Preface

I wrote this pamphlet while I was studying both the history of the Lowell and Lawrence Working Girls and the first volume of *Capital* by Karl Marx. In writing it, I was exploring the categories which Marx uses in *Capital*, as well as the categories which I had already had as an anarchist. By writing it, I was defining for myself the meaning of class struggle, the necessity of class struggle in capitalism. I was learning that the class struggle, the tendency toward simultaneous gluttony and misery in contemporary society, would be a constant as long as private property were maintained.

I was also attempting to understand how class consciousness among workers can come about. Georg Lukács wrote in *History and Class Consciousness* that “the worker can only become conscious of his existence in society when he becomes aware of himself as a commodity.” This means that the worker can only become conscious of his/her class position by becoming aware of how their only property, their activity and time, that is, their labor-power, is sold. While sold and owned by the capitalist, it is used to generate greater profit than the capitalist has paid the worker. Fair and square in a capitalist society’s reasoning, but reprehensible and atrocious outside of capitalist ideology.

In publishing this, I hope that folks will enjoy the history of the young women workers in early 19th century New England and will desire to learn more of how capital only exists when it expropriates and thereby ruins lives. Capital is only born by theft; Capital is only sustained by exploitation and repeated proletarianization.

I have found that all the sources that I cite are available on aaaaaarg.org. This way, folks who are curious will be able to cheaply (freely) read the sources which I cite and form more directly their own opinions.

I’d like to thank Eleni Makkas for editing an earlier draft of this pamphlet; those who read *Capital* with me; Susan Tracy and Margaret Cerullo for guiding me in my studies.

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Class Consciousness in Early 19th Century New England

In *The Making of the English Working Class*, E.P. Thompson says that class is a historical phenomenon. He says that class occurs when groups base their identities on certain interests which are distinct and usually opposed to each other. Marx says class struggle begins in the working-day. So, it should be easy to determine whether E. P. Thompson’s ideas around class are correct if we evaluate a class struggle.

In New England in the early 19th century when industrialization was booming in the textile industry, the growing opposition between the capitalist and working classes became strikingly apparent. The class drives of the capitalists, that is, the inherent interest of capital to exploit its labor to more and more intense degrees; and of the workers, that is, the natural response to attempt to control one’s life and dignity in the face of its continued domination by capital, necessarily leads to class struggle. This essay examines this class struggle through the 1820s, ‘30s, and ‘40s, twice, once examining the class drive and class actions by the capitalists, and again on the workers.

Capital means exploitation. Capital is money invested to create more money. The formula Marx identifies is M-C-M. This is the qualitative formula of capital, money converted into commodities resold as money. Marx examines it again through a quantitative lens, M-C-M'. The amount of money at the conclusion of the formula has changed. This means that there has been an increase in the value somewhere in the commodity-form of the formula. The only commodity which can create value is labor-power. The Capitalist mode of production is defined by Marx as “the unity of the labour-process and the process of producing surplus-value.” Surplus-value means the value of the commodity which is greater than the value of the labor-time necessary to reproduce labor-power exerted, that is, the labor-power necessary to reproduce itself. So, the extraction of surplus-value is the extraction of extra labor-power, the exploitation of the laborer. In capitalism, “the directing motive, the end and aim of capitalist production, is to extract the greatest possible amount of surplus-value, and consequently to exploit labour-power to the greatest possible extent.” The capitalist must buy labor-power and extract

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3 Ibid. 93-96, 108.
4 Ibid. 130.
5 Ibid. 202.
nevertheless, the first recognition of a "sense of class": many sides of the struggle are perceived, links are established with other groups of working people, and capitalists are confronted in the political arena.37

Thus, in the 1840s the “Lowell factory girls” had become class conscious enough to acknowledge their position in opposition to the “monied aristocracy” of capitalists. They had also become sophisticated enough to create labor formation and confront capitalists politically. And it’s at this degree of sophistication and consciousness when the labor force of the textile mills was shifted to immigrant labor of Irish and French-Canadian women.38 The American-born women workers had become too much of a liability for the accumulation of capital, and thus a new, weaker, insecure labor force had to be found. With this insecure labor, the capitalists could employ their usual tactics in expanding surplus-value without the fear of too much of a response on the part of the exploited, defeating the labor movement among the American-born women textile mill workers.

