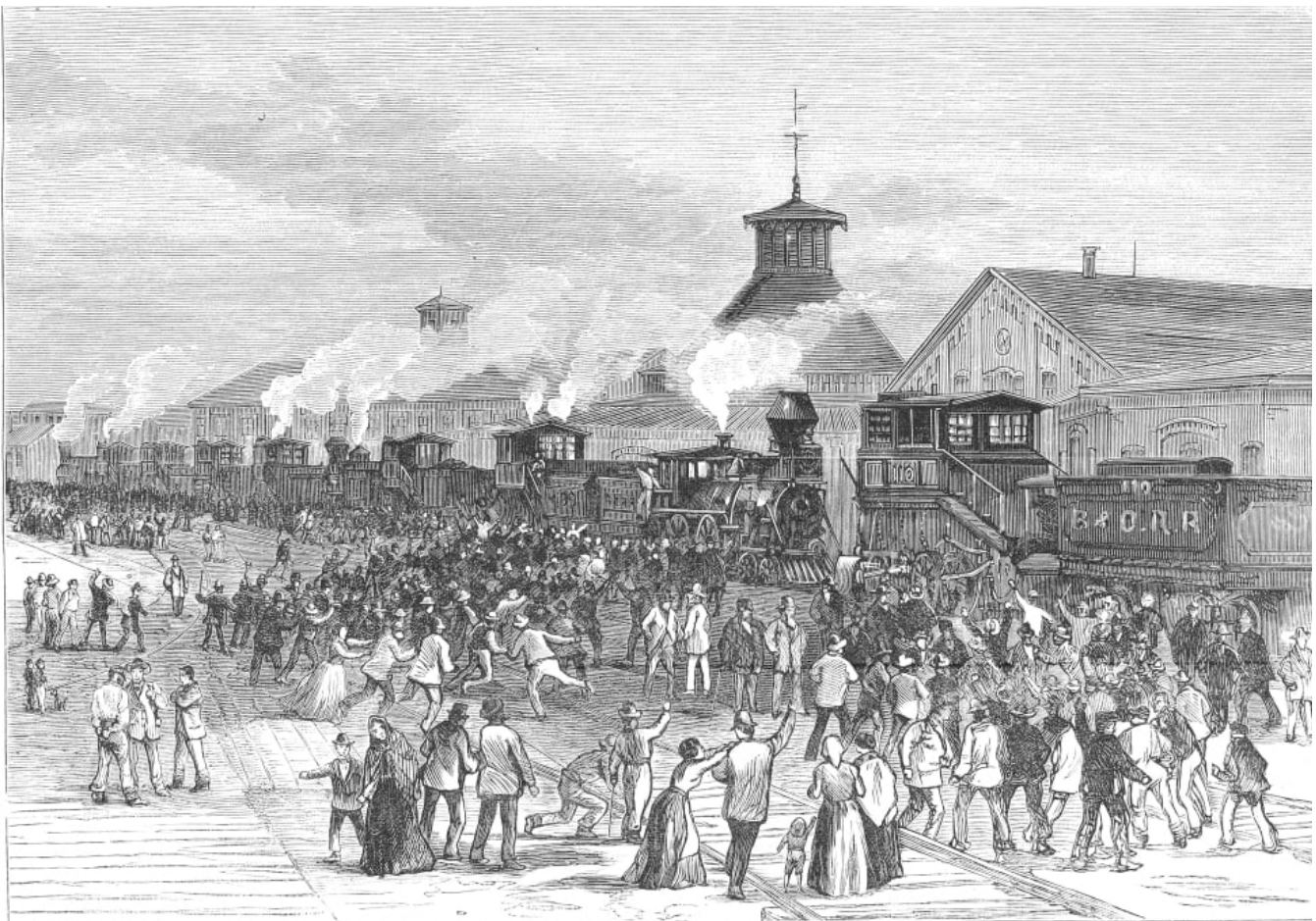
What was really good about [this and other strikes in the time period] was that it set up a procedure for handling disputes, the precursor to the Railway Labor Act , for instance. And also, what it led to, in less than fifteen years, probably even ten years, it led to an eight-hour day. Which nobody else had! Railroad switchmen had an eight-hour day. The one part about this, of course the railroad would never do that [without the strike threat]—”No, you’re working all day long.” You know.

But because they threatened to strike and they had this system in place for adjudicating issues like this, the government said, “Yes you will, you’ll provide them with an eight-hour day.” Very reasonable. And then of course a lot of other industries followed suit.

## Formation of Railroad Workers United

[BL:] Then after World War I [and the resurgence of monopoly rule over the railroads], there was a big shop strike in the 1920s, but railroads were very powerful, they continued to be that way. The unions became very powerful, the switchman’s union—SUNA [Switchmen’s Union of North America], as it was called—that had become the most militant of the railroad unions, along with the firemen, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen. These were powerful unions in their time.

I saw this for a lot of my career, and it was one of the things that we really needed to fix. So fifteen years ago or so, we said, let’s start an organization that we can all join that’s not a union—we’re all in our individual unions—but is going to look at the model that was set up by



THE GREAT STRIKE—BLOCKADE OF ENGINES AT MARTINSBURG, WEST VIRGINIA.—FROM PHOTOGRAPH BY D. BENDANN.

Eugene V. Debs back in the 1890s, of one big union for the entire industry. And what we'll do—we're not advocating that you join Railroad Workers United as a union—you join it only as an ancillary group to your own unions you're in. But then you apply pressure on that union through this organization to work together with the other unions.

I think we've certainly made our mark, and certainly in this last 10 months or so, since our four years of negotiation were going nowhere. And all the sudden, our issues became, like, the nation's issues as a whole. They started looking at what was going on: "What, you don't get any sick days?!"—that sort of thing. Nobody was complaining about the increase in pay we were gonna get, maybe some did, but you know that was never the issue. Working conditions are the biggest issue.

But they were craft unions, and so, yes, you would honor somebody else's strike. At least that part was good. But you could never coordinate: when it came time to do negotiations or something like that, if one union under that system would capitulate, then they would have a "pattern agreement" as they call it, and all the rest of the unions would be stuck with it. So they tried to stay together, but there was always a little sweetener here, a little sweetener there.

## Disaster in East Palestine

[BL:] I thought it was kind of strange when I was reading about East Palestine, that they were talking about, "Well [the defective wheel bearing on the train] was 250 degrees [Fahrenheit] higher than normal..." No! If you've got a bad bearing, it's running at 1000 degrees above normal. It takes like 3000 degrees for it to melt through. I've been on a train where I got a reading, I'm out in the middle of the desert, it's

nighttime, there's snow everywhere, and I get back there, and I didn't have to check all the axles, cause I can see it glowing red. When I got back there, I couldn't get any closer to it than from here to that sandwich board right there [several meters away], it was that hot. And all the snow all around it had been melted. We're talking really hot, you know! Put a piece of paper on it and it'd catch on fire. But it's just a solid block of steel.

So that's just one of my experiences with a hot box, and it was pretty damn hot. I mean, not 250 degrees, I mean I hear that, and I go, "Are you kidding?" I know there's been plenty of those kinds of things, where detectors didn't catch it in time, or whatever. But, a lot of the things about this are totally preventable. I don't understand what they were talking about when it came to heat of the bearing. That just doesn't make any sense to me.

Who's maintaining that detector? When's the last time it was maintained? The NTSB [National Transportation Safety Board] is looking at this, you know, and that's why they're having this big hearing. But it's interesting because, you know, we have lots of derailments, we have had pretty spectacular ones that are caused by any number of different things. We've had broken rail, bearings like this, that'll happen every once in a while. Track-caused, that's always a big one. Crew-caused, went into emergency or something bad, dragging equipment. Yeah, so we do have derailments on a regular basis, not that often, but I've been in several of my own, so I know how that is.

