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# The Failure of the Working Class in front of Fordism

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Abstract	Research Article
The development of the production forces following the Industrial Revolution radically dehumanized the conditions of labor. This situation brought about the reactionary labor movements especially during the period between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. However, those reactions could not culminate in a class consciousness through which the laborers could organize to shatter the foundations of capitalism as it was the case in Ford Motor Company. The five-dollar day policy of the company achieved to demotivate the workers to take part in any syndical movement. This article aims to investigate the success of Fordism in dismantling the labor solidarity in the midst of an epoch of intensified syndical movements by means of high wage policies.	Received: 06.09.2021 Revision received: 27.05.2022 Accepted: 18.05.2022
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#### Introduction

The period between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century was one of the most vibrant periods in the United States' history, as it witnessed several syndical movements, some of which achieved to organize nationwide general strikes. However, despite all the achievements of the unions, like those of "Industrial Workers of the World" which united the least qualified and the worst paid workers, these movements could not bring forth the anticipated class consciousness. Yet, according to Marx, only such a class consciousness could have the potential to shatter the foundations of the capitalist mode of production and lead to the absolute dissolution of the exploitation. Instead, those movements were abruptly resolved in the class collaboration once the relative conditions of workers were improved and even the least qualified workers found the occasion to access to some of the luxury consumption goods. Obviously, it was a strategy to disarm the masses of workers preventing them to consolidate mass movements.

One of the best applications of this strategy could be seen in the example of Ford Motor Company's Five Dollar Day policy. In the midst of the struggles and strikes, Henry Ford took a radical step in order to cope with the syndical movements. Instead of intensifying the pressure on the workers of his factories and to deteriorate the conditions of work, he doubled the wages and reduced the weekly working hours. Although he confronted the fierce reaction of his fellow industrial investors and was even accused of being a "mad socialist", he considered this act as a successful managerial strategy, the best move he ever took (Wood and Wood, 2003, 95). The following periods showed that he was right, and his strategy turned out to be the best strategy to dismantle the working class.

The failure of the class struggle among the low-skilled workers can be found in the new mode of consumption which Henry Ford debuted by introducing *Five Dollar Day* policy. The workers who suffered the conditions of the labor process finally found a way to enjoy comfort and imitate the consumption habits of the higher income groups. However, this improvement of the material conditions of a group of workers in developed countries did not change the fundamentals of exploitation and the basic conditions of the labor process. Yet, the workers believed this illusion because they were already touched by the capitalist ideology in which wealth already had a positive connotation as a symbol of power and social inclusion. The article will investigate the historical background of the failure of labor movements due to high wage policies which reinforced class collaboration and intensified the competition in the labor market in the beginning of the twentieth century.

# Proletariat and the Revolution Ideal

To understand why the syndical movements of the early period of capitalism could not attain a class consciousness, first, we must understand their historical context. The awful applications of the capitalist mode of production in the Western countries during the nineteenth century are evident. However, it is also important to note that these applications, e.g. the unhealthy period of convalescence, the use of opium on the babies to let mother work during the day, the underage child employment, inadequate nutrition etc. (Humphries 2003; Sharpe, 2012), were considered as normal under the relative empirical moral values of the time.

According to the mentality of the epoch, the poor masses, regardless the life conditions, were considered to deserve nothing but their actual state as they were seen

as lazy and parasitic members of the community. The misery was even considered as the whip on the back of those masses, necessary to put them to work. Accordingly, following writers like Arthur Young who believed that "the lower classes must be kept poor or they [would] never be industrious" and Thomas Mun who raised the idea that "penury and want do make a people wise and industrious", Edgar Furniss stated that "hard times increased the industry of the laborer", (Furniss, 1965, 118).

However, the Kantian practical imperative demands to treat the human being as an end in itself and refuses its instrumentalization (Walker, 2011, 107). It is illegitimate to defend those disgraceful acts as necessary measures. It was then inevitable that life, contained in chains and misery, reacted in order to change its conditions of existence. The nineteenth century eventually was one of the most vibrant periods in history, and numerous syndical movements were led by workers in reaction to the miserable conditions of life.

