

The New Middle Class.

BY ANTON PANNEKOEK



THE middle class is the one which stands between the highest and the lowest strata of society. Above it is the class of the great capitalists; below it the proletariat, the class of the wage-workers. It constitutes the social group with medium incomes. Accordingly, it is not divided with equal sharpness from both of the other two classes. From the great capitalist the small bourgeois is distinguished only by a difference in degree; he has a smaller amount of capital, a more modest business. Therefore the question as to who belongs to this small bourgeois class is difficult to answer. Every capitalist who suffers from the competition of still greater capitalists denounces those above him and cries out for help on behalf of the middle class.

From the proletariat, on the contrary, the small bourgeois is divided by a difference in kind, in economic function. Be his business and his income ever so small, he is **independent**. He lives by virtue of his **ownership of the means** of production, like any other capitalist, and **not** from the **sale of his labor power**, like a proletarian. He belongs to the class that undertakes enterprises, that must possess some capital in order to carry them on; often he employs laborers himself. From the wage-working class he is, therefore, sharply differentiated.

In former times this class of small capitalists constituted the main body of the industrial population. Social development, however, has gradually brought about its destruction. The motive power of this development was competition. In the struggle for existence the greatest capitalists, the ones financially and technically best fitted to survive, crowded out the poorer and more backward ones. This process has gone on to such an extent that at present industrial production is carried on almost exclusively on a large scale; in industry small production survives only in the form of repair work or special artistic activities. Of the members of the earlier middle class a small number have worked themselves up to the rank of great capitalists; the great majority have lost their independence and sunk down into the proletariat. For the present generation the industrial middle class has only a historical existence.

The class that I referred to in my first paragraph is the commercial middle class. This social stratum we ourselves have seen, and still see, decaying before our eyes. It is made up of small merchants, shopkeepers, etc. Only during the last decades have the great capitalists gone into the retail business; only recently have they begun to establish branch concerns and mail-order houses, thus either driving out the small concerns or forcing them into a trust. If during recent times there has been great lamentation over the disappearance of the middle class, we must keep in mind that it is only the commercial middle class that is in question. The industrial middle class long ago went down and the agrarian middle class became subordinate to capitalism without losing the forms of independence.

In this account of the decline of the middle class we have the theory of Socialism in a nut-shell. The social development which resulted in this phenomenon made of Socialism a possibility and a necessity. So long as the great mass of the people were independent producers Socialism could exist only as the utopia of individual theorists or little groups of enthusiasts; it could not be the practical program of a great class. Independent producers do not need Socialism; they do not even want to hear of it. They own their means of production and these are to them the guarantee of a livelihood. Even the sad position into which they are forced by competition with the great capitalists can hardly render them favorable to Socialism. It makes them only the more eager to become great capitalists themselves. They may wish, occasionally, to limit the freedom of competition—perhaps under the name of Socialism; but they do not want to give up their own independence or freedom of competition. So long, therefore, as there exists a strong middle class it acts as a protecting wall for the capitalists against the attacks of the workers. If the workers demand the socialization of the means of production, they find in this middle class just as bitter an opponent as in the capitalists themselves.

The decay of the middle class signifies the concentration of capital and the growth of the proletariat. Capital faces, therefore, an ever-increasing army of opponents and is supported by a constantly decreasing number of defenders. For the proletariat Socialism is a necessity; it constitutes the only means of protecting labor against robbery by a horde of useless parasites, the only bulwark against want and poverty. As the great mass of the population comes more and more to consist of proletarians, Socialism, in addition to being a necessity, comes more and more to be a possibility; for the bodyguard of private property grows constantly weaker and becomes powerless against the constantly mounting forces of the proletariat.

It goes without saying, therefore, that the bourgeoisie views with alarm the disappearance of the middle class. The new development which inspires the proletariat with hope and confidence fills the ruling class with fear for its future. The faster the proletariat, its enemy increases in numbers, the faster the owning class decreases, the more certainly the bourgeoisie sees the approach of its doom. What is to be done?