But, spectacular ones, like this one, where you've got chemicals spilled, big fires, that sort of thing. It happens. Not out of the question. So the question is, now they're paying attention to it. And I like to see that. What I'd like to see them do is, look into this very carefully, and see how

the lack of employees applied to this, and why the government agencies, the regulatory agencies, the NSTB and the Federal Railroad Administration, which is supposed to write the rules on this sort of thing, haven't been proactive all of this time. They've been letting this go on, and my question is: who's paying who off? Why aren't you doing your job? You're waiting til this [East Palestine] for it to happen?

Anyway, I think that's part of the problem. I'm not saying people are paying other people off, but I think the railroads are too powerful. And they have ways to just quell anybody's attempt to force them to hire more employees. To do a better job. To get rid of Precision Scheduled Railroading.

Technology is [allowing railroads to cut different corners]. What it does is says, "Oh, we can get rid of this employee now. We've got this going for us." But they lose something in the tran-

sition. And, just to give you an example, when I hired out there was a caboose in every train. The end of every train, didn't matter. Even if it was just what they called a cab-hop. Which was, you know, you were going some place to get a train, you didn't have any cars, but you had two engines and a caboose. You always did that. Caboose were always on a train, and you put them on the rear of whatever cars that you picked up or dropped off.

And one of the things about doing that was this issue of detection. Of something like a hot box. If you're in the caboose, you smell everything with your nose. If there was a hot box on that train, wherever that train went, that caboose went. And the smell goes straight back along the train, no matter what it is. Could be a hot box, burning something, a journal, or whatever. Whatever was going on on that train, you could smell it with your nose.



*Overhead image of the East Palestine derailment in Feb. 2023 and Norfolk Southern's deliberate, unscientific burning of railcars carrying toxic vinyl chloride.*

Unfortunately, all this technology has never figured out a way to replace the nose on a railroader. And I've always said that. You've got this new technology, you know, infrared check for heating bearings. You've got a lot of other [technologies]—but you're missing something. Every time you make a change, every time you adopt a technological advancement, you're missing something else.

## Major Tasks and Challenges in Workplace Organizing Today

[BL:] I tried to develop [a foundation of social cohesion] amongst our people here locally in Oakland [as a union leader]. So I worked together with the engineers local chairman, and even the people who were working in the shops, and whatnot—engine crews, and that sort of thing. And we'd do things, softball games, and picnics and all that, trying to create that cohesion.

But in terms of a sense of labor solidarity, and social cohesion, and that sort of thing—that was the hardest thing to develop. And a lot of people would go, “Oh, that's communist shit!” I mean even when I was a delegate in the national conventions every four years, they would even use that as a battering ram, you know, they didn't want somebody to be in a position, and they would just sneak around, and [whispering], “He's a communist.” You know, that kind of bullshit, didn't bother me then, but it was a shame that a lot of people just felt that way, that “That's communism!” It means nothing, it was just a label, a scary word.

We're all socialists. We're all railroad workers in the same crap, we have a lot of stuff in com-

mon, we need solidarity and all of that. But it always kind of suffered. It always troubled me. You know, Eugene V. Debs was The Great Socialist! How did that moniker become such a pejorative? Nonsense.

[RH:] With the huge development of the CIO in the 30s, as well, communists played a pretty key leading role in that movement, but also, not everybody who participated and even led that was a communist; I think there was a pretty strong coalition of, you know, progressive, leftist-type people as well. But yeah, you do need some leadership with a longer-term vision of, “Why are we even doing this stuff, and who are the antagonists, who are the people we can unite with?” Whatever word you call that, it's pretty important to have.

[BL:] Yeah, you need to have that, you need to have solidarity. And I think it's suffered—I mean I think that we had that in the 50s, the 40s—I mean, who am I to say, I was too young. But you look back, and you see how important the union hall was, and how everybody sort of stood by each other, helped each other out, you know. I can attest to certain things like that happening like that on the railroad. I certainly cared for my employees, the people I represented, I'd do anything for them. But to develop that part, that solidarity that exists, the social fabric that holds everybody together—that's the hardest part, I think, in this day and age, it really is.

*We encourage readers to check out the full interview to read more about railroad worker struggles in the United States, including more detailed tellings of specific strike movements, the development of Precision Scheduled Railroading, a technical analysis of train mechanics and how they malfunction in derailments, and racial discrimination in the railroad industry in the late 20th Century.*





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# THE PROLETARIAT: VANGUARD OF LIBERATION

SEBASTIAN ARROYO & SIRAJ



*The Paris Commune in 1871 was the first successful seizure of state power by the working class. Although the Commune was defeated only 2 months after its founding it holds historical significance and demonstrates that the workers are capable of banding together and overthrowing their oppressors. The flag reads “long live the commune.”*

Across the world wealth continues to be concentrated in the hands of a few despite being produced by the many. This fact is glaringly obvious in U.S. society where the richest people are all owners of mega-companies or are finance

investors (who also leech off workers in various ways) while 61% of the population lives paycheck-to-paycheck and has to bear ever-growing precarious conditions.<sup>1</sup> Because we are submerged in all kinds of ideas propagated by the

<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.forbes.com/forbes-400/> and <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/03/08/as-prices-rise-61-percent-of-americans-live-paycheck-to-paycheck.html>

bourgeoisie, we are led to believe that this is how things have been—and always will be. This is done to justify the current order, an order which can no longer sustain humanity and instead threatens to collapse it. The masses yearn for a better way of life for themselves and the coming generations. But to realize a brighter future, we have to cut through the bourgeois lies and uncover the root of the problems we face right now in our present society.

What is the fundamental cause of the suffering we see all around us, and who has the power to change the world for the better? Marxism tells us that, under capitalism, the proletariat is the leading force in the revolution to overthrow capitalism and institute socialism, and is capable of continuing to lead the struggle all the way to communism where poverty, classes, and all inequalities are abolished once and for all. Without a clear understanding of the revolutionary, historical role the proletariat plays in dealing the death blow to capitalism, any revolutionary attempts to raise our conditions of existence will undoubtedly lead to co-optation and deceit by the capitalists and their mouthpieces.

## **Classes and Class Interests**

Ever since the emergence of classes the destitution of the laboring people has been necessary for the obscene wealth of the elite. The enrichment of the elite forms a unity of opposites with the impoverishment of the masses. Marxism teaches us that class is determined by several factors, especially by who in society owns the tools and other means to produce goods (and therefore who doesn't and has to labor for the benefit and enrichment of others). Other factors determining class include: how production is structured (e.g. who labors and who directs the labor as manager, overseer, etc.), how the

goods produced are distributed, and various social and cultural privileges (e.g. who has access to education, influence in the government, etc.). So, in other words, we're looking at who owns the land, factories, machinery, real estate, etc. and how these people can use these means of production to amass wealth and power, cemented in various institutions such as the government, military, bureaucracy, corporations, and universities.

Capitalism, like other oppressive class societies that came before it, has on one hand, a class which produces the majority of the things needed by society as a whole, and on the other hand, another class which leeches off of the labor of the producing class. In slave society, the slaves and slave-masters; in feudal society, the peasantry and feudal lords and nobles; and in capitalism, the workers and the capitalists. Under slave society an average slave would toil away in conditions similar to (or even worse than) cattle to produce wealth necessary for slave-masters and government officials to live luxuriously. Today, the working class is the primary producer of the goods and services everyone uses and consumes; while the capitalist class takes that wealth, consumes a portion of it (for example with things like luxury yachts), and decides where to funnel the rest of the surplus to generate even more wealth and power for themselves.

