

FREE WAGE LABOUR: A Note

How free is free wage labour?

On the face of it there does not seem to be much that is free about 'free wage labour'. The proposition that the worker is free to work for whom they please, free to agree to the wages and conditions on offer and free to go elsewhere if things are not to his or her liking, appears to any sensible person to be entirely *theoretical*. Anybody who goes to work for wages in a modern capitalist society is well aware that they are not in practice free to work for whom they please or to come and go at will, they know only too well that the bargain they strike with an employer (or their personnel department) on the day they are hired is decidedly one-sided. Workers are not in a position to negotiate with a 'remuneration committee'; for the most part, they are faced with a 'take it or leave it' offer.

When they go to work in the office, depot, workshop, store, or factory, working people also enter a dictatorship where the employer, or the people hired to supervise and manage the enterprise, will decide or implement all decisions concerning the conduct of the business. What is produced, how it is produced, in fact all decisions concerning the function and operation of the firm are in the hands of the employer. The worker is not free to make strategic decisions or to participate in the direction of the business. Beyond the rights prescribed by law or defined in the contract of employment, or the capacity of a trade union to moderate the arbitrary actions of the employer, the worker has no rights in the workplace. They must do what they are told; they must work for a purpose determined by the employer, and at a pace and in a manner dictated by the employer. If they fail to cooperate they risk losing their job and having to re-enter the labour market without references.

The various schemes that employers use to consult workers, or the opportunities that might be offered to staff to make suggestions, or to discuss the operation of the business are not at any stage permitted to undermine or weaken the proprietor's absolute rights to decide all matters effecting the operation of the firm. Any capitalist enterprise is the private property of the owner – an individual proprietor, a group of partners, or a mass of shareholders. Even when workers are given shares in 'profit-sharing' schemes, they are insignificant in relation to the

company's total share capital, and concede no practical power to the worker over the direction of the company.

Why then is the waged worker described as “free”? Well, the most obvious reason is that in modern or liberal democracies the worker has the full defensible civil rights that are accorded to all citizens within that state. Among the citizens of such states there are no legal distinctions between the employer and the employed or between the rich and the poor. All are equal before the law. It is of course true in a number of very practical senses that ‘some are more equal than others’, relating maybe to historic disadvantages associated with ethnicity, race, gender, physical disability, sexual orientation, or simply level of income and education. However, obstructions or impediments experienced by workers in the full exercise of their civil rights are open to effective democratic challenge and to erosion by sustained political struggle.

Perhaps the more important reason to describe waged workers in capitalist society as “free” is that they are not literally servile. Before the emergence of ‘commercial’ or capitalist relations of production most, if not all, labouring people were in a servile condition. That is, they were often slaves, serfs, peons, or bonded labourers of some kind. They were either owned or they were bound by law to particular masters or to the owners of particular pieces of land. By and large, working people were not legally free to seek new masters or free to set up independent households or to move to a new location without the express permission of their masters.

Even in circumstances where labourers were not owned outright or tied by law to a particular location or master they were frequently, bound by rents, debts, indentures, and by ties of custom or affection to particular masters or particular wealthy households. Even independent peasant proprietors were bound by caste, communal rights, responsibilities and duties, to particular villages or to inescapable relationships with local grandees and the owners of large estates, or important workshops and artisanal activities.

Indeed, people in such societies were at a distinct disadvantage if they did not have a master, or a relationship with a substantial or propertied family. The condition of being masterless typically resulted in indigence and poverty.

However, as commercial considerations began to dominate all productive activity, the payment of money wages, calculated by the day or the hour, gradually came to replace the multiplicity of different forms of servile labour. Workers who were free to seek work from village to village, town to town, even from country to country, gradually came to dominate the labour force. Labour itself became a commodity to be bought and sold by employers and free labourers in hiring fares, labour exchanges, and at farm and factory gates. Such free workers were free to fend for themselves, free to prosper by their own ingenuity and prudence, or free to starve in recessions and interruptions of business, or as a result of their own fecklessness or improvidence. Their 'masters' were now *employers* who hired them by the day or the hour and dispensed with their services at will.

