
unemployment

There are more than three million people unemployed in South Africa today. For every three South Africans who have a job, there is another South African who should have a job but cannot find one.

When we think of unemployment, we think of the suffering of those unemployed and their families. But, our whole society suffers. At the moment, one quarter of our workers are going to waste. Those who are unemployed want to work, and they could add to our country's wealth. Unemployment stops them from doing this.

What can we do about this problem? Many people just shrug their shoulders and say: "Unemployment, there is nothing we can do. There are just not enough jobs." The bosses and the apartheid government tell us that all over the world the economy is in a bad shape. They talk about unemployment as if it was a natural fact, like the weather - one day sunny, one day rainy, but there is nothing we can do about it. That is the story the government and the bosses want us to believe.

But this strange situation where we waste one quarter of our workers has everything to do with the kind of society we live in. South Africa is a CAPITALIST society, and capitalism causes unemployment.

capitalism causes unemployment

In earlier societies (like tribal societies) there was no unemployment. If you were old enough and healthy enough, you worked. You helped everyone else. You gave your share of work, and you benefitted from everyone else's work too.

Also, in modern socialist countries, like Cuba, there is no such thing as unemployment. The fields and factories belong to the whole Cuban working people. Everyone who is old enough and healthy enough is expected to work, to build up the wealth shared by all Cuban working people. Work is guaranteed to all citizens in socialist countries. Work is not seen as an unpleasant duty, it is not slave labour for a boss. In a socialist country work is a way of developing yourself as a full human being, learning skills and working together with others.

If there is no unemployment in tribal societies, or in socialist societies, why do we find so much unemployment in our country today? In all capitalist so-
countries there is large unemployment. Not only in South Africa, but in the richest country in the world - the United States - millions of workers cannot get jobs. The same is true in the other capitalist countries - Britain, West Germany, France, Japan.

Why are such rich capitalist countries not able to solve the problem of unemployment? Sometimes we are told that it is just at the moment that things are like this. We are told there is a world-wide reces-
sion (this means the economy is going down). But, we are told, we must wait, sooner or later the economy will get better.

Is this true? The answer is: Yes and No.

Yes, capitalist economies do go up and down. Yes,

when they are down, when there is recession, then millions of workers lose their jobs. Unemployment increases.

But the answer is also No. It is very important to remember that: there is always unemployment in capitalist countries. It does not matter whether the economy is going well or badly. When it is going well there is unemployment; when it is going badly, there is even more unemployment. Let us give one example. In South Africa, between 1979 and 1981 there was an economic upswing. The South African economy was: very wealthy, but we still had two million unemployed. The same applies to all capitalist countries - even in good times, there is large scale unemployment.

But, why is there this huge waste of workers?

capitalism and the class struggle

Capitalism is a system where a few bosses own the factories, big shops, banks, mines and big farms. They pay wages to workers who labour in these factories, farms, etc. The bosses aim to make as much profit as possible. This means that the bosses try to get the workers to work as hard and as long as possible for low wages.

The workers, of course, struggle against this. They struggle to earn more and to work less hard. Between the bosses and the workers there is always, every single day, a struggle of this kind. It is against this background that we can understand the three main causes of unemployment:

- i) The reserve labour army
 - ii) Demand shortage
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iii) Labour saving machinery

i) The reserve labour army

If everyone was employed in a capitalist country, the workers would be much stronger in their battle with the bosses. It would be easier for workers to demand better wages, or a shorter working day.

But, when there are unemployed workers desperate for jobs, this strengthens the boss's hand. If employed workers make demands, the boss can say: "If you don't like your wages, you can leave! There are plenty others looking for work."

It is for this reason in capitalist countries you will always find unemployment. The bosses are careful not to employ everyone. They like to have a safety-valve, a large number of unemployed workers hungry for jobs. This safety valve we call the reserve labour army.

ii) Demand shortage

We have seen that unemployment is not a natural thing, like the weather. Unemployment is caused by capitalism. We have also said that recessions, or when the economy goes down, makes unemployment worse. Recessions lead to even more unemployment.

Again, the bosses and the apartheid government speak of recessions as if they were natural facts like the weather. And again it is important to understand that recessions are also caused by capitalism. The one big reason for recessions is the greedy selfishness of the bosses.

Every boss pays his worker as little as possible. That way he can make big profits. But every boss would like other bosses to pay their workers more. Why? Let us take an example.

Imagine you are Raymond Ackermann, the boss of Pick 'n Pay. If you were Raymond Ackermann you would like the bosses who own clothing factories, and car factories, and tyre factories, etc. to pay their workers more, so that these workers could buy more from Pick 'n Pay. But at the same time, you, Raymond Ackerman, want to keep your own profits high, so you pay low wages to your own workers.

So you can see why things don't work out so well. Each boss is selfish, and pays his own workers very little. In this way all bosses suffer from each other's greediness.