Because of these class relations, the capitalists and the proletariat have antagonistic class interests. If society is setup in a way that one class can live off others and govern society how they wish, naturally the former will have an overall desire to keep things this way. In other words, if the ruling capitalist class' basic existence is based off living off the work of others, they have a deep-seated interest to fight to maintain and perpetuate this system. Conversely, it is in the interest of the oppressed and exploited classes (those producing the social wealth, yet largely



deprived of the fruits of their labor) to overthrow “their” rulers and establish a new order in which they are free from the shackles imposed on them by the ruling class. The capitalist system constantly deepens the masses’ overall immiseration, giving them no real say in how society is run, all while they toil away to make the rich richer.<sup>2</sup>

Capitalism brings about, for the first time in human history, an oppressed class which cannot liberate itself without also ridding the world of all forms of class oppression, and with it, *every form* of oppression and inequality. Previous classes’ liberation did not necessarily require this. This is due to the peculiar form of oppression the working class faces which requires them to deal with oppression at its root—that is, to overcome private property and class society as a whole.<sup>3</sup> In order to really grasp the significance of this point we will need to break from narrow and individualist notions of interests, and instead consider things in terms of the interests of a class as a whole. This is often particularly difficult for us Americans, as the United States is an extremely individualistic society, where even in progressive circles, slogans like “you do you” are ubiquitous.

To clarify this point, it can be helpful to refer to a quote from Marx and Engels:

*It is not a question of what this or that proletarian, or even the whole proletariat, at the moment regards as its aim. It is a question of what the proletariat is, and what, in accordance with this being, it will historically be compelled to do. Its aim and historical action is visibly and*

*irrevocably foreshadowed in its own life situation as well as in the whole organization of bourgeois society today.*<sup>4</sup>

## The Interests of the Oppressed

Each class society has had a key oppressed class which produces the vast majority of the social wealth for the given ruling class. However, the economic and political interests of each of these oppressed classes has differed based on their particular forms of oppression and exploitation. In slave society, slaves were literally considered to be sub-human by the ruling class and their ideologues. They were referred to as “the speaking tool” in Ancient Greece and Rome, and were legally the private property of slave masters. The slave masters were free to buy, sell, or even slaughter their slaves just as they could do with their livestock. As a class, slaves had a distinct and revolutionary interest to overthrow the entire rotten slave-system.

As a class, slaves were able to find their liberation from slavery simply by abolishing slave society, but not by abolishing class society and private property. Therefore, as a class, slaves achieved their liberation by becoming free people, often then getting ownership of some land (e.g. becoming peasants or free-holders) or becoming laborers or craftspeople. While the smashing of these old slave empires—not just in Europe, similar revolutions took place all over the world—was a tremendous step forward, it did not herald the ultimate liberation of humanity. The former slaves generally became a

2 With that said, individuals can and do go against their own class interests. For example, workers on strike express their class interest by fighting for better wages, work conditions, etc. while a worker who crosses the picket line and scabs for the employers (while perhaps getting some short-term gain from this such as being favored by management or higher pay) is at the same time injuring himself and striking workers by short-circuiting the workers’ resistance and promoting individualism by looking out for oneself at the expense of others.

3 Private property refers not to personal effects such as clothing, appliances, homes, etc. but rather private ownership of the means of production. These means of production are privately owned by the capitalists but are used by society as a whole.

4 Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family*, 1845, Ch.4

new oppressed class in a new type of class society, namely feudalism.<sup>5</sup>

Under feudalism, peasants have some degree of possession and private ownership of means of production (often things like sickles, hoes, or even draft animals) which they employed on plots of land, either owned by themselves or the landlords. Feudal lords, nobles, royalty, and emperors made up the ruling class under feudalism (often along with religious institutions like the Catholic Church and its functionaries). Often these lords owned big tracts of land which they would either rent out to the peasants or hire the peasants to work on. However, even when the peasants owned their own land, they still had to pay feudal rent to these lords, as well as taxes and tithes to the church (or other religious institutions) and other members of the ruling class. So, the peasants toiled all day in their fields and a huge portion of what they produced had to be directly handed over to the ruling class. This is obviously a step forward from slavery; however, it was far from the ultimate liberation of humanity from all oppression and exploitation. Often the peasants had next to nothing left to feed themselves and their families. Famines and mass starvation were regular occurrences under feudalism, as were massive peasant revolts and revolutions.

As a class, the peasantry finds their liberation in overthrowing the feudal system, in smashing the power of the lords, kings, and queens. The overthrow of the feudal system was a tremendous step forward for humanity. However, here too, the oppressed class found only partial liberation. Freed from the yoke of the feudals, the peasants quickly saw polarization in their fortunes. Some amassed big amounts of land and became rich, “moving up in the world” to become new landlords (during peasant revolutions before the complete defeat of feudalism) or (later on) capitalists. Some remained small farmers and petty-proprietors. However,

many lost their land because of debts, were outcompeted by wealthier farmers, or were driven off their land by the capitalists. Thus, while the feudal system of oppression and exploitation was abolished, the persistence of private property and classes led to the rise of new forms of oppression and exploitation, namely the rise and development of the capitalist system. Consequently, many peasants were directly or indirectly forced into the propertyless working-class.

In capitalist society, the proletarian (i.e. wage laborer) has no private property of his own (recall that here we mean private property in the means of production, not basic personal possessions like clothes or a phone) and nothing to sell other than his ability to work (i.e. his labor power). Workers are free in a double sense. They are free in the sense that they do not belong, as property, to any individual slave master and are not bound to a landlord or plot of land (often in feudalism, peasants were not free to buy or sell their land, but were tied to it under the system of serfdom). As such, they are “free” to enter the market as a member of society to sell their labor power free from any restrictions imposed by slavery or feudal bondage. They are also free of any means of production, i.e., they do not own any means of production (unlike the peasantry, which owned land, tools, and sometimes draft animals). This “freedom” impels the working class to make a living by entering the market for a wage and working for the capitalists. However, the proletariat, as a class, is not made to toil for a capitalist out of any force other than the pangs of hunger. In other words, the proletariat is “free” to starve.

Despite being “free,” the proletariat, much like the slaves, produces wealth that unconditionally belongs to the capitalist. The system of exploitation under capitalism is not as obvious as in the case of the slave or peasant. In past class societies we could openly see the exploitation that the slaves and peas-

5 It's worth noting that the smashing and collapse of the old slave empires was not a neat and clean process of slaves simply rising up and revolting for their freedom. There was a complex mixture of slave discontent, rising forms of bonded labor and a peasantry (along with a new exploitative class), invasions from the outside that the slaveholding ruling classes couldn't fend off, divisions among the ruling class, etc. that led to the emergence of feudalism. Although, the class struggle was the key component in ensuring that the former slaves did escape the shackles of slavery and the new society was able to take shape.

ants faced—the products of labor were visibly seized from their producers. Today, however, this oppression is mediated through the proletariat’s formal “freedom.”

Being deprived of means of production, workers engage in wage-labor and sell the only thing they do have—their labor power. The cost of this labor power is the total cost needed to reproduce their ability to work and bring up the next generation of laborers. This is because if workers do not have some basic housing, food, water, transportation, etc. they won’t be able to live to work the next day, to exercise their mental and manual efforts, and actually labor. These all factor into the cost of their labor power and are paid out in wages. Workers then, for a period of time (in most full-time jobs in the U.S. this is 8 hours a day), work utilizing the capitalist’s means of production to produce a good or service. Throughout the working day, the workers spend a portion of their time reproducing the cost of their labor power (i.e. producing the cost of basic necessities: food, clothing, rent, etc.). The rest of the time is spent producing above and beyond the cost of labor power which the capitalist pockets. Similar to how slaves might spend a minuscule portion of the day toiling away for their own food or clothing, workers toil away to make their daily bread. As the worker produces more wealth for the capitalist, they are impoverished at the same time; they are deprived of the very product they produce. This aspect of the capitalist mode of production was Marx’s ground shaking contribution to the study of economy which illuminated that beneath hourly pay still lurked unpaid labor, and this unpaid labor is precisely how the rich get richer while the poor get poorer.