The unity of those oppressed masses is best summarized in the Marxian concept of proletariat, etymologically derived from the Latin word proletarii. This term signifies a social class of Roman citizens who had nothing but their own labor power as property. Marx used this concept to identify the masses, suffering from the conditions of the capitalist labor process, which renounced their share in the final product by selling their labor power (Marx, 1976, 292). According to Erich Fromm (2013), Marx introduced the concept of proletariat reacting against its conditions of life as he was concerned to emancipate man from the economic determinism which abstracted and reduced life into working hours by means of the labor process. Thus, the proletarians who had "nothing to lose but their chains" could win the world "by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions" (Marx, 1955, 46).

According to Marx, this contradiction obstructing life from becoming active had a revolutionary potential for a historical momentum, which would transform the history into a world history and unify all the workers of the world for the sudden and simultaneous act to appropriate the whole world. This purpose was unattainable without the emergence of the class consciousness, which should replace the individually driven psychological consciousness. Marx defended that this transformation was only possible in the final stage of capitalism of the big industry, where "mass of conditions of existence, limitations, biases of individuals, are fused together into the two simplest forms: private property and labour" (Marx and Engels, 1974, 91). It is only at this stage that all interactions between individuals would be reduced to two categories: accumulated labor in form of capital and actual labor of the living human beings in form of workers.

Hence, at this stage all the individuals should become completely dependent one on another, insomuch as they would entirely be subordinated to the labor process and the division of labor. While their labor existed in a fragmented way due to its division, the individuals in the state of being "completely shut off from all self-activity" were capable of realizing a "complete and no longer restricted self-activity". Through this activity, they could appropriate the totality of productive forces, which would appear as an independent set of potentiality (Marx and Engels, 1974, 92–93). It was only at this moment that they could form a unity, free of all contingent individualities. Self-activity would coincide with material life only then, by way of "the appropriation of the total productive forces through united individuals" (Marx and Engels, 1974, 93).

Thus, Marx considered revolution as the only way to prevail the terrifying conditions of capitalism as it would transcend the individual drives thanks to the universality of the class consciousness. Only through this universality in the ultimate stage of the big industry, the proletarians would find the occasion to unify for one aim, under one unified consciousness, all over the world. However, any local communism,

which could come forth before the emergence of the class consciousness would not succeed, as it would be contaminated by the surrounding forces of capitalism (Marx and Engels, 1974, 56). These movements emerging before the universal act of revolution could only bring forth an intermediary state, coexisting with capitalism, which could be abolished by any interaction with the rest of the world.

According to Marx, before the emergence of the class consciousness and the ultimate revolutionary moment, individuals in the capitalist mode of production should find themselves on hostile terms in the universalized concurrence. Just like the bourgeoisie, their consciousness was dominated by the bourgeois ideology. This is to say, the workers would see the competition in the labor market as a natural fact in this stage and they would try to protect their advantages against their fellow workers. Even the accidental character of individuality, the trait which separates one individual from another, is a product of those struggles among the individuals. Moreover, individuals believe to be independent under the dominance of bourgeois conditions thanks to the labor market struggles to find a living which bring about the accidental traits of individuality. They hence perceive in an illusion that their conditions of life are accidental, even though, in reality, "they are less free, because they are more subjected to the violence of things" (Marx and Engels, 1974, 82–84).

# **Labor Movements of the Epoch**

The nineteenth century encompassed many labor movements due to the inhumane conditions of labor during the big industry stage of the capitalist mode of production. These movements were mostly local reactions, but they were sometimes united through the worldwide network of the International Workingmen's Association, First International, founded in 1864 (Gryzanovski, 1872). One of the most important centers of these reactionary movements was the rapidly industrializing young republic of the United States. Parallel to the country's pace of industrialization, the proletarian reactions intensified under the influence of the victory of the Australian workers on the question of eight-hour day. For this purpose, the American workers started to organize leagues and committees in the big cities to express their demands (Adamic, 2010, 48–51). The first American syndical organization affiliated with the First International, the *National Labor Union* was founded in 1866, even though it did not survive after the death of its founder in 1873 (Guérin, 1977, 25).

