

Yes, Charlie, There Is a Labor Aristocracy Though We Might Decide to Call it Something Else

By Steve Bloom, New York Branch

January 23, 2005

In his article “The Myth of the Labor Aristocracy” in the January 2005 issue of the *Solidarity Discussion Bulletin* Charlie P. states: “The theory of the labor aristocracy . . . has and continues to inform the politics of many currents on the US and international left. It even has adherents in *Solidarity*.”

Imagine that! Even in *Solidarity*? Yes, and I can testify that I am one of these remarkable individuals. True, were it up to me I would not have chosen the term “labor aristocracy” because I don’t really think it characterizes the phenomenon very well. I actually like the concept of “white privilege” better. It is more descriptive of something that exists not as an absolute difference (between the aristocrats and all others) but as a relationship that is flexible, relative, representing a continuum of possibilities. Workers who are “privileged” in relationship to one group can be underprivileged in relation to another, or in relation to what is objectively possible. Nevertheless Lenin chose the term “Labor Aristocracy” and I choose not to quibble over terminology for the purposes of this discussion. The phenomenon Lenin describes is a real one: Since at least the development of imperialism as a global system, a layer of the working class has emerged that ideologically identifies its interests with its own national ruling class, or its own set of bosses in a particular industry *because it has a relatively privileged material position vis-à-vis other workers in the world.*

Note the key element here: This ideological identification by a layer of workers with their own bosses and their own imperialist ruling classes is not simply an ideological error on their part (though it is that). It has material roots in a *relatively* privileged life-style, measured not in some absolute sense but in terms of its relationship to the life style of other workers—in other nations, in other industries, or in other sections of the same industry.

Charlie attempts to prove that this idea is a myth by disproving *one particular assertion* about the mechanism whereby these privileges are established and maintained. He rejects the idea that individual capitalist enterprises make superprofits through investment in the third world and then directly share those profits with their own workers in the form of higher wages. I tend to agree with Charlie that this is not really the way it works. But it works nonetheless, through a multitude of more indirect and subtle mechanisms. Lenin is therefore correct on the fundamental question: “The capitalists of the ‘advanced’ countries do bribe them: They bribe them in a thousand different ways, direct and indirect, overt and covert.”

How do I rob thee? Let me count the ways

Charlie indicates some recognition of this broader problem when he writes about unequal exchange between the global north and the global south: “Granting the reality of ‘unequal exchange,’ the notion that it produces benefits only for a minority of workers in the global North is not tenable. Again, *all*

workers in the global North—from the most poorly to the best paid—would benefit from ‘unequal exchange.’”

Hold this thought, because what Charlie says is true (well, at least half-true): All workers in the global north do benefit from unequal exchange. What he misses with this statement, however, is that some benefit more than others. This is part of the trick that is played on us, and on workers the world over. It is the reason workers in Mexico will risk their lives to smuggle themselves across the border in order to work for less than a minimum wage—because when compared to their fellow workers who have to remain in Mexico, undocumented Mexican workers toiling for less than a minimum wage in the USA still share, even if just a very little bit, in the privilege of living in the USA. The benefits of making it over the border are genuine, tangible, and can be sent back to Mexico in the form of dollars to help loved ones who were left behind.

At the same time there continues to be a hierarchy in the USA itself, where undocumented Mexican workers are close to the bottom, while US citizens and Green Card holders are still more privileged, and then privileged yet again if their skin happens to be “white” (understanding all of the social assumptions that go into the making of “whiteness”). Far from negating Lenin’s assertion that workers in the imperialist nations are bribed by their ruling classes “in a thousand different ways, direct and indirect, overt and covert,” Charlie has simply explained one mechanism through which the wealth is accumulated with which to do the bribing—by setting the prices of agricultural goods and raw materials, that the nations of the South tend to sell (along with the price of labor for such tasks as assembling consumer electronics, garment manufacture, etc.) low, and the prices for industrial products that they tend to buy high.