In short, all the surplus product created by the proletariat belongs to the capitalists, who own the

means of production, while the working class receives more or less just enough (in the form of a wage) to stay alive and return to work. And, due to this, workers are forced to live in the shackles placed on them by private property. Because the proletariat are “free” members of society, their specific liberation necessitates, and is at the same time, an all-encompassing struggle against private property itself. Private ownership of the means of production is what lays the basis for the proletariat to sell its labor power (as they have no means of production of their own, and a worker must eat). In the process of using the private property of the capitalist, the workers continue to be impoverished, while the idle capitalists and politicians who rule from above continue to be enriched. The proletariat cannot end its oppression by solely breaking the shackles of chattel slavery or by solely overthrowing landlordism since, in principle, the worker is a free person yet still subject to economic and political oppression. Instead, the proletariat has no choice but to end private property in its entirety by overthrowing capitalism and building a communist society based on the collective ownership of the means of production. In doing so, the proletariat abolishes the vestiges of slavery and feudalism, as well as capitalism—all forms of class oppression.

The proletariat’s quest to overthrow private property and oppression does not stop at overcoming class inequalities. The general task the working class has (to overthrow oppression as such) means that it cannot stop until all particular forms of oppression have been eradicated—this includes racism, patriarchy, anti-immigrant sentiments, etc. Although these forms of oppression have emerged as a result of society being split into classes, they have a distinct (but related) existence.<sup>6</sup> This means that, as the working class seeks to abolish class distinctions and transform relations between people, it has to con-

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6 For example, the emergence of racism in the U.S. was tied up with certain historical circumstances during the colonial period that allowed for noxious ideas and practices to grip the masses. With the proliferation of slavery and indentured servitude, there was a need to ideologically justify the existence and reproduction for these forms of bondage. Thus, the colonial elite employed different legal and extra-legal methods for dividing up the masses to maintain their exploitative position, and justify the ruling order. Although chattel slavery has been abolished, old ideas and structures die hard. We encourage curious readers to check out early chapters of Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States* and Theodore W. Allen’s *The Invention of the White Race*. These texts directly go against any notions of different people being “inherently suspicious” of the “other” and similar ideas which serve to mask the origins of different social contradictions.

cretely deal with the oppressive ideas and structures that were created throughout the course of class society. As such, it is not enough to say that economic transformations under socialism will automatically lead to tackling the oppression of women, or the oppression of Black Americans, etc. and so these struggles must be carried out in relation to how the particular form of oppression exists in our society (e.g. changing the ideas that uphold oppressive practices).

We have a wealth of concrete experience tackling the complex social inequalities from the history of various revolutionary movements to demonstrate the leading role of the working class in addressing these forms of oppression. For example, the question of women's liberation in China was a pressing one. Prior to the revolution, China was a deeply patriarchal society in which women were often literally treated as property. The practice of buying and selling brides was widespread, the feet of girls were bound at young ages (crippling women for generations), women were taken as slaves by landlords, and even married women of peasant farmers were seen as "fair game" for the ruling classes to take as sexual exploits. Women generally had limited opportunities for education and employment beyond household tasks due to their second-rate status.

In short, there was no lack of oppressive practices. However, as Jan Myrdal notes in his *China Notebook* (1975-1978):

*It is not just that people are oppressed; they are also given thoughts and notions about their own worthlessness and inferiority which oppress them. To settle accounts with that inner oppression is important.*

Many of the overtly backwards practices were abolished through the course of the revolutionary movement in China. The Communist Party took seriously the need to address women's liberation and change the ideas among the masses. As a result, they formed "Women's Associations" which organized and encouraged peasant women to lift their heads and speak out against their oppression (especially by the big landlords). Women received large chunks of land during the land reform programs, something unprecedented, as poor peasant women did not generally own land prior to the revolution. Peasant women had started receiving education and became literate, allowing them to play a leading role in collective work and society. Prostitution, which was widespread in China and kept women in sexual slavery was completely eliminated. Overall, this time period saw a marked shift in the attitudes of the masses towards women as the new socialist ideas challenged the old traditions that held women were inferior to men. There were many strides in uprooting old patriarchal ideas and practices. Although, there was still a ways to go before the inequality between men and women were leveled (and certain ideas still had not been fully overcome, such as beliefs about women having to be the ones to rear children, etc.), there were great breakthroughs made prior to the defeat of the revolution in 1976.<sup>7</sup>

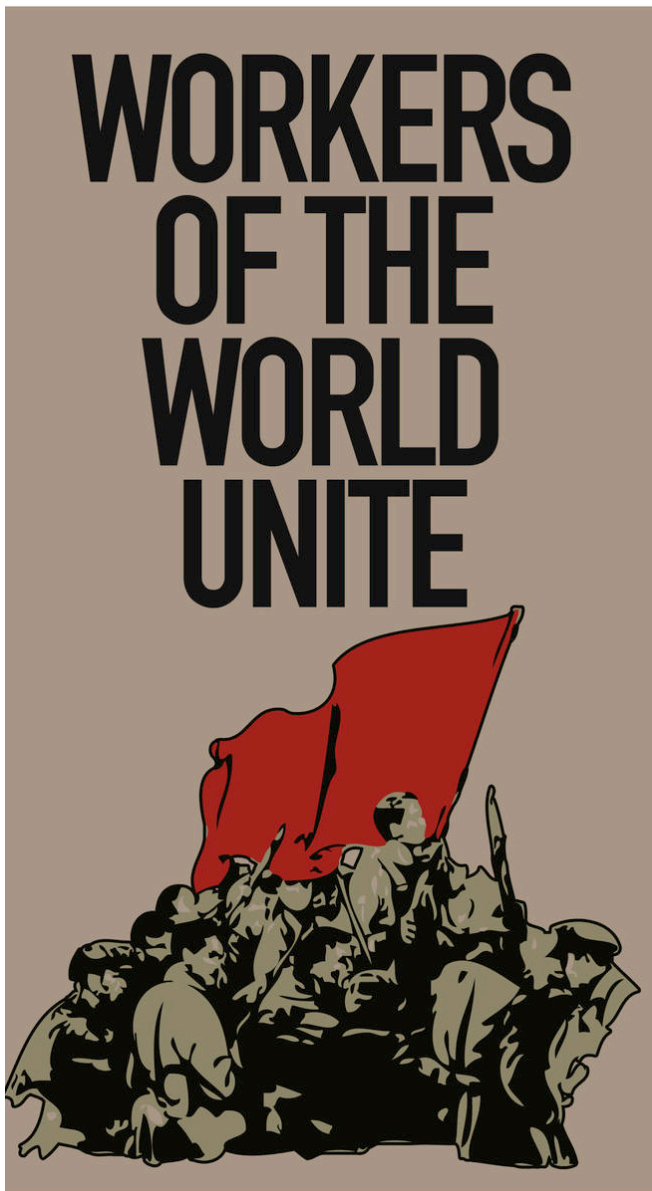
Despite the fact that many of the advances made through the course of these revolutions were reversed following counterrevolutions from within (e.g. the defeat of the revolution in China saw the return of prostitution, the patriarchal family form made a comeback over collective child rearing, etc.), their experiences are

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7 To understand how the struggle against class oppression is linked to the struggle against various forms of oppression like patriarchy it is helpful to read in detail about the struggles in the socialist period in China. There is a wealth of material available on women's liberation in revolutionary China. For a brief overview we recommend reading the "Liberation of Women" section in the document "Evaluating the Cultural Revolution in China and its Legacy for the Future." Link: <https://www.mlmsg.com/attachments/article/72/CRpaper-Final.pdf>



rich and instructive. They show us that the proletariat has an important duty to tackle these complex social issues in a manner that isn't reductive and truly advances the revolutionary struggle for a society without oppression. For the proletariat to truly abolish the conditions of its life—in particular its condition under capitalism to fall deeper and deeper into impoverishment (both economically and politically) despite being “free”—it must abolish all the associated wretched conditions of life for the masses of people. As it is the only class in the history of human society to be served this task, it also must play the leading role in the liberation of mankind.