The history of the New England textile mills in the earlier 19th century illuminate how class develops. E.P. Thompson had said, “class happens when some men ... feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs.” We can find that this is clearly illustrated in this history. E.P. Thompson also said that if we stopped history at any given moment, we would not be able to perceive classes, and that we can only perceive them through a historical lens.39 The development of the class consciousness of the workers and capitalists over time and, more importantly, the responses of capitalists and workers to their class drives, that is, to the accumulation of capital and the expansion of surplus-value or the resistance to exploitation throughout the history, validate what E. P. Thompson had said about class.

surplus-labor to create surplus-value, which is essential to their existence as a capitalist. Thus, exploitation is integral to capital. The capitalist cannot exist as a capitalist without exploiting their workers, and must exploit their workers at greater rates than their competitor.6

The factor of competition amongst capitalists means that there must be more vigorous extraction of surplus-value, new methods imposed, new strategies for making the workers produce for the capitalist greater sums of money. What this means for the workers is exploitation, pain, and over-work. The capitalist must make his workers work harder and longer, and eventually, work for less pay. An increase in the productivity of the worker doesn’t benefit anyone except the capitalist. Increased productivity means nothing but added stress and anxiety, greater rates of exploitation – “to be a productive labourer is, therefore, not a piece of luck, but a misfortune.” Here we see the inherently antagonistic class drives of collective capital – the capitalist class, and collective labor – the working class.

The methods that capitalists use to extract more surplus-labor vary. In 19th century New England, it’s easy to see all these phenomena at work: the development of classes and their antagonism; the extraction of surplus-value, viz. the struggle over the working-day; and the development of the consciousness of the antagonism through the struggle over the working-day. The working-day is composed of two parts for the capitalists, one portion is necessary labor, viz. the labor necessary to reproduce labor, and the other portion is surplus labor, viz. the remaining value which is the expansion of capital.8

The battle over the working-day begins with the prolongation of the working-day, what Marx termed “absolute surplus-value.”9 In Dover, New Hampshire in 1828, the capitalists of the textile mills made stricter regulations of the working-day, imposing fines and punishments on workers who did not arrive to work on time or wasted time on the job.10 This is not a prolongation of the working-day, but an enforcement of its limits. The women who were working in this job were from rural areas,
and were not accustomed to the consequences which machinery had for modern industry, that is to say, as far as industry was concerned, they were undisciplined workers. \(^{11}\) This enforcement of the limits of the working-day was to discipline the workers so the capitalist class would be able to make the most of their investment in labor-power in extracting absolute surplus-value. This was to make their workers into disciplined workers, consistent with the new industrial sense of time. \(^{12}\)

In Exeter, New Hampshire in 1834, there was another method where the capitalists attempted to lengthen the working-day without a pay rise by setting the clocks backward throughout the day. This was simpler to do when fewer workers had timepieces of their own, \(^{13}\) and thus the limits of the working-day were dependent on the capitalists running the factory. So here we see a capitalist prolonging the working-day so as to extract a greater absolute surplus-value.

First in Lowell, and then throughout New England, in 1834 capitalists began to impose wage cuts of 15%. Diminishing a wage means that the labor-power is being bought lower than its value, thus it’s easy to see how a greater surplus-value is to be created. It’s not worth mentioning how a lower wage is to the advantage of the capitalist and is entirely in his class interest. The wage cuts provoked a strong reaction on the part of the workers. A well organized strike was initiated and the sophistication of working class resistance increased, which I will elaborate below. The resistance included the formation of labor organizations to oppose the interests of the capitalists. The response of the capitalists to the activity of the workers shows clearly their class consciousness. When the strike died, the capitalists blacklisted all the leaders, and the remaining workers either left to their homes or returned to work. The capitalists instituted “[A] yellow-dog contract, which asked all future employees to sign a statement that they were not members of any labor organization and would not so join, bound by their employment contract.” \(^{14}\) This is part of the capitalists’ method of barring workers from their working class institutions and the attempt to cripple working class resistance to exploitation, classic in class war. The confrontation of 1834 considered themselves to be equals to the capitalists. The women workers expressed that they were equals to the overseers and the mill owners, an equality of equal exchange between laborer and capitalist. The ability to at will cut wages and change the contract of employment reflected the illusory nature of this conviction, and the power that the capitalist had over the laborer. The appearance of equality disappeared, and class consciousness was achieved by this point. The workers issued declarations where they identified the “monied aristocracy” and the “oppressing hand of avarice that would enslave us,” connecting this wage-slavery to chattel-slavery. \(^{32}\)

A number of things illustrated the level of sophistication that these women workers had attained. The strike had a set of demands, which gave the workers a goal which they could aim to accomplish which was expressed through a petition. \(^{33}\) The strike was also organized enough to include a strike fund. \(^{34}\) All-round, the strike exhibited an improvement in the class consciousness and sophistication of the women workers in 1834 from 1828.