What are some of the other methods?

In the earliest days of exploration and the establishment of colonies wealth was transferred the old-fashioned way, by outright theft: Find the gold and other precious commodities, take them at gunpoint, load the booty onto ships and carry it home. Another, more subtle, form of this was commercial theft by merchants who would, formally, “purchase” spices or other goods (for a fraction of their value) and sell them in Europe for far more than their value, thus generating massive profits and accumulating vast amounts of capital.

As colonialism and imperialism progressed these mechanisms were augmented, and eventually supplanted, by the importation of slave labor, the superexploitation of native labor that was not forced into slavery (think South African diamond and gold mines), as well as the enforcement of unequal exchange discussed above. Today this process finds its modern expression in neoliberal economics, and (among other mechanisms) again the direct theft of massive wealth through interest

payments on third world debt, the demand for royalties on “intellectual property,” etc.

The result has been the transfer of uncounted, and probably uncountable, wealth over the centuries, with the nations of the south remaining poor *because* the wealthy elites in the north have gotten, and continue to get, richer and richer at their expense.

How this transfer of wealth contributes to workers’ living standards in the northern countries

What happens to this wealth? That is the key question that Charlie has to contend with. It is easy to demonstrate that it is not paid directly to workers in the northern countries in the form of wages. (We will return to this question shortly.) It is, instead, in the first instance transferred to the pockets of imperialist corporations, banks, and their shareholders. What happens to it then is the key element in our equation, and the key link in the chain that Charlie fails to recognize.

A portion of this wealth is, of course, set aside to support the lavish lifestyle of northern industrialists, bankers, corporate executives, and government officials. I believe it can be demonstrated that this does actually create a trickle-down effect, since consumption by these layers generates a demand for goods and services produced by workers in the north, and therefore sustains a certain level of production and jobs at relatively higher wages. But this is one of the more subtle forms of the process, and not so easy to quantify. So let’s look at more direct mechanisms by which a portion of this wealth, stolen from the nations of the south, actually improves the standard of living of working people in the north.

Northern workers earn higher wages, on average, than those in the south. Where does the wealth come from to pay these higher wages? Directly from the production process itself, via the classical exploitation described by Marx in his analysis of capitalism: The corporations pay their workers a wage that represents only a portion of the exchange values the workers actually produce through their labor. Profits are generated when another portion of those exchange values is expropriated, creating surplus value that is pocketed by the corporation as profit. No funds are taken to pay wages to northern workers directly from those corporate pockets that may have been filled through the theft of wealth from the global south. On its face, then, Charlie’s theory is confirmed.

But this is not the whole story, not by a long shot.

Higher wages in the north are a direct result of higher labor productivity, which allows the corporations to still make profits even while paying higher wages. The workers *produce more exchange value per hour*, and can therefore be *paid a higher hourly wage* while the capitalist corporation still makes a profit by extracting surplus value. Why is labor in the north more productive than labor in the south? Clearly it is because there has been a massive investment of capital in the northern countries. And where did this massive quantity of capital come from? See “How do I rob thee? Let me count the ways” above, at least for a significant part of it.

Thus the relatively privileged position of northern workers vis a vis southern workers is an indirect byproduct of an overall historical process of capital accumulation by northern corporations and industrialists, much of it at the expense of the global south. Without that process of capital accumulation, the

massive wage differential between the north and south would not exist.

Another way in which northern workers enjoy a relatively privileged position in comparison to those in the south is the higher social wage in the industrialized nations of the world. More is spent by governments per capita on public education, health care (even in the USA if we think about Medicare and Medicaid), the construction of roads and other infrastructure that everyone uses, parks, public libraries, the arts, etc. Where does the money for such expenditures come from? Obviously, from tax revenues (or else from government bonds which ultimately have to be repaid through tax revenues). Some portion of those tax revenues are levied on income and profits garnered through the superexploitation of southern workers, payments of interest on the third world debt, and unequal trade relations between north and south. Thus a part of the wealth expropriated from the poorer nations goes to help raise the general standard of living in the industrialized countries, including of their working classes.