Except for some limited improvements in the conditions of work and wages, the labor movements of this period did not have any important achievements (Kimeldorf and Stepan-Norris, 1992). The fiasco of these labor movements, in fact, was mostly due to the disagreements among workers, arising especially from their professional organizations, trade-unions. The main objective of these organizations was to protect the benefits of their affiliated workers practicing a certain profession in the labor market. They did not aim to unify workers regardless of their professions or affiliations within a class consciousness. They only intended to protect the competitiveness of their affiliated members to the detriment of the rest of the workers. This is a phenomenon known as trade-unionism, which Pannekoek defined as "an action of the workers, which does not go beyond the limit of capitalism" (Pannekoek, 1936). Thus, apart from the relatively comfortable lifestyle provided to the qualified worker members, the tradeunions like the National Labor Union and the American Federation of Labor did not seek to elaborate a class consciousness. On the contrary, they facilitated the division of the class through the hierarchy among the professions to the service of the tacit league of the employers (Adamic 2010, 48-51; Guérin 1977, 25).

The emergence of The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), which principally united the unskilled foreign workers in 1905, changed this picture at the national level (Burgmann, 1995), especially following the deterioration of the economic situation after the 1907 banking crisis which increased the social disturbance and indignation (Sobel, 1999, 301). Under these worsening circumstances, mainly to the detriment of the poorest part of society, as Antoine Pannekoek summarized, the IWW put forth the slogan "one big union for all the workers" and the principle defending that "all workers of one factory, as comrades against one master, must form one union, to act as a strong unity against the employer" (Pannekoek, 1936). Consequently, the labor movements entered a new era where the workers could organize nationwide demonstrations and strikes to protect the rights of all fellow workers. The wave of demonstrations, strikes and product boycotts led by the IWW between 1905 and 1910 achieved to organize a sort of labor unity despite the class divisions produced by the trade-unions (Burgmann, 1995). Likewise, the strikes against the American Woolen Company in Lawrence organized by the IWW in 1912 managed to improve the wages of workers. The strike of 1913 against the silk producers in New Jersey improved the labor cooperation, as it rapidly turned into a nationwide strike. The strike of the unorganized rubber workers in Akron, Ohio also rapidly turned into a nationwide general strike in 1914, despite its failure at the end (Guérin, 1977, 53–59).

### **Taylorism to the Rescue of the Business**

In the midst of the achievements of the intensified labor movements in which the IWW led the worst paid workers into the fight, the tacit league of the Big Business that Adam Smith suggested as a significant obstacle in front of the labor movements (Smith, 2007, 44) looked for a way out. Herein, Winslow Taylor's *The Principles of Scientific Management* came to the aid of the employers in 1911. In the framework of this book, Taylor proposed effective methods to the industrial employers as means of struggle against the labor movements.

Taylor's first concern was the organization of work itself by means of scientific methods and the deterrence of soldiering, the systematized and conscious way to reduce the pace of work by adapting it to the speed of the slowest worker. On the one hand, the Scientific Management aimed to increase productivity and profitability through rationalization of the labor process through scientific standards; on the other hand, it proposed to conduct the labor process in a more efficient and docile way in favor of the employers by giving the qualified part of the work, the technique, to engineers, a group of professionals loyal to the employers, through standardizing the work by means of quantitative methods like time and motion studies dividing up the labor process of unskilled workers to its smallest elements (Taylor, 2004).

Once these methods were introduced, what was left to the masses of workers was to tighten the screws according to the instructions of the motion and time studies. As Tsutsui claimed in his article, the hierarchy in labor was established by means of the absolute division between the design and the execution of the labor process. This hierarchization weakened the labor movements, as the monopoly in the design of the labor process left the laborers armless face to the new strict norms of the workplace (Tsutsui, 2001).

The measures that Taylor proposed were not enough to cease the conflicts and the labor reactions. The trade unions opposed the applications of the Scientific Management insofar as it degraded the situation of their members by making it possible to put the unskilled workers in the skilled workers' positions, as it increased the interchangeability of the labor process (Nelson, 1984). Moreover, although the Scientific Management could disarm the masses of the workers thanks to the

standardization of the labor process, Antonio Gramsci underlined the fact that it could not reduce man to the state of a "trained gorilla". Inasmuch as man could both walk and think at the same time, the unskilled workers could also find more time to realize their degraded conditions in the labor process while carrying out the standardized repetitions of their jobs (Gramsci 1971, 8). Thus, the Scientific Management could not utterly hinder the syndical movements alone although it strengthened the position of the employers.