There are, of course, many circumstances in which waged workers find themselves greatly confined in ways that often mimic the restricted or bonded labour of the past. One need only think of mining communities or 'company towns' where the waged worker is effectively bound to a single employer, places where the worker finds themselves confined by a lack of employment opportunities, skills and education, and by family ties; here the waged worker is ensnared by a set of relationships that seem to have more to do with pre-capitalist relations between master and man than anything more modern. However, as industry has been transformed by new technologies and by new methods of organisation company towns have begun to decline as both capital and labour is compelled by competitive pressures to move towards new points of production.¹

Over the last three centuries as democratic rights and freedoms have both deepened and broadened working people have been able to turn the freedoms accorded to them as free waged workers to their positive advantage, by forming trade unions, challenging the arbitrary powers of employers with the formation of social democratic movements

¹ The decay of single industry, single factory towns, is variable. In Russia, for example, the Soviet era company towns are still limping along in permanent crisis, in other places they have been disappearing rapidly as closures and bankruptcies take their toll. There continue to be small towns dominated by a single supermarket, warehouse, or car dealership and body shop, where the old 'company town' pressures operate but such circumstances have become marginal to the experience of the vast majority of workers.

and labour parties, by pushing up their wages, fighting for improved conditions, and using their freedom of movement greatly to their own advantage. Often moving from country to country and even from continent to continent in pursuit of more advantageous conditions.

Indeed, from the middle of the nineteenth century as a consequence often of famine, repression by landlords, or political and religious persecution by autocratic monarchs, millions of people began to flee from ancestral villages or feudal and semi-feudal conditions to join the growing numbers of free waged workers in the United States, Canada, Australia or even older capitalist states like Britain. Towards the end of the nineteenth century these movements of people eager to improve their chances, and try their luck as free waged workers, became truly enormous.

These developments were slowed and restricted somewhat after 1914 by wars, economic crises, and mass unemployment. However, by the middle of the twentieth century millions of people began to move again on a large scale either into the urban and industrial areas of their own countries² or to search for work and a better life in Europe or America. By the end of the twentieth century the scale of these migrations surpassed the mass migrations of the nineteenth century as globalisation took hold.

Despite the best efforts of border guards, draconian laws, and the elaborate networks of detention centres and prison camps put in place by the democratic states, nothing has blunted or held back the movement of free waged workers to new countries or to the great cities of the twenty-first century. People of every race, creed and ethnicity have crowded into the great metropolises of the Europe, the Americas, and Australia. In the process, the migrating workers have had a profound cultural impact upon each other, and upon the workers of the cities and countries to which they have migrated; as older homogeneities of race and ethnicity have given way to variety and multiplicity *difference* has inescapably become part of everybody's experience.

² This sort of internal migration was one of the factors which stimulated the civil rights movement in the United States as very large numbers of black people during the 1940s and 1950s fled the life of share cropping, under-employment, and servitude, associated with life in the segregated rural South to work for wages in the industrial cities of the North.

The truly globalised division of labour has produced an international labour market in which employers can attempt to keep wages down by attracting workers from poorer countries to migrate in order to take up minimum wage jobs in richer countries. There is a *real* international labour market for relatively privileged workers – English speaking academics, IT experts, healthcare professionals, or hot shots in financial services – but for less skilled workers the global labour market could not be said to be ‘frictionless’. For most, a lack of good language skills and internationally recognised qualifications narrows the options for new migrants. This, however, has not dampened determination or the spirits of millions of migrants to make a go of things as free waged workers in strange and unfamiliar surroundings. There are often profound tensions and conflict associated with these huge migrations but they have characterised the development of the modern working class and are a key feature of the lives of free waged workers in most, if not all, the urban centres of the wealthy capitalist world.

Undocumented migrants face super exploitation by employers who use their vulnerability to arrest and deportation in order to impose very poor conditions upon ‘illegal aliens’ and to pay exceptionally low wages; such workers because they lack the protection afforded by citizenship³ are prey to criminal gangs involved in debt slavery, prostitution, drug processing and manufacture.

Despite all this, despite the obstacles placed in their path, despite the paradoxes and the glaring contradictions, inherent in their circumstances, modern waged workers have no masters; they are not servile; they are free to attempt to shape their own lives, free to found churches, mosques, community associations and trade unions, free to struggle for better wages, better education for their kids, a better life for their families, free to seek their fortune where they will.

³ Or at a minimum, documents granting “exceptional leave to remain”, or “Permanent Residence” (Green Card), which recognize the right of the migrant to live and work in the country in question.