For this reason, in capitalist countries, you will find factories that can produce thousands of cars, TVs, clothes, etc. work only to half their capacity. Or, you find these factories closing down. This is not because people don't want cars, TVs or clothes. It is because there are not enough people with enough money to buy these things. Because the bosses pay so little, there is not enough demand for their goods. This leads to recessions, and this leads to more unemployment.

iii) Labour saving machinery

This is the third cause of unemployment. Again, the bosses and the apartheid government make this sound like a natural fact. They tell us: "We've got to keep up with the times. We've got to introduce the latest machinery."

Once more this so-called natural fact is rooted in the capitalist system. It is a system based on profits for the bosses, and not on the needs of society.

In capitalism there is not only a constant struggle between the bosses and the workers. There is also competition between the bosses. Each boss tries to take the other bosses' customers away. One way of

doing this is to produce more goods more cheaply by using new fancy machines. These machines employ fewer workers and make more goods.

Now it is true that labour saving machinery can help a society, can produce more wealth and cheaper goods. But in capitalism, the introduction of this machinery is not based on the needs of the society, but on the profits for the bosses. So new machines often mean that thousands of workers lose their jobs. "What can we do? It's competition", say the bosses.

In socialist countries, there is much advanced machinery. But the use of this machinery is based on what society needs, and on whether jobs can be found for those who will be replaced by the machines. In socialist countries, they may decide to keep old machines if this will benefit society more. It all depends.

Once again, the third cause of unemployment only seems like a natural fact if you are sitting inside the room called capitalism, and if you forget to look outside of the window at other possibilities.

apartheid and unemployment

We have looked at the three main reasons for unemployment:

- i) The reserve labour army
- ii) Demand shortage
- iii) Labour saving machinery

In South Africa you will find all these causes. This is because South Africa is a capitalist society. But South Africa also has special things about it. Besides capitalist exploitation there is also national

oppression of the majority of our people. This national oppression adds to the unemployment problem.

The white settlers came to South Africa long before capitalism developed here. These white settlers stole the land from the people. They pushed the local people into reserves. They made them carry passes. The African majority became foreigners in their own land.

This national oppression was here before South African capitalism started. Then, at the end of the last century, with the development of diamond and gold mines, this national oppression was adapted to help capitalism.

When we speak of national oppression, we are speaking of many things: pass laws, forced removals, job reservation, the Bantustan system, separate and gutter education, etc. All of these aspects of national oppression add to the problem of unemployment in South Africa.

i) National oppression and the reserve labour army

In all capitalist countries there is a reserve of unemployed. In South Africa, the pass laws and the Bantustans are used to control and support a huge reservoir of unemployed. Ever since the beginning of capitalism in South Africa, the reserves have been used as a cheap way of keeping reserve labour.

In this way, the unemployed are kept away from the cities, away from the political and economic power centres in our country. For this reason, the South African bosses and the apartheid government are comfortable with a much higher number of unemployed than in other advanced capitalist countries. We just bury the problem in the starvation camps in the Bantustans.

But while this works in one way for the South African

bosses, it makes the demand shortage greater in our country.

ii) National oppression and the demand shortage

The demand shortage is even greater in South Africa than in similar capitalist countries. With millions of unemployed starving in the Bantustans, they can hardly think of buying cars, TVs, or new clothes.

It is not just the Bantustan system that causes this demand shortage. The general poverty and oppression that hits the black majority in our country, means that South Africa has a much smaller home market than is usual for an advanced capitalist country with 30 million people.

This brings us to the third capitalist cause of unemployment.

iii) National oppression and labour saving machinery

Because of the small home market, many South African bosses are forced to sell their goods overseas. In fact, from the start, South African capitalism was largely directed to selling overseas. For many years gold was the major thing produced by South African capitalism. Most of this gold was sold overseas. Because South African bosses export a lot of their goods, they also have to compete with powerful foreign bosses.

Of course, it is not just South African bosses who operate here, there are also many overseas bosses (imperialist bosses) operating in South Africa.

In all these cases, we often see the use of labour-saving machinery that needs less and less workers. The kinds of factories we have depends on South African bosses, and not on the needs of South African workers.

This new machinery often uses a few skilled workers, and here again national oppression adds to unemployment. Gutter education, cultural oppression, job reservation, all these things hold back the black majority of our country. It is very difficult for blacks to gain skills. Today we have the terrible situation where South African bosses and the apartheid government are paying large amounts of money to attract skilled workers from Europe, while millions of our own people are unemployed.

conclusion

We have seen that capitalism causes unemployment. We have also seen that in South Africa the national oppression of black people adds to this problem of unemployment. It is for this reason that we say that the struggle against unemployment is also a struggle against capitalism and national oppression.

questions for discussion

1. Discuss the 3 main causes of unemployment in all capitalist countries. Do you understand these 3 causes? Do you agree that capitalism causes unemployment?
2. Discuss the ways in which apartheid makes unemployment worse.
3. Discuss the possibilities, the importance and the difficulties of organising the unemployed.