Two years later in October 1836 there was another battle over wage-cuts. In this strike, the women workers organized themselves into the Factory Workers’ Association. \(^{35}\) The fact that the workers had created a labor formation to oppose the capitalists’ endeavors shows the extent of class consciousness and sophistication. The strike also lasted longer than the strikes before. In 1834, the strike lasted several days, whereas in 1836, it lasted for several months. \(^{36}\)

In the next decade, we see a dramatic development in the class struggle. On the side of the capitalists is the intensification of labor, and on the side of labor is a fruition of class consciousness and a very high degree of labor’s sophistication. Workers made their response to the aggression of the capitalists by engaging in the Ten Hours Movement. Mill towns sent petitions to their state legislatures in the early 1840s. Between 1843 and 1845, the workers formed the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association, which was the labor formation which would address the grievances of the workers to the state. Thus, the sophistication of the workers reached the point where it is tried to use the state as an intermediary and a tool in the class struggle. And, as Nisonoff explains, the operatives’ switch to legislation and coalitions does indicate.

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\(^{11}\) There are numerous accounts of women first entering the industry who expressed fear and hesitation in working in the factory and living in the towns (Nisonoff, Op. Cit.). However, they quickly enough entered into the community of women mill workers and were able to adjust (Dublin, Thomas. Op. Cit. 46-7).


\(^{13}\) Ibid. 69.

had come from the same background, shared the same values and mores, and would live and work together constantly.

The living arrangements that these women had were provided by the companies. They were set to live together in boarding houses, and so along with work, these women workers were constantly together and formed their own values, norms, and forms of discipline. For instance, when a member of a boarding house violated a norm, the women collectively disciplined the woman by ostracizing or other means. As class consciousness developed among these women, the norms of dress, speech, relations with men, &c. began also to include attitudes regarding the factory, the ten-hour day, and so on. This form of collective discipline to the norms, not of the company, but of the women workers, functioned well as a method of forcing women living in these boarding houses to participate in labor actions and to develop class consciousness. Here, we see also the development and role of community in the development of class consciousness.

The first labor action of the New England textile mill women workers was in 1828. It was in response to the stricter regulations surrounding the working-day. The way the women resisted the regulations and restrictions did not reflect sophisticated labor organization or activism. When the restrictions were made, the following Friday 3-400 workers poured out from the factories in the first all-woman strike to burn several casks of gunpowder in the street. These kinds of actions mirror the kinds of actions that the Russian workers made in the late 19th century when industrialization was beginning there. As with the New England women workers, the Russian workers in the late 19th century were from the countryside and, as Paul Avrich describes, “Powerful magnets pulled them in two directions, one leading back to their traditional villages, the other towards a strange new world beyond their comprehension.” The “peasant mentality” in these Russian workers was, like the New England women workers, “evidenced in their sporadic outbursts against the harassments of the factory, more akin to the jacqueries of an earlier age than to the organized strikes of a more mature proletariat.” However unsophisticated or ‘infantile’ the workers were in this protest, their demonstration expresses an outrage of indignation and a primordial class consciousness.

Years later in 1834, another strike surfaced, this time in response to the wage-cuts. Throughout the years, the women in the factories had the capitalists betray their paternalistic facade, and reveal their ‘vampiric hunger’ for the accumulation of capital.

There was another strike in 1836. It came in reaction to another wage cut at 5%. The strike was even more intense than in 1834, and thus the punitive measures of the capitalists likewise had to be intensified. The strikes, although more sophisticated than before, which I will elaborate below, failed, and hundreds of the strikers were blacklisted.

In the 1840s the textile mills began to intensify the process of production to increase productivity. More commodities are produced, while the same wages are paid, thus the extraction of surplus-value is greater. This is what Marx terms relative surplus-value. A more efficient productivity means a greater production of relative surplus-value. If a capitalist is able to produce twice as many commodities as his neighbor capitalists, then they are at the value socially necessary, and he is able to sell them cheaper than his neighbors, significantly expanding his capital. However, once this capitalist’s neighbors catch on, and rearrange the labor-process in their factories to match his production rates, the socially necessary labor-time is adjusted, the value of the product diminishes, and the capitalist is left without his advantage. So there is a motive for each capitalist to cheapen his commodities by increasing productivity, a class drive to intensify the labor-process. This is competition, and its consequences for labor are severe.

Labor was divided further according to quality of fabric and task, enabling the use of the machinery at greater speeds. Along with that, the workers were working now more than one loom simultaneously. Also, the speeds of the looms were increasing as the years wore on. This work intensification, an increase in productivity and thus surplus-value, did not coincide with an increased wage. A woman describes how she works more and more looms at faster speeds but still earns around the same pay.