Another aspect of the higher standard of living enjoyed by northern workers is the generalized ownership of certain commodities that remain out of reach for most residents of third world nations—automobiles, video recorders and televisions, computers, cellular telephones, etc. Each of these consumer items, and many others, first began life as luxury goods for the rich. Before they could become mass consumer items the costs of production had to be reduced. But before the cost of production could be reduced adequately for a mass market there had to be a reasonable high-end market to stimulate the process of technological development in the first place, and create the support infrastructure necessary (filling stations, auto mechanics, TV broadcast stations, computer chip manufacturers, cellular telephone networks, etc.).

These initial stages were possible because a significant layer of genuinely wealthy individuals could begin to use these products even before they became inexpensive enough for generalized consumption. Where was the wealth accumulated to make this process possible? In large part from the riches that were stolen/expropriated from third world peoples.

The effect on consciousness

To me, and to many Marxists, it seems obvious that the tangible benefits northern workers receive because of the wealth their own capitalist classes have accumulated has had a strongly conservatizing effect on their class consciousness, especially since the second world war. Charlie disputes this, although he doesn’t dispute that there has been a sufficient conservatization to require some explanation. He seeks the explanation in purely ideological factors. As we shall see below, it is impossible, in this case, to establish an absolute proof of cause and effect either way. But at least the scenario above demonstrates that there *is* a transfer of wealth from south to north that *does* create a level of privilege for northern workers. So it is not completely untenable (as Charlie asserts) to attribute the conservatizing trends to this factor. We have not constructed a theory based on pure mythology.

Let us assume for a moment that our conclusion is correct, higher living standards in the north do dampen militancy and workers’ struggles. Should we therefore write off the northern working classes as hopeless, a group that will be impossible to

win to the struggle for socialism? (or, worse, that they actually do have a stake in defending imperialist exploitation around the globe?) that the only appeal to them can be on a moral rather than on a material basis (which would clearly be much more difficult, bordering on utopian)?

I would say “no”—though it has to be acknowledged that this “no” is a purely theoretical one at the moment, and remains to be verified empirically. There are several reasons why I am convinced that “no” is the right answer, that the working classes in the northern countries remain a force for revolutionary social change..

a) Perceptions of well-being are relative, not absolute. Precisely because workers in the north have come to enjoy a relatively higher standard of living they have also come to expect it. The inevitable contradictions of capitalism still cause the northern ruling classes to attack that standard of living, attempting to drive down expectations and increase the rate of exploitation in the north. This effort has been pursued with some considerable vigor and success in recent decades. The greed of the capitalists knows no bounds. The more they are successful with this campaign the harder and further they will pursue it. At some point they will push too far, and get a reaction in the form of a serious struggle by northern workers to regain what they have lost. At that point another radicalization, and an openness to socialist ideas, seems likely.

b) We have focused here on the truth of the statement that workers in the north benefit from the transfer of wealth from the south. But the opposite statement is equally true: Workers in the north suffer as jobs seek the lowest possible wages in a global labor market. This creates its own dynamic, and as that dynamic unfolds it becomes easy to see that northern workers have a direct material interest in the fight for living wages and economic development for people in the third world. This, then, requires a struggle against their own capitalist ruling classes and creates another basis for radicalization and an openness to socialist ideas.