#### The Labor Movements versus the Five-Dollar Day

Taylor was informed about these facts of the epoch and believed that the prosperity of employers could only be protected by increasing the prosperity of workers. He claimed that the employer could attain "what he wants -a low labor cost- for his manufactures" by giving to "the workman what he most wants -high wages" (Taylor 2004:5). The first industrialist who listened to this advice was the owner of the Ford Motor Company, Henry Ford. Ford was already using the scientific methods of Taylor in his factories. He had even improved these methods by introducing the assembly line technique in his Highland Park Ford Plant in Michigan in 1913. However, while all the industrial employers contented with the scientific management methods like time and motion studies, Ford thought that it was not feasible to continue mass production without mass consumption. He needed to create a new body of loyal customers as well as a loyal body of workers for the mass production, fueled by the productivity that Scientific Management and the assembly line increased. As Foster stated, he "envisaged a new, corporatist age of high-wage, high-consumption, easy-credit and high-productivity capitalism, based on the firm foundation of the mass production assembly line" (Foster, 1988, 1).

Similar to Taylor, Ford wrote that "business can live only as it develops within corps of employees the talent and the force which will carry business along" (Ford, 1988, 22). In accordance with this new vision, Ford Motor Company responded to the demands of its workers in a very different way in 1914. The working conditions were very hard in this period and the labor force had a high turnover rate. The situation was worse in Ford's factories, as the work became more monotonous following the implementation of the assembly line. The workers could even leave the job in the middle of their shifts, which could hamper the work and stop the entire assembly line. Accordingly, the labor turnover rate became an important expense for the company in Highland Park as it reached 370% in 1913 (Mackamani, 2014).

In response to this problem, Henry Ford did not only reduce the workday hours; he also nearly doubled the wages of his employees by increasing it from two dollars to five dollars a day. To understand the importance of this rise, it should be taken in consideration that the value of one American dollar of 1914 is equivalent of 24.28 American dollars in 2017 (Anon n.d.). Thus, he increased the daily wages of workers at this period from 48.56 U.S. dollars of 2017 to 121.4 U.S. dollars of 2017. This meant a remarkable improvement in the economic conditions of the workers, and it was not welcomed by the other members of the Big Business struggling with the labor movements.

Although the new policy radically improved the conditions of labor, the main drive behind it was not to redistribute wealth, but to create a loyal working force and a loyal clientele. According to Ford, this improvement in the wages, which he called Five Dollar Day in his book (Ford, 1988), utterly was a management strategy aiming the growth in both labor and capital, this is to say, in both consumption and production, by sharing the profits with the masses. In his book, he even stated that this strategy was the

main source of the growth of his company, insofar as it improved the purchasing power of his workers who became both loyal workers and reliable customers of the company in the market. In this sense, Ford considered the policy was the best cost cutting method he ever implemented (Foster, 1988,3).

Assuming new consumption habits was not only an option but an obligation. The lifestyle of the workers was closely surveyed in Ford's factories by the agents of the "Sociological Department". The alleged purpose of the department was to "Americanize" the workers who were majorly immigrants (Mackaman, 2014). This unit of the company closely monitored the lifestyle of the workers and the way that they used their increased wages. In consequence of these investigations, 28% of the workers lost their chance to work in Ford's plants "for spending money too freely; some for lying or not cooperating; some for not demonstrating proof of marriage; some for having 'domestic troubles'; some (men) because their wives worked, etc." (Foster,1988,4). However, this compulsion did not hamper the success of the policy. On the contrary, following the dissolution of the Sociological Department in 1921, the workers autonomously assumed the new lifestyle and even started to denounce voluntarily their comrades who rejected to submit to the new mode of life (Foster,1988,4–5).

Ford's five-dollar day policy did not survive for a long time, due to the high inflation rates of the World War I. The company even announced a six-dollar day in 1919 but it was less impressive than the first one. However, the mollification of the labor movements by means of high wages manifested the beginning of a new era. Despite the conflict of interest between the capital and the labor, this new policy achieved to resolve the tension in a class collaboration instead of class struggle. Henceforth, the unskilled workers, like those who were united under the flag of the IWW, could also imitate the consumption habits of the higher classes just like the skilled workers protected by the trade unions (Mackaman, 2014).