A ruling class cannot voluntarily give up its own predominance; for this predominance appears to it the sole foundation of the world order. It must defend this predominance; and this it can do only so long as it has hope and self-confidence. But actual conditions cannot give self-confidence to the capitalist class; therefore it creates for itself a hope that has no support in reality. If this class were ever to see clearly the principles of social science, it would lose all faith in its own possibilities; it would see itself as an aging despot with millions of persecuted victims marching in upon him from all directions and shouting his crimes into his ears. Fearfully he shuts himself in, closes his eyes to the reality and orders his hirelings to invent fables to dispel the awful truth. And this is exactly the way of the bourgeoisie. In order not to see the truth, it has appointed professors to soothe its troubled spirit with fables. Pretty fables they are, which glorify its overlordship, which dazzle its eyes with visions of an eternal life and scatter its doubts and dreams as so many nightmares. Concentration of capital? Capital is all the time being democratized through the increasing distribution of stocks and bonds. Growth of the proletariat? The proletariat is at the same time growing more orderly, more tractable. Decay of the middle class. Nonsense; a new middle class is rising to take the place of the old.

It is this doctrine of the new middle class that I wish to discuss in some detail in the present paper. To this new class belong, in the first place, the professors. Their function is to comfort the bourgeoisie with theories as to the future of society, and it is among them that this fable of the new middle class found its origin. In Germany there were Schmoller, Wagner, Masargh and a host of others who devoted themselves to the labor of elaborating it. They explained that the Socialist doctrine as to the disappearance of the middle class was of small importance. Every table of statistics showed that medium incomes remained almost exactly as numerous as in former times. In the places of the disappearing independent producers there were appearing other groups of the population. Industry on a large scale demanded an immense army of intermediating functionaries: overseers, skilled workers, engineers, managers of departments, bosses, etc. They formed a complete hierarchy of officials; they were the

officers and subalterns of the industrial army, an army in which the great capitalists are the generals and the workingmen the common soldiers. Members of the so-called "free" vocations, physicians, lawyers, authors, etc., belonged also to this class. A new class, then, constantly increasing in numbers, was said to be taking the place formerly occupied by the old middle class.

This observation in itself is correct, though not at all new. All that there is new about it is its exposition with a view to disproving the Socialist theories of classes. It was expressed clearly, e. g., by Schmoller at an Evangelical Social Congress held at Leipsic as far back as 1897. The audience burst into joyful enthusiasm at the good news, and declared in a resolution: "The congress notes with pleasure the reassuring and scientifically grounded conviction of the speaker that the economic development of modern times does not necessarily lead to the destruction of a class so useful to the welfare of society as the middle class." And another professor declared: "He has filled us with optimism for the future. If it is not true that the middle class and the small bourgeoisie are disappearing, we shall not be forced to alter the fundamental principles of capitalist society."

The fact that science is merely the servant of capitalism could not be more clearly expressed than in such statements. Why is this declaration that the middle class is not decaying hailed as reassuring? Why does it create content and optimism? Is it because through it the workers will attain better conditions, be less exploited? No. Just the opposite. If this statement is true, the worker will be kept forever in slavery by a permanent army of enemies; what appears to prevent his liberation is pronounced reassuring and optimistic. Not the discovery of truth, but the reassurance of an increasingly superfluous class of parasites is the object of this science. No wonder that it comes into conflict with the truth. It fails, not only in its denial of Socialist teaching, but in its reassurance of the capitalist class. The comfort that it gives is nothing more than self-deception.

The Socialist doctrine as to the concentration of capital does not imply the disappearance of medium incomes. It has nothing to do with relative incomes; it deals, on the contrary, with social classes and their economic functions. For our theory society consists, not of poor, well-to-do and rich, of those who own nothing, little, or much; but rather of **classes**, each one of which **plays a separate part in production**. A merely external, superficial classification according to incomes has always been a means whereby bourgeois writers have confused actual social conditions and produced unclearness instead of clearness. The Socialist theory restores clearness and scientific exactness by concentrating attention upon the **natural divisions of**

society. This method has made it possible to formulate the law of social development; production on a large scale constantly replaces production on a small scale. Socialists maintain, not that medium incomes, but rather small, independent producers, tend more and more to disappear. This generalization the professors do not attack; everyone acquainted with social conditions, every journalist, every government official, every petty bourgeois, every capitalist knows that it is correct. In the very declaration that the middle class is being rescued by a new, rising class it is specifically acknowledged that the former is disappearing.

But this new middle class has a character altogether different from that of the old one. That it stands between capitalists and laborers and subsists on a medium income constitutes its only resemblance to the small bourgeoisie of former times. But this was the least essential characteristic of the small bourgeois class. In its essential character, in its economic function, the new middle class differs absolutely from the old.