In May, 1842, the last month before the reduction of wages, I tended two looms, running at the rate of 140 beats of the late per minute. In twenty-four days I earned 14 dollars and 52 cents. In the next month, June, when speed and prices had both been reduced, I tended four looms, at a speed of 100, and earned in 24 days, 13 dollars 52 cents. In January 1843, the speed was raised...
to about 118, and the price reduced still lower. I earned in that
month, in 24 days on three looms, 14 dollars 60 cents ... In June
1843, I still tended three looms, and in 24 days earned 15 dollars
40 cents, and in June 1844, I received 16 dollars 92 cents in
payment for 24 days' work.20

Nisonoff interprets this data, saying that the increase in work intensity
(the expansion in relative surplus-value) and fall in piece work rates
meant that many worked harder while earning less pay. Along with this
expansion in relative surplus-value extraction, there was an expansion in
absolute surplus-value, by 1841, textile mills operatives were working
fifteen minutes longer than they were 1821.21

The cramped work spaces in the textile mills reached dangerous
limits. In this era where the legislation for safety precautions was
rudimentary, crude, and practically non-existent, young women labored in
any conditions the capitalists set. In the conditions which the capitalist
set, safety of the workers doesn't concern the accumulation of capital, and
thus was neglected. When in the 1840s, the working class reached the
sophistication to include political agency in their organizing, one Lowell
worker gave testimony to a court hearing about the conditions in the
textile mills, explaining that "over 150 persons worked in one room,
where 293 small lamps and 61 large ones burned morning and evening
during the winter months" This made the air foul, and sometimes as
many as thirty women were sick in one day from the fumes.22 But these
conditions which caused sickness among the workers were of no concern
for the capitalists. What mattered was that 150 persons worked in one
room so that the production of thread increased and the extraction of
surplus-value was expanded - what mattered was the accumulation of
capital.

The original conditions of the factories, which seemed pleasant to a
visitor, and the facade of a modern and beautiful Lowell were a symbol of
the paternalistic relations between the textile mill owners and the young
women workers. When the town was constructed by the industrial
capitalists, it was built to be beautiful in contrast to the "gloomy mill
towns of the English industrial revolution."23 However, the class drive
of the capitalists which necessitated that they place capital above all made
them abandon their attempt to construct a New England industrial "city
upon the hill" and their system of benign paternalistic exploitation. The

nature of capital meant that the capitalists as capital personified could not
obey their own wills to see Lowell as their New England ideal, but
instead the will of capital which necessitates a class struggle.

Opposite the capitalists in this development of class and class
struggle, are of course the workers. Capitalism is a class struggle because
capitalists struggle to exploit their workers to expand surplus-value, and
workers struggle for a normal working-day, for decent remuneration, &c.
The struggle on the part of the workers creates an antinomy of capitalism,
two opposing forces in the factory, "the determination of what is a
working-day," wages, and working conditions "presents itself as the result
of a struggle, a struggle between collective capital, i.e. the class of
capitalists, and collective labour, i.e. the working-class."24 The
development of the class consciousness of the workers in New England in
the 19th century textile mills was of course made by this struggle. The
assault on labor by the capitalist forms a common cause, the other class
drive, and this class drive of the workers is quite distinct in principle from
the capitalist class drive. The working-class doesn't struggle for the
creation of value for its own consumption, the class drive of labor is the
drive to defend itself against the assault of capital, its drive must be to
resist. Key to resistance is the acknowledgement of what hid behind the
facade of a paternalistic businessman – capital personified.

The women working in the New England textile mills in the early
19th century had special circumstances for the development of their class
consciousness. The workforce of the factories were 90% women, the
men having supervisory and mechanic jobs, so women did all the labor
which was assaulted and exploited by the capitalists.25 Further, there was
little interaction between the women and the men working, and even
outside of work, due to the living situation provided for them by the
companies, the women had little interaction with men.26 As mentioned
above, these women all were in the same age range, 16-25,27 came from
the countryside, and were American born, coming from families who had
lived in the US or the colonies for several generations.28 These women all

25 Nisonoff, Laurie. Op. Cit. 1. The business owners were also men, of course. In an era
of True Womanhood, women owning capital would violate the principle of
submissiveness. However, young women working in factories was allowed, as this
violation of the idea of domesticity in true womanhood didn't threaten the power and
privilege of rich white men.
27 Dublin says that "over 80 per cent of the female workforce were between the ages of
15 and 30; and only 10 per cent were under 14 or over 40" (Ibid. 50).

20 Ibid.
21 Ibid. 9.
22 Ibid. 10.