c) The benefit which northern ruling classes receive from the superexploitation of the south (their extremely lavish lifestyle) would disappear if socialism were to replace capitalism. Thus there is a clear material necessity for the bourgeoisie to fight for the maintenance of capitalism itself. The benefit/privilege that the northern workers receive (their relatively higher standard of living), on the other hand, would not disappear. In fact, socialism—by doing away with the waste and gross inequity of capitalism—could even raise the average standard of living of northern workers, and dramatically improve their overall quality of life in countless ways that cannot be measured in monetary terms, while simultaneously engaging in a massive effort to equalize living standards between north and south. Thus, while the present state of affairs does act as a brake on the consciousness of northern workers (as long as capitalism is assumed as a global system it is better to be a northern worker than a southern one) as soon as it becomes possible to imagine an alternative to capitalism, the ideological mystifications on which this brake is based vanish into thin air.

d) Approximately half of the workers in the United States, and increasing numbers in Europe as well, are non-white. These workers share considerably less in the benefit of living and working in a northern country (though they do benefit partially, as noted above), and the disparity between their living standards and those of the most privileged layers is actually a spur to struggles. They also tend to identify with the struggles of oppressed peoples around the world. This reality, *which is part of the total reality of working people in the northern countries today*, is a factor that will promote the general combativeness of these working classes, even as the conservatism of the most privileged layers retards that combativeness.

e) Even the white working classes in the north are repulsed by the more visible atrocities inflicted on oppressed peoples (think Algeria, Vietnam, South Africa, lynching in the US South, etc.). Thus the human element, the reaction of northern workers as human beings to the grotesque oppression that underlies the superexploitation of the global south, cannot be written off. It remains a potent element in the development of consciousness, from time to time even of mass consciousness.

f) The accelerating tendency of profit and the market to destroy the environment on which human beings depend crosses all borders and is of grave concern to working people in the north, even if it is of still greater concern to those in the south. This, too, imposes a certain imperative that working people, and their representative organizations, are far better placed to respond to than the ruling classes are, and is likely therefore to create another material basis for radicalization and the development of socialist consciousness.

Thus, thinking dialectically, we cannot consider the tendency of white privilege to create conservatising pressures in isolation, as if this is the entire reality of capitalism and imperialism in the 21st century. It is merely one tendency, existing simultaneously with other tendencies that still point to the imperative of working-class struggle and radicalization.

Comparing apples and oranges

A note is needed before we conclude on Charlie’s attempt at an empirical proof of his thesis, in a section entitled “The ‘Labor Aristocracy’ and Working Class Struggles in the 20th (and 21st) Centur(ies).” Readers need to think critically about Charlie’s argument here.

To begin, let’s examine the standard of proof needed to refute the statement: “The relatively privileged position of white workers in the northern industrialized countries creates a tendency toward conservatism and a higher threshold of struggle.” This cannot be disproved by citing individual counter-examples. Consider a similar statement: “People served larger portions of food tend to eat more than people served smaller portions.” That statement is true, and even if I know one or two, or ten individuals who do not eat more when served larger portions, the statement remains true. I cannot disprove a statement about *tendencies* by citing individual counter-examples, because within every tendency there are *always* counter-tendencies and exceptional cases.

This is one of the problems that will keep Marxism from ever becoming an exact science. If medical researchers want

to find out whether a particular medication *tends* to shorten the duration and severity of an illness they can create two groups, where no one actually knows who is getting the medication and who is getting a placebo. Then they average the severity and duration of illness in *all* members of *both* groups in order to do a comparison and draw a rigorous scientific conclusion. This kind of “double blind” experiment is the *only* way to draw completely unimpeachable scientific conclusions when we are talking about factors that potentially have multiple causes.

Revolutionaries, on the other hand, cannot divide workers into two groups, whose circumstances are controlled for all variables except their living standards, and thereby determine precisely how living standards affect consciousness. We have to rely on those experiments (imperfect and inexact, because there are many variables) offered to us by social reality, and then apply a certain amount of logic and judgment in drawing our conclusions. If we do this it should become clear that many of Charlie’s examples are simply not relevant to the present discussion.

He tells us: “The backbone of Lenin’s Bolsheviks . . . were the best-paid industrial workers in the Russian cities.” He also cites the role of skilled workers in auto, steel, rubber and other mass production industries in the USA during the rise of the CIO, and the role of relatively highly-paid workers in South Africa or Brazil in terms of the development of the union/political movements in their countries.