The members of the new middle class are not self-supporting, independent industrial units; they are in the service of others, those who possess the capital necessary to the undertaking of enterprises. Economically considered, the old middle class consisted of capitalists, even if they were **small capitalists**; the new consists of proletarians, even if they are **highly paid proletarians**. The old middle class lived by virtue of its **possession of the means of production**; the new makes its livelihood through the sale of its labor power. The economic character of the latter class is not at all modified by the fact that this labor power is of a highly developed quality; that its development may have required an expensive course of study, and that, therefore, it receives comparatively high wages; no more is it modified by the fact that this labor power is chiefly of an intellectual sort, that it depends more on the brain than on the muscles. In modern industry the chemist and the engineer are dealt with as mere wage-workers; their intellectual powers are worked to the limit of exhaustion just like the physical powers of the common laborer.

With the statement of this fact the professorial talk about the new middle class stands revealed in all its foolishness; it is a fable, a piece of self-deception. As a protection against the desire of the proletariat for expropriation the new middle class can never take the place of the old. The independent small capitalists of former times felt themselves interested in the **maintenance of private property in the means of production** because they were themselves owners of means of production. The new middle class has not the slightest interest in keeping for others a privilege in which they themselves

have no part. To them it is all one whether they stand in the service of an individual manufacturer, a stock company, or a public organism, like the community or state. They no longer dream of sometime carrying on an independent business; they know that they must remain all their lives in the position of subordinates. The socialization of the means of production would not change their position except as it would improve it by liberating them from the caprice of the individual capitalist.

It has often been remarked by bourgeois writers that the new middle class has a much more certain position than the old one and, therefore, less ground for discontent. The fact that stock companies destroy the small business men is a charge that cannot be allowed to count against its many advantages; it is really insignificant in view of the fact that the small business men, after being ruined, are given positions in the service of the company, where, as a rule, their life is much freer from care than it was in the first place. (Hemburg.) Strange, then, that they struggled so long, sacrificed their wealth and exerted their strength to the utmost, to maintain themselves in their old positions while all the time such an alluring berth was inviting them! What these apologists of the capitalist system carefully conceal is the great difference between present dependence and former independence. The middle class man of former times no doubt felt the pressure of want, of competition; but the new middle class man must obey a strange master, who may at any moment arbitrarily discharge him.

Now it is certainly true that those who serve the modern capitalist as skilled technical workers or company officials are not tortured by the cares which weighed down the spirit of the small bourgeois of former days. Often, also, their incomes are greater. But so far as the maintenance of the capitalist system is concerned they are worthless. Not personal discontent, but class interest, is the motive power of social revolution. In many cases even the industrial wage-worker of today is in a better position than the independent small farmer. Nevertheless the farmers, by virtue of the possession of their little pieces of ground, have an interest in the maintenance of the system of private ownership, while the wage-worker demands its destruction. The same is true of the middle class: the oppressed, discontented small capitalists, despite the disadvantages of their position, were props of capitalism; and this the better situated, care-free modern trust employes can never be.

This fact means nothing more than that the professorial phrases, intended to reassure the bourgeoisie with the notion of this new middle class and so hide from them the tremendous transformation which

has taken place, have turned out to be pure trickery, without even the remotest resemblance to science. The statement that the new class occupies the same position in the class-struggle as did the small bourgeoisie of the past has proved to be worthless deception. But as to the real position of this new class, its actual function in our social organism, I have thus far hardly touched upon it.*

The new intellectual middle class has one thing in common with the rest of the proletariat: it consists of the propertyless, of those who sell their labor power, and therefore has no interest in the maintenance of capitalism. It has, moreover, in common with the workers, the fact that it is modern and progressive, that through the operation of the actual social forces it grows constantly stronger, more numerous, more important. It is, therefore, not a reactionary class, as was the old small bourgeoisie; it does not yearn for the good old pre-capitalistic days. It looks forward, not backward.

But this does not mean that the intellectuals are to be placed side by side with the wage-workers in every respect, that like the industrial proletariat they are predisposed to become recruits of Socialism. To be sure, in the economic sense of the term, they are proletarians; but they form a very special group of wage-workers, a group that is socially so sharply divided from the real proletarians that they form a special class with a special position in the class-struggle.

In the first place, their higher pay is a matter of importance. They know nothing of actual poverty, of misery, of hunger. Their needs may exceed their incomes and so bring about a discomfort that gives real meaning to the expression "gilded poverty;" still immediate need does not compel them, as it does the real proletarians, to attack the capitalist system. Their position may rouse discontent, but that of the workers is unendurable. For them Socialism has many advantages; for the workers it is an absolute necessity.