## Conclusion

If humanity is to realize a world where poverty, inequality, and misery—all oppression as it exists—is wiped off the face of the planet, it is of great importance that we see clearly that the working class and its real political party, the Communist Party, in coordination with all other downtrodden peoples and oppressed classes, must rise and smash the capitalist system. In its place, a new socialist society will be built that can truly unleash the floodgates of the masses' initiative and harness mankind's ingenuity to lift ourselves from the ills of the old society.

There is no politician from this or that party, no advocating for this or that reform, that can ultimately eradicate private property and *all* oppression. This can only be done by revolution spearheaded by the workers of the world. Therefore, there is a crying need for Marxists from all walks of life to go among the working class, expose this rotten capitalist system for what it truly is, and prepare the workers to muster their strength and achieve their world historical goal of shattering the tight grip private property, oppression, and the capitalists have on the masses at large. As Marx and Engels once said:

*Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communist revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. Workingmen of all countries unite!*



洞庭女民兵

*Women's Militia From Dongting Lake, 1978*

**Militia Women (Inscription on a Photograph)  
by Mao Zedong**

How bright and brave they look, shouldering five-foot rifles

On the parade ground lit up by the first gleams of day.

China's daughters have high-aspiring minds,

They love their battle array, not silks and satins.

# PROSTITUTION: LIBERATION OR SUBJUGATION?

HELEN OCHS & DEENA HAMPTON



Whether it is the glamorous lives of escorts depicted in movies or the brutal reality for homeless women selling sex on streetcorners, prostitution and the larger sex industry is present throughout all levels of capitalist society. Prostitution is incredibly oppressive despite the popular narrative present in the liberal feminist movement that flips this reality on its head. Liberal ideology justifies prostitution by using flowery language, empty slogans, and vague notions of “empowerment” and “reclamation” to paint a thick layer of obfuscation over the brutal existence of the sex trade. Through the study of the development of prostitution, it becomes undoubtedly clear that prostitution was born out of the emergence of antagonistically opposed classes, the patriarchal relations established with the rise of class society and was used as a systemic mechanism for the subjugation of women.

*1929 poster from the USSR which reads “Stop! (from being a prostitute).” The liberation of women from all of their oppressive social conditions is integral to socialism and is something that has been wrestled with in both the USSR and China in their respective revolutionary periods.*

For starters, prostitution can be defined simply as sexual acts being exchanged for money, which we argue is not a form of work. In this sense, we will be using the term prostitute instead of sex worker throughout the article. Opposing the use of the term “sex worker” isn’t because we believe prostitutes are any less human or have any less of an interest in realizing a society rid of institutionalized oppression that instead guarantees the general uplift, health, and safety of the masses.

The very opposite is true. Rather, we believe the term “sex worker” ultimately sanitizes what is actually happening to the women, men, and children ensnared in this industry. In fact, the gender breakdown in the sex industry is 80% women to 20% men.<sup>1</sup> Although the sex industry arose out of the patriarchal oppression of women, this institution also oppresses men through the violence of patriarchal culture. Throughout the article we will at times refer to prostitutes as women, but the points made about the oppressive nature of the sex industry equally apply to the men and boys subjugated by prostitution.

What are the different forms prostitution can take? Generally, someone who is a prostitute falls into one of three categories:

First, legal or semi-legal prostitutes, in places like Nevada where prostitution is legal, or in gray area places like some Nordic countries where only traffickers and Johns (the buyer of prostitution) are penalized.

Second, street/survival prostitutes—they are often homeless, addicted to drugs, and are basically one step above being in sexual slavery. Al-

though liberal media sources and ideologues refer to this as “survival” prostitution, we believe this distorts the basic fact that people would not be prostitutes if they did not need money to survive in class society, but more on this later. The last subcategory is sex trafficked people, including those who are imprisoned in sexual servitude, with no way to leave, have exorbitant financial contracts with their traffickers and others, and/or are kept detained in other ways. A much smaller category outside of these includes BDSM (Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission, Sadochism and Masochism) small business owners, who are often college educated, in a higher class position, and who have a relative degree of “freedom” in choosing clients who will be “safer”—this is an incredibly small section of the sex industry, yet their type of prostitution is often portrayed by the pro-sex trade industry rhetoric as the dominant situation for prostitutes. But since an estimated 90% of prostitutes are under a pimp, are not in the same position as BDSM escorts, most of our analysis will focus on the situation for the dominant percentage of prostitutes.<sup>2</sup>

Thirdly, we’ll provide a brief overview of the scale and dominant character of the sex industry. Because of “woke” media, the types of prostitution that initially come to the fore were typically the higher end escort and other social media-based ways of being able to pimp oneself out. And because of the ways that these are romanticized, they misconstrue our conception of the scale of, and dominantly violent elements, of the sex trade. Prostitution generates billions of dollars for traffickers who use their blood money to expand the sex trade, alongside other illicit trades that harm people, such as the drug trade. Illegal sex trafficking by itself generated

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1 <https://www.vice.com/en/article/evm5vw/nearly-one-in-five-sex-workers-are-men>

2 Catherine Goldmann, “Current Assessment of the State of Prostitution”, Fondation Scelles, <https://www.fondationscelles.org/pdf/current-assessment-of-the-state-of-prostitution-2013.pdf>

\$99 billion according to the International Labor Organization.<sup>3</sup> And when looking at modern-day slavery across the globe, over half of those held in chains are women and girls in the sex industry. To put this into perspective: if the world sex trade was a corporation, it would be the most profitable one in the world. To paint an even more disturbing picture, the average age at which a woman enters prostitution is between twelve and sixteen.<sup>4</sup> Even further, the average life span for prostitutes is thirty-four years.<sup>5</sup> Yet, the movies of the ruling class want us to see prostitution as the gateway for women to high class lifestyles or, at the very least, financial security. For most women it costs them their mental health, safety, and ultimately, lives.

Jeffrey Epstein, a member of the ultra-wealthy who made millions off of sex trafficking, shows that this illegal sex trade does not just happen in the shadows, led by nameless, faceless pimps on the fringes of society. Rather, these pimps at the top of the food chain are the very bourgeois elements that control our financial system. They service the politicians and major capitalists; many members of the elite are deeply embedded in the sex trade. JP Morgan helped Epstein move blood money made off of the sale of the abuse of women and children.<sup>6</sup> Many members of the ruling class were his “friends” from Bill Clinton, Donald Trump, Bill Gates, Mohammed bin Salman, Kevin Spacey, Prince Andrew, and Leon Black among others.<sup>7</sup> Epstein’s operation went far beyond just making money; the sex tapes he recorded of fellow members of the ruling class gave him a powerful tool to

blackmail the capitalist elites. How can we reform this away, when the very people who are supposed to “solve” the problem are the major players, who control wealth, wield political power, and have an endless drive to consume more and more prostitutes for sexual gratification or to fatten their pockets?

But, maybe this information alone hasn’t been convincing enough, and some of you may still be left wondering why exactly prostitution itself is oppressive. In order to further break this down, we’ll answer some of the burning questions on the minds of those contemplating the role that the sex trade plays.