#### **Results and Discussion**

The syndical movements of the proletarians who possessed nothing but their own labor failed once they had something more than their chains to lose in the struggle. Sooner or later, these relative improvements became obligations determining the decisions of the workers and keeping them in line. The workers acted accordingly as the comfort they received had a price to find a place in the workforce and led them to struggles against their fellow workers to overcome their material difficulties experienced as individual problems. Accordingly, the workers developed their individualities, the accidental traits of their personal identities, by means of confrontations and struggles among themselves. As within the dominant capitalist ideology workers experienced a relevant wellbeing and wealth through conformity to the demands of their employers to gain advantage against their comrades, the competition among workers that Marx underlined as a phase preceding the class consciousness was buttressed and eventually hampered the class struggles.

This strategy, which was also coined as "Americanism" by Gramsci (1971, 561–63), lasted until the end of the golden period of consumption on account of the mass unemployment following the Great Depression in 1930s (Smith 2001, 157). In the example of Ford Motor Company's five-dollar day policies, it became evident that the main concern of even the most oppressed stratum of the proletariat was not to shatter the foundations of the system of exploitation, but to acquire some relative improvements in the conditions of labor. Although the unity in the labor movements was motivated by absolute ethical principles like the slogan of the IWW "one big union

for all the workers", despite all the transcendental principles of the struggle, the workers made their decisions within the capitalist valorization process based on individual traits. Consequently, the imposed new consumption habits were easily welcomed by the workers of Ford Motor Company and the labor movements which could elaborate the class consciousness resolved within the competition in the class. Therefore, the unity was mollified in the trap of liquidity of the new lifestyle of consumerism.

Despite the success of Ford's paternalistic management based on consumerism, the First World War had an important impact on American social and industrial relations. Although the prewar period was a progressive era during which labor movements lost impetus in favor of implementation of Taylorist managerial strategies and, as Meyer (1981,169) indicates, it was a period during which workers were optimistic about the future and sympathetic to reformist mind of the era, the postwar period was marked by pragmatic and tough policies. During the war period, Ford's labor policies followed the spirit of the time and they shifted from the welfare capitalism initiated with the Five-Dollar-Day program to "a version of the American Plan" aiming at war production and technologies (Meyer,1981,169). The American industrials continued to embrace Ford's efficient forms of work organization initiated in the prewar period whereas wages were continuously declining. This derangement of the Fordist policies led to radicalization in labor as workers progressively turned militant to protect their earlier conditions and standards (Nevins,1954,647–48).

In 1917, the labor problems that Ford's high-income policies reduced reemerged (Meyer,1981,170). To ratify the tension which led to the socialist organization of Auto Workers' Union advocating industrial unionism, Ford even announced a 6-dollar day program in 1919; however, this time the new policy was "considerably less impressive" and, consequently, Ford laid off nearly 70,000 workers in 1920 (Mackaman,2014). Besides, in 1929 the tension drastically increased with the crash of stock market which led to one of the worst economic disasters in American history, the Great Depression. However, although at this period the economic disaster resulted in many job losses and unemployment soared, the participation in labor unions were mostly affiliated with the conservatist union of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), and, instead of industrial unionism, trade unions of skilled craftsmen dominated once again the American labor organizations between 1929 and 1933, up until the New Deal of Franklin Roosevelt (Kimeldorf and Stepan-Norris,1992).

Following the declaration of The National Industrial Recovery Act in 1934 in the scope of the New Deal program, once workers' adhesion to unio3ns became legal for the first time in American history, organized labor movements regained ground in the country and new labor unions were formed while old ones were restored (Gregory,2009). According to Michael Harrington (1987), the New Deal was a reformist attempt which systematized Henry Ford's policies safeguarding mass production-mass consumption equilibrium on the basis of Keynesian macroeconomic politics. Thus, it is also important to capture the impact of the New Deal policies on the class consciousness to understand the contemporary situation of labor and the effect of high-income consumerist policies on organized labor movements.

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