

what is needed to survive is not constant, but changes in different circumstances. If the working class is strong and organised, it may be able to increase what is considered to be sufficient to live on; if the workers are weak and disorganised, the capitalists are able to lower the average survival consumption of workers. (WIP 19:27).

Thus, the power of the capitalist class may, at certain stages, be such that it actually reduces what is considered socially necessary for working class survival, and depresses the level of working class consumption. In practical terms, this means that workers eat less, and that the quality of what they eat is poorer; the quality of housing and clothing may decline, there will be less money available for health care, schooling, etc. This sort of process is detailed in WIP 17 under the general title Inflation and the Working Class. In the section on falling wages, it is shown how the standard of living of workers is actually falling in South Africa, and that what is considered to be 'socially necessary' for survival is declining for at least some sections of the working class. (see WIP 17:26).

Because, in this general example, surplus labour time is being increased relative to necessary labour time (rather than absolutely, as in our first example), this is called the production of relative surplus value. In the one case, the division between surplus and necessary labour time is changed absolutely, by lengthening the working day; in the other, it is the internal divisions of the working day which are changed relative to each other.

There are other ways of producing relative surplus value, apart from the one described above. At this stage they need not be dealt with in any detail, although we will be returning to this question in part 3 of the series.

What is important at this stage is to realise that the way in which the capitalist class attempts to increase the amount of surplus value it takes over (appropriates) from the working class is a very important social relation in society. A society in which absolute surplus value (lengthening the working day) is the major way of appropriating surplus value will in some ways be different from a society in which relative surplus value is more important. In other words, the way in which surplus value is appropriated (taken over) by the capitalist class is an important social relation, necessary to understand in analysing society. For example, if the capitalist class is cutting back on working class consumption, is lessening necessary labour time relative to surplus labour time, the level of repression is going to be very high in that society. A certain degree of force and violence will be used by the ruling class to enforce a cut back on what is considered socially necessary to survive.

The importance of this will become clearer in part 3 of this series on political economy, when we come to look at some of the ways in which the capitalist class has appropriated surplus value in the development of South African capitalism. This is one of the keys to understanding segregation and the migrant labour system, as well as institutions like hostels, compounds and townships.

CONCLUSION

IN this section, we have seen that social relations, rather than things or peoples' intentions or ideas, are a key to understanding how society works. We considered two very important sets of social relations:

1) the relationship of the capitalist and

working class to the means of production. Here we discovered that the capitalist's ownership of the means of production was an important basis of power. This power allowed them to force the working class to produce surplus value, to decide what is to be produced, how it is to be produced, and how the surplus is distributed.

2) the different ways in which the production of surplus value is increased is also a key social relationship. In this article, we distinguished between the production of absolute surplus value, and relative surplus value. The way in which surplus value is produced and appropriated is very important in understanding why there are different forms of capitalist society.

In the next part of this series on political economy, we will look at some of the specific ways in which the capitalist class has increased its rate of surplus value appropriation (exploitation) in South Africa, and how these mechanisms explain some of the features of a racially segregated society initially based on a system of migrant labour.

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