Whether it’s the hyper-globalized networks of sex trafficking today, or the earliest sale of women during the emergence of class society, prostitution has played a key role in the oppression of women. This oppressed position has not changed, although it has taken on different forms in different periods of times (and under different forms of production). So long as production is dictated by the ruling class which parasitically maintains its wealthy existence off of the labor of the working class, production will only serve to maintain capitalist society, a class society rife with inequality and oppression. This very system of production generates a section of the population that owns no means of producing wealth and thus must sell their ability to work or their body for sex to scrape by (among other things such as selling drugs on the side, etc.). To work for a wage or enter prostitution is not a choice made from true freedom, but due

3 “How profitable is the exploitation of people? Sadly, extraordinarily so,” International Labour Organization, [https://www.ilo.org/newyork/voices-at-work/WCMS\\_244965/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/newyork/voices-at-work/WCMS_244965/lang--en/index.htm)

4 Michael Shively, Kristina Kliorys, Kristin Wheeler, Dana Hunt, “A National Overview of Prostitution and Sex Trafficking Demand Reduction Efforts, Final Report,” The National Institute of Justice, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/238796.pdf>.

5 John J. Potterat, Devon D. Brewer, Stuart Brody, “Mortality in a Long-term Open Cohort of Prostitute Women”, *American Journal of Epidemiology*, Volume 159, Issue 8, 15 April 2004, Pages 778–785, <https://doi.org/10.1093/aje/kwh110>

6 <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/25/business/jpmorgan-jeffrey-epstein.html>

7 <https://www.businessinsider.com/famous-people-jeffrey-epstein-money-manager-sexual-trafficking-connected-2019-7>

to economic and social circumstances produced by capitalist production in society. And like the oppression of the working class, the oppression of women will not cease so long as we continue to live in a class-based society. Hence, the patriarchy will only be swept away with the dissolution of class society through socialist construction and the struggle for a classless, communist society. But to understand this conclusion, we have to start by deeply investigating some of the most pressing questions regarding prostitution and break down its oppressive role historically as well as presently.

## The Emergence of Prostitution

Prior to the establishment of patriarchal relations and the concurrent division of society into classes of the exploiters and exploited, women were treated as equal to men in public life. Early hunter-gatherer societies, and in some regions, horticulture based societies were more egalitarian as a result of how work was done and how the surplus generated through production was divided. Production was done on communal land with collectively owned tools, as a result of the low levels of production, and thus labor and the products of this labor were for the well-being of the tribe.<sup>8</sup> Communal economic production produced communal relations, where both sexes played roles that were seen as equally important to economic as well as social life. Women in particular were key to maintaining the life of their children due to humans needing to breastfeed, which necessitated that they stay closer to the home to care for their children, carry out agricultural duties, and hunt small game in some cases. Liberal proponents often claim that the oppression of women stems from

this division of labor between sexes, using the fact that women played a dominant role in the household as their evidence. But countless archaeological information about primitive communal societies flips this rhetoric on its head and rather paints a picture of the grave respect women received in society and how crucial their role was in production.

With the development in means of production, a surplus of resources was generated. Although struggle occurred over how the surplus would be appropriated, over time, this surplus began to get funneled into the hands of a smaller group of the collective. The once communal ownership over land, cattle, and tools became consolidated into the hands of the ruling minority and converted into private property, which were dominantly male heads of households. This economic sidelining of women (and the propertyless in general) through the concentration and development of private property had serious effects on the economic and social structure of the commune. In general, humans were now owned, worked, and sold like property through enslavement and the reproductive ability of women, in particular, was handled like private property through their sale into marriage. The sum of these economic developments required an organ to further solidify and secure the rule and interests of those that owned property over the exploited class: the state. The state institutionalized the subordination of women and children to the male heads of households under a patriarchal pattern of ownership.

One of the key ways, but not the only way, that women's subordination was institutionalized was through the birth of prostitution. Women were largely enslaved to the house, sold off to

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<sup>8</sup> Low levels of production leads to collective production/distribution as this ensures the survival of the collective with limited resources. Once resources began being produced at an excess the surplus began to be unequally divided amongst the collective giving birth to private property and class society.

make debt payments, and tied to monogamy while their husbands practiced polygamy. This was written into law in many cases, such as in Athens. Women were relegated to a subordinated position of having to reproduce for their husbands, working as slaves, or entering prostitution. These were the options that existed once patriarchy and prostitution became institutionalized under class society. Although the patriarchal property system was not the first semblance of the oppression of women in society, patriarchal relations institutionalized this oppression and prostitution by tying it to property relations. This would in turn severely hinder women's role in public life for centuries and overall perpetuate women's subordination into the future class societies up until this day.<sup>9</sup>

## **Prostitution is Not Work Nor “the World’s Oldest Profession”**

Prostitution is falsely decried the “world’s oldest profession.” This is often posed as being a liberatory statement. But it is completely ahistorical. Women engaged in productive labor far before prostitution. Calling the sexual enslavement of women “the oldest profession” promotes the false idea that women have always been, and will always be, in an oppressed position due to their sex. As described above, specific economic conditions and the division of society into classes encouraged the development of prostitution and general oppression of women.

Likewise, in our present capitalist society, production of goods and services are driven by the insatiable thirst of the capitalist to grow its wealth and power. The growing wealth of the

capitalists from extracting the surplus the workers produce creates widespread misery for the masses who are being exploited. Labor in and of itself, the act of producing, is not what creates this impoverishment. Instead, it is the fact that the labor is being done to generate wealth for the capitalists, instead of the whole society, and that the masses have no choice but to work or starve, while the capitalists leech off their work.

While prostitution is a product of the birth of classes with the emergence of slave society, the oppression that exists with prostitution is distinct from the exploitation of the worker by the capitalist. Private property, and the social relations that arise out from it, oppress women. This is the impetus for women to either be forced into prostitution, or seek it out on their own accord—either because they need to escape poverty and the conditions that come with it, or for the quite miniscule group of petty-bourgeois prostitutes who take up an anti-labor attitude. Even in a society rid of economic exploitation, the hypothetical existence of prostitution would maintain its oppressive nature. This is because it is the act of prostitution in and of itself that oppresses the prostitute, as they are having sex or other sexual activities with someone who they otherwise wouldn't, for money. Under any and all conditions prostitution will always be void of consent—if people wanted to have sex with each other, then why would money enter the equation? To be rid of oppression, sex should necessitate consent. Sex is an important aspect of humans connecting with each other and is an inherent part of life similar to labor. But prostitution is not necessary for society, and indeed is bad for the health of the people. The sex industry is the normalizing of sexual abuse of women, made “legitimate” under capitalism

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<sup>9</sup> For more on the development of patriarchy, we recommend reading *The Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State* by Engels alongside *The Creation of Patriarchy* by Greta Lerner, which contains more current anthropology, but offers liberal reformist solutions to ending patriarchy.

through the surface level “equal exchange” of money.

Calling prostitution oppressive does not mean we believe that prostitutes are the problem. They are the ones being oppressed by pimps, traffickers, and johns, and more generally, the capitalists at the top. But criticizing prostitution is often conflated with being for the oppression of those in the sex trade. This muddying of the water is only advantageous for the ruling class, who want people to just accept that prostitution is “natural” along with class society. We must expose the larger woke culture trend that calling prostitution exploitative is “criminalizing” and that even saying the word “prostitution” is oppressive. This is a paper-thin façade for the ruling classes’ open acceptance and promotion of sexual abuse of the masses at all levels of the society.