In each of these cases, however, the degree of difference between “better-paid” workers and others in the population was qualitatively less than the differences that exist today between industrial workers in the imperialist nations and workers/peasants in the global south. The industrial workers in Russian cities in 1917, for example, were only a generation or two (and often less) removed from the peasants who still lived in the countryside. In terms of living standards, social connections, consciousness, social status, and in numerous other ways, the Russian workers of *all* skill levels, and the Russian peasantry, were pushed together far more than they were pulled apart. Similarly with the examples from South Africa and Brazil. Even in the USA during the rise of the CIO, the skilled workers who were involved in these struggles were qualitatively closer economically and socially to their unskilled sisters and brothers, as well as to the large proportion of the population who continued to farm for a living, than are similar categories today.

More relevant, perhaps, are Charlie’s examples from Europe and the USA in the 1960s and ‘70s. And yet, as noted above, such counterexamples would only disprove the labor aristocracy/white privilege theory if the labor aristocracy/white privilege theory asserted that privilege constitutes some absolute barrier to workers engaging in struggle. But that is not what the theory suggests. To repeat: it merely says that the privileges raise the threshold which must be reached before struggles can be expected. Note, again, the *contradictory* reality summed up in this statement. There are *both* tendencies that promote struggles *and* tendencies that inhibit them, pushing and pulling on more privileged workers simultaneously. The end product (to struggle or not to struggle) is the result of this complex of contending forces, not simply the result of “white privilege,” taken by itself.

The relevance for political perspectives

Charlie stops short of actually drawing conclusions about political perspectives. But it seems to me that this is something we need to examine, because there are real implications for a revolutionary organization (in particular for a predominantly white revolutionary organization in the USA) depending on which side of this discussion we come down on.

The first problem is our relationship to revolutionaries of color, most of whom accept some variant of the “labor aristocracy” or “white privilege” theory. In a few cases they draw the most extreme possible conclusion—that white workers are part of the problem, not (at least potentially) part of the solution. But on the whole, most understand this reality in the more nuanced sense that I suggest above, reflecting a problem to be overcome, but at the same time containing enough contradictions to make it possible for us to overcome it.

Obviously, if we draw the conclusion that from a scientific point of view this theory is simply wrong, pure mythology, then we don’t have much choice but to stand our ground and insist on truth over myth. However, if we can come to understand that this idea is not simply mythological it creates the basis for a potentially more constructive dialogue between us and revolutionaries of color. That is not a small question.

There are also the implications for revolutionary strategy in the USA. If we agree that Black and Latino workers do not share as greatly in the privileges of living in the USA, and are therefore likely to demonstrate a greater combativeness against the inequities of this system and a natural identification with the struggles of peoples in other nations, then this should affect what areas of political activity a group like Solidarity should prioritize. Our recent discussion about the Million Worker March, it seems to me, reflects precisely this dynamic at work, with some comrades still failing to understand the political significance of the MWM development as an initiative by a radical wing of the labor movement, led by activists of color, even if it was relatively modest in terms of its outreach and impact on the labor movement as a whole.

Understanding the centrality of workers and communities of color in the US socialist revolution, the vanguard role we expect them to play because they have much in common with the global south even while residing in the industrial north, should also affect our attitude toward the social composition of Solidarity. Is our overwhelmingly white membership a serious problem for us, one that will require a conscious effort to overcome? Will we be prepared to change, to develop the understanding and relationships we need in order to become more multi-national, because a revolutionary organization in the USA *simply cannot survive*, and maintain its revolutionary integrity, if it is based on the most privileged and least combative section of the US working class, without direct contact to its more militant and combative wing?