## Prostitution and “Consent”

Choice is an illusion for women when it comes to prostitution. The major coercive forces are violence and cash. There is no consent when these forces are at play. Women are forced into an economic position where they have limited options about how to earn some money to survive, with prostitution being one of these limited options. When forced into hardship, with little to no option other than to sell your body, there is no consent here. Bourgeois ideas of consent also warp the masses’ understanding of their exploitation. While we “agree” to work and can “choose” who we work for, the real option is between working and starving. But for prostitutes, the 90% who are under a pimp, there isn’t even that illusion of consent. Instead, they are living in sexual slavery. Women are co-

erced into the sex industry initially through economic desperation, addiction, escaping abuse, etc. Many are lured by someone who they thought was their boyfriend and is actually a pimp who uses mental and physical abuse to coerce women into prostitution. Some women and girls are trafficked by their own family members. The majority of prostitutes are not just forced into the industry due to economic circumstances but are truly physically and violently coerced—completely entrapped in the sex trade with no option to leave. This makes prostitution distinct from the exploitation of workers under capitalism who at least have the choice to choose a new boss to exploit them. Prostitutes are often sold from pimp to pimp like chattel. This is not unique to street prostitutes but also includes “high class escorts” who are also included in the earlier statistic. The glamorous life of a high-class prostitute is pure fantasy created by bourgeois media.

Rachel Moran, a former prostitute, put it clearly when she said:

*They imagine prostitutes as entering or leaving five-star hotels, wearing sharp designer suits and high heels, and the look set off with vivid red lipstick. I’ve walked into more hotels more times than I could count, wearing sharp suits, high heels, and every shade of lipstick. None of that changed what was going on in my heart or in my mind, and none of it made any difference to the bodily experience involved here. None of it was of any practical benefit to my mouth, breasts, or vagina. What was going on was the very same thing that was going on when I was lifting my skirt in the backstreet alley. The nature of prostitution does not change with its surround[ings]. It does not morph into something else because your ass is rubbing against white linen as opposed to roughed concrete.<sup>10</sup>*

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<sup>10</sup> Rachel Moran, *Paid For*, 100.



One former porn actress, Robin Rivera, explained in *America: The Farewell Tour* that as she continued to work in the porn industry, she started to see the girls around her who claimed to feel empowered become further and further depressed. Many of the women who were in the industry committed suicide, and she herself struggled with PTSD due to her experiences as a porn actress.<sup>11</sup> Death rates for prostitutes and porn actors (there is a lot of overlap between the two) in the US are sky high. Across the world, prostitutes face high murder rates, and mental health problems. In one study of prostitutes in low and middle-income countries, the pooled prevalence of depression was 41.8% with 22.8% experiencing suicide ideation and 6.3% a recent suicide attempt.<sup>12</sup> People tell themselves all sorts of comforting lies to survive the sex industry, but it takes a heavy physical and emotional toll.

This false image is also upheld by the very fact that prostitutes and porn actors often must feign enjoyment of their sexual abuse so they can get it over with faster, and ingratiate themselves to the John to protect themselves, or to produce “good” content. The reality of the sex industry is not the glorified picture that is painted on social media by the upper strata of OnlyFans models, or the scenes in movies that romanticize the lives of prostitutes as glamorous and edgy. Really, this is a faux progressive bending of the “happy hooker trope” which declares that women actually enjoy sexual abuse, and even want it.

## Decriminalization and the Nordic Model

The ruling class tries to make us believe that we can reform our way out of the violence of the sex industry, and free women from the chains of patriarchy without overthrowing them. Liberals point to two main reforms, Decriminalization and the Nordic Model as justification for the reform of prostitution instead of the revolutionary overthrow that is necessary for its abolition.<sup>13</sup>

Decriminalization/legalization has been statistically proven to increase sex trafficking and give the black market free reign. In Germany and the Netherlands, there has been expanded trafficking and an “explosion in child prostitution.”<sup>14</sup> Areas with legalized prostitution are hotbeds for trafficking, where women from oppressed countries all over the globe, mainly in Asia, Eastern Europe, and Africa are brought to legal brothels. These women and girls, victims of the imperialist plunder of the globe, not only have their economies dominated by other countries but are also stolen from their homelands. Their very bodies are under the thumb of pimps and traffickers, many of which directly work with the capitalists who plundered their country in the first place. In Nevada, legalization has not led to the abolition of the illegal sex trade, but the proliferation of it. Most recent estimates of the whole of the sex trade in the state indicates that rates of prostitution are 63% higher than the next highest state in the country.<sup>15</sup>

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11 Chris Hedges, *America: The Farewell Tour*, 138.

12 Tara S. Beattie, Boryana Smilenova, Shari Krishnaratne, April Mazzuca, “Mental health problems among female sex workers in low and middle-income countries: A systematic review and meta-analysis”, *PLOS Medicine*, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1003297>

13 Maine is the first state to adopt the Nordic Model, as of this June. The tide towards these type of reforms is really becoming mainstream in the US, with the ACLU also advocating for decriminalization. See <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2023/06/30/maine-sex-work-decriminalization/>. Avoid the paywall here <https://archive.ph/sIkIz> and <https://www.aclu.org/news/topic/its-time-to-decriminalize-sex-work>

14 Chris Hedges, *America: The Farewell Tour*, 153.

15 <https://awakenreno.org/heres-why-nevada-is-not-safe-for-women/>

A surface level analysis of legalization in Nevada leading to some more basic measures in place for prostitutes ignores the fact that the majority of prostituted women within the state are illegally trafficked at unprecedented levels relative to the rest of the country, and that this legalization has had the direct effect of proliferating the trade in the state. Therefore, while legalization may have led to some protections in place for the small fraction of prostitutes in legal brothels, the introduction of legalization has led to an increase in levels of violence as a result of the boom in the illegal sex trade. Bekah Charleston, a former prostitute said:

*There's this idea that somehow by legalizing it and kind of quarantining it within these brothels, that it makes it safe and healthy...well, I was actually trafficked through the legal system. My trafficker would use the brothels as a form of punishment. If you weren't making enough money, if you were getting arrested too often, he would send you to the brothels. Because then he had other pimps watching over you, and he knew that you'd be forced to get off your butt and make money because the brothels aren't going to let you sit around and say no all the time.<sup>16</sup>*

An audit of brothels in Nevada found that 30% of the women had red flags for sex trafficking.<sup>17</sup> With the sex trade, even if legalization is in place, does this fundamentally change the nature of the sale of one's body to be violated, often violently or perversely, and used solely as a disposable object? Does this magically bring about consent? The sex trade is violent, and often the trafficking and disappearance of women is common. As we've seen, legalization does not bring about the end of abuse and violence in the trade but regulation for a minority of pros-

titutes and the proliferation of the trade and further violence for the majority.

The Nordic model criminalizes the people who buy sex (Johns) and those who own prostitutes (traffickers/pimps). One positive aspect of this is that it does not criminalize prostitutes themselves. Of course, those who are being trafficked or engaging in prostitution shouldn't be jailed, and thus the onus should fall on the person violating another person's body. But these laws cannot root out sex trafficking fully, as the masses still have no economic or political control, and prostitution continues to be profitable for the ruling elite and a mechanism for social control as well.

Studies have shown that partial criminalization yielded no statistically significant decrease in violence against prostitutes. What's more, in places such as in Johannesburg SA, partial criminalization has just allowed for extortion by the cops of the clients, gaining a bribe from clients over putting them in jail. This had no effect on reducing prostitution. Bribery was a socially acknowledged thing that just led to men knowing they had to cough up more money than what they paid for sex in order to escape jail.<sup>18</sup> Maybe this law would have an effect on sex industry in lower income areas, but clearly wealthier men had no problem paying a higher price to avoid jail and still purchase sex. But is a return to women being pimped out exclusively to the elite really a resolution to prostitution?