Or do we simply wait until the world changes a bit, and generalized struggles of workers against the bosses erupt, in which case this problem will essentially resolve itself as the consciousness of the working class, taken as a whole, changes for the better? Obviously, this problem is less of an imperative if we believe that there is no real material conservatising pressure which the privileged position of workers in an imperialist

nation brings to bear on a white revolutionary organization, merely problems of ideological understanding.

Charlie asserts: “Only through the experience of collective, class activity against the employers, starting at but not limited to the workplace, can workers begin to think of themselves as a class with interests in common with other worker and opposed to the capitalists. Workers who experience their collective class power on the job are much more open to class—and anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-militarist, anti-nativist—ways of thinking.”

We could devote another article to analyzing and objecting to aspects of this statement. For example, it talks of “workers” and how they will come to an “anti-racist, anti-sexist” understanding. And yet, if we realize that a majority of the workers in the USA are either people of color, or women, or both, we might consider other paths through which “workers” become conscious of the ways in which racist and sexist practices affect them and their fellow workers.

Nevertheless, for now let us accept Charlie’s primary point, which is OK as an approximate statement if we understand that it is not adequately nuanced. Talking about the working class as a whole, including white male workers, it is unlikely that it will overcome its more conservative tendencies, whatever the source of those more conservative tendencies might be, until broad layers begin to engage in struggles of some kind to defend their own interests as workers. The question is, what political conclusions should we draw from this fact?

It seems to me there has been a tendency for some in Solidarity to conclude that the development of “collective, class activity against the employers,” by the working class as a whole is a prerequisite to developing *any* effective struggles that reflect the need for “anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-militarist, anti-nativist—ways of thinking” in the labor movement. Please note, I select my words carefully here. I suggest there has been a *tendency*, not an absolute barrier. Our comrades in the labor movement have been working effectively around the question of the Iraq war, for example. And I do not want to suggest that the work we do, through our labor orientation, to promote rank-and-file militancy around workplace issues is not a good thing. It is a very good thing, and a model of the kind of work revolutionaries should be doing.

And yet it still seems to me that the tendency I refer to does exist within the context of that very good work we do in the labor movement, a tendency to act as if workplace struggles are the only possible starting point, and in that sense a

prerequisite, for every other kind of struggle around the ideological backwardness of the working class. This is incorrect, however. Our statement about the working class as a whole (that it cannot overcome its conservative tendencies until there is a generalized struggle against the bosses) is not a statement about individual workers, or even about groups of workers, who can radicalize and develop consciousness far in advance of a generalized radicalization that affects the class as a whole. It is precisely because of this that it is possible to build a revolutionary organization even in non-revolutionary times. Given the realities of life in capitalist, racist, sexist America, the best of those radicalizing workers (especially including people of color) will be looking for a revolutionary organization that is engaged in struggles that promote “anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-militarist, anti-nativist—ways of thinking” even now, at a time when it is not yet possible for us to win the working class as a whole to this perspective. And it is possible to mobilize significant layers, and even to win partial victories on such questions based on present levels of consciousness—which, in turn, will also help to raise that level of consciousness.

We need to avoid any theories or rationalizations for not undertaking the difficult task of trying to move the US labor movement toward “anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-militarist, anti-nativist—ways of thinking” today, based on present levels of consciousness, and thereby advancing that consciousness to the extent it can be advanced. We need to understand that the economic and social privileges of being white in America create a specific and distinct set of problems, that white workers and white revolutionaries therefore have particular tasks vis a vis people and organizations of color, that there are historical relationships between whites and others in the USA that flow from the unequal power relations between different segments of the working class and that we need to work in a conscious way to overcome this, that Black and Latino workers in the USA will inevitably play a vanguard role in relationship to white workers because of the reality of racism and white privilege.

If we can gain this understanding we are likely to approach our tasks of organizing within the labor movement, and of building a revolutionary socialist organization, in a way that puts a higher priority on campaigns that will promote “anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-militarist, anti-nativist—ways of thinking,” even before there is a generalized mass struggle around workplace issues as such.