With an institution such as prostitution, there is no place for reforms. Advocating for reforms to prostitution is a dead end. Prostitution can only

16 <https://sierranevadaally.org/2021/01/21/nevadas-illegal-sex-industry-is-the-nations-largest-and-a-hub-for-sex-trafficking/>

17 Rio Lacanlale, "Audit finds signs of human trafficking at brothels in Nevada county", *Review Journal*, <https://www.review-journal.com/crime/sex-crimes/audit-finds-signs-of-human-trafficking-at-brothels-in-nevada-county/>

18 All of this is described in great depth in "Radical Feminist Harms on Sex Workers" by India Thusi. Although the author's conclusions are incorrect (calling for full decriminalization), she provides good empirical data of what the Nordic Model looks like in action. <https://scholarlycommons.law.cwsl.edu/fs/242>



be abolished through uprooting all of its economic underpinnings. While some individual prostitutes can leave the sex industry, the greater oppressive machine will continue without revolutionary struggle. There is no basis to show prostitutes a way forward through reforms to their situation, to do so would promote the maintenance of the institution as a whole.

## **Abolishing Prostitution: Lessons From the Chinese Revolution**

Prostitution has been completely stamped out already once in modern history. We need only look to revolutionary China's experience. The USSR made significant steps to reduce the scale of prostitution, but it still existed at the fringes of society in the underground market and once again blossomed with the restoration of capitalism. In contrast, China, which reached a higher level of socialist construction, was able to completely uproot prostitution—a fact that even

non-Marxists see as a significant historic development. Unfortunately, prostitution in China too came back with a force with the restoration of capitalism after the end of the cultural revolution.

How did the masses of China eradicate prostitution? By studying prostitution closely and uprooting it from the economic base. The masses in China realized that class society itself was the underpinning of prostitution, which worked hand in hand with patriarchal subjugation of women. They saw that prostitution was upheld primarily through the economic oppression of women, and then secondarily by violence towards women and patriarchal ideology. A key element of abolishing prostitution was bringing women into the productive sphere as workers, via teaching them trades and breaking down patriarchal ideas and practices around women doing manual labor. By doing this, women had the economic independence to not need to rely either on the nuclear family and a husband, or on prostitution, to make ends meet. Prostitutes were not treated as criminals, instead, they were

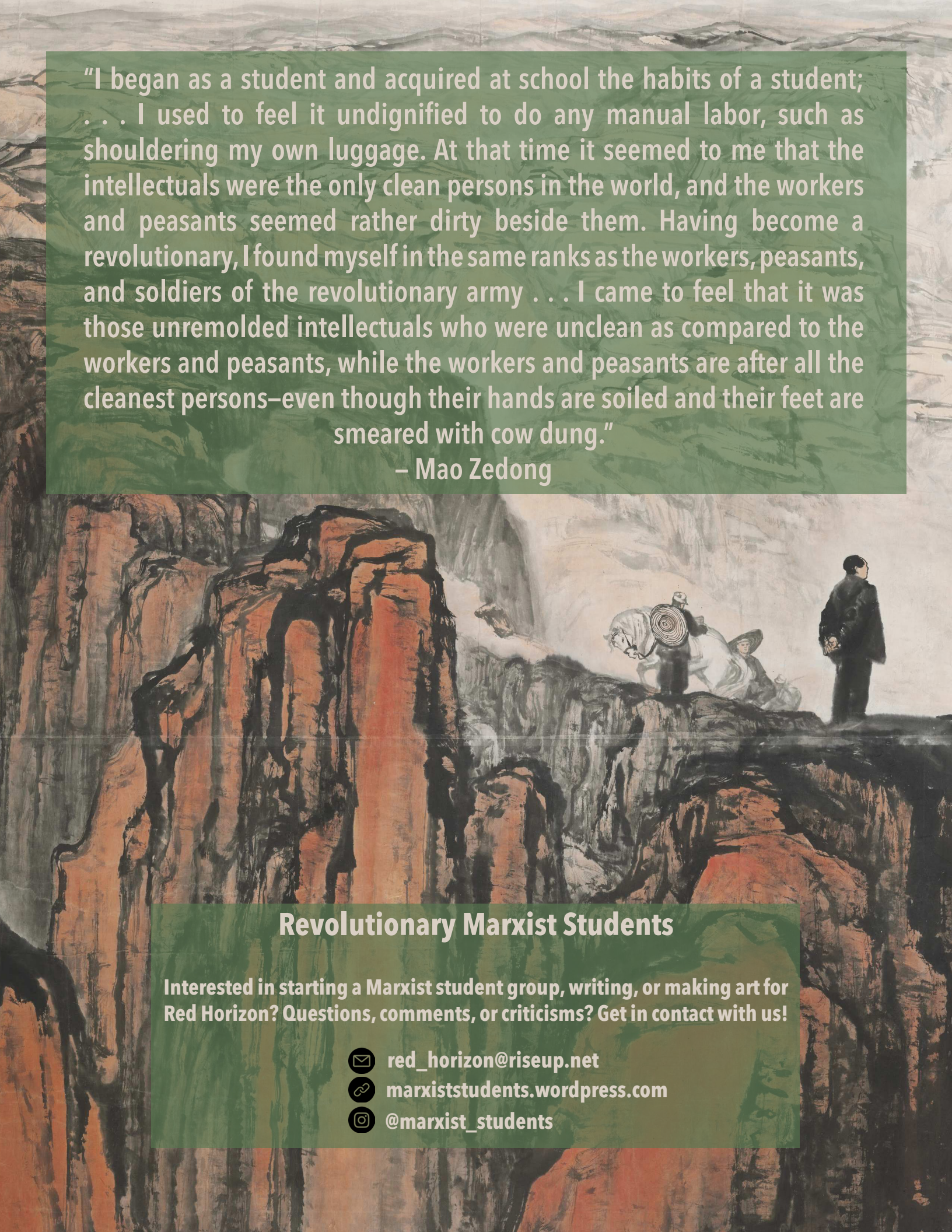
seen as oppressed members of the masses who had been forced out of the productive sphere. At the same time, brothel owners and traffickers were criminalized while mass education campaigns blossomed to help Johns understand why consuming prostitution was oppressive; and those who did try to buy sex were publicly exposed and criticized by the masses.<sup>19</sup> All of this was key to raising mass consciousness around why everyone needed to take up the struggle against prostitution and its social basis, patriarchy. For prostitution to be abolished, it must be rooted out through economic change and cultural shifts that can only come through socialist construction, where the masses have the power to overhaul society.

Decriminalization, the Nordic model, and other reforms under capitalism do not uproot the oppressive economic base and patriarchal chains that create the conditions for prostitution. Instead, they simply make prostitution a bit harder for some to access (Nordic), or actually create fertile ground for its expansion (decriminalization). Neither are enough to overthrow the globalized currents of capital that run on blood money. We owe it to the women on streetcorners, the children trafficked, and the men enslaved to build up mass consciousness against sexual exploitation. As revolutionaries, we need to be square with fellow students and the broader masses about the need to oppose the sex trade, but the real path forward for the complete abolition of the sexual exploitation of women, men, and children—the overthrow of class society.

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19 Christian Henriot, “‘La Fermeture’: The Abolition of Prostitution in Shanghai, 1949-58”, *The China Quarterly*, Issue 142, 1995, Pages 467–486, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/655424>





"I began as a student and acquired at school the habits of a student; . . . I used to feel it undignified to do any manual labor, such as shouldering my own luggage. At that time it seemed to me that the intellectuals were the only clean persons in the world, and the workers and peasants seemed rather dirty beside them. Having become a revolutionary, I found myself in the same ranks as the workers, peasants, and soldiers of the revolutionary army . . . I came to feel that it was those unremolded intellectuals who were unclean as compared to the workers and peasants, while the workers and peasants are after all the cleanest persons—even though their hands are soiled and their feet are smeared with cow dung."

– Mao Zedong

## Revolutionary Marxist Students

Interested in starting a Marxist student group, writing, or making art for Red Horizon? Questions, comments, or criticisms? Get in contact with us!

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