In addition to this, it must be remembered that this body of intellectuals and highly-paid industrial employees divides itself into a large number of widely varying strata. These strata are determined chiefly by differences in income and position. We begin at the top with heads of departments, superintendents, managers, etc., and go on down to bosses and office employees. From these it is but a step to the highest paid workers. Thus, so far as income and position are concerned, there is really a gradual descent from capitalist to pro-

* Because the part of the intellectual in the socialist movement has recently been the subject of controversy, I feel obliged to remark that we are here dealing with an altogether different subject. In the party discussions the question has been, What role can individual intellectuals play within the socialist movement? Here we have under consideration the problem, What is the role of the whole class of intellectuals in the general struggle of the classes? ..

letarian. The higher strata have a definitely capitalistic character; the lower ones are more proletarian, but there is no sharp dividing line. On account of these divisions the members of this new middle class lack the unity of spirit which makes co-operation easy for the proletariat.

The state of affairs just described hinders them in their struggle to improve their position. It is to their interest, as it is to that of other workers, to sell their labor power at the highest possible price. Workingmen bring this about through joining forces in unions; as individuals they are defenseless against the capitalists, but united they are strong. No doubt this upper class of employes could do more to coerce the capitalists if they formed themselves into a great union. But this is infinitely more difficult for them than for workingmen. In the first place they are divided into numberless grades and ranks, ranged one above the other; they do not meet as comrades, and so cannot develop the spirit of solidarity. Each individual does not make it a matter of personal pride to improve the condition of his entire class; the important thing is rather that he personally struggle up into the next higher rank. In order to do this it is first of all necessary not to call down on himself the disfavor of the master class by opposing it in an industrial struggle. Thus mutual envy of the upper and lower ranks prevents co-operative action. A strong bond of solidarity cannot be developed. It results from this condition that employes of the class in question do not co-operate in large bodies; they make their efforts separately, or only a few together, and this makes cowards of them; they do not feel in themselves the power which the workingmen draw from consciousness of numbers. And then, too, they have more to fear from the displeasure of the masters; a dismissal for them is a much more serious matter. The worker stands always on the verge of starvation and so unemployment has few terrors for him. The high class employe, on the contrary, has a comparatively agreeable life, and a new position is difficult to find.

For all these reasons this class of intellectuals and higher employes is prevented from instituting a fight along union lines for the improvement of their position. Only in the lower ranks, where great numbers labor under the same conditions and the way to promotion is difficult, are there any signs of a union movement. In Germany two groups of employes of this class have lately made a beginning. One of these groups consists of foremen in coal mines. These men constitute a very high class of labor, for in addition to superintending industry they have oversight of arrangements designed to insure sanitary conditions and safety from accidents. Special conditions have fairly forced them to organize. The millionaire operators, in

their greed of profits, have neglected safety devices to an extent that makes catastrophes inevitable. Something had to be done. Thus far the organization is still weak and timid, but it is a beginning. The other group is made up of machinists and engineers. It has spread over all Germany, has become so important, in fact, as to be made a point of attack by the capitalists. A number of ruthless employers demanded that their men desert the organization, and when they refused to comply discharged them. For the present the union has been able to do nothing for these victims except to support them; but even in this it has taken up the cudgels against the capitalist class.

For the cause of Socialism we can count on this new middle class even less than for the labor union struggle. For one thing, they are set over the workers as superintendents, overseers, bosses, etc. In these capacities they are expected to speed up the workers, to get the utmost out of them. So, representing the interest of capital in its relation to labor, they naturally assume a position of bitter enmity to the proletariat and find it almost impossible to stand shoulder to shoulder with them in the struggle for a single goal.

In addition, a set of ideas, particularly notions of themselves and their position, tends to ally them to the capitalists. Most of them come from bourgeois, or at least small capitalist, circles and bring with them all the prejudices which stand opposed to Socialism. Among the workers such prejudices are uprooted by their new environment, but among these higher, intellectual employes they are actually strengthened. Small producers had, for example, as the first article of their faith, the idea that each one could struggle upward in competitive strife only by virtue of his own energy; as a complement to this teaching stood the notion that Socialism would put an end to personal initiative. This individualistic conception of things is, as I have remarked, strengthened in the intellectuals by their new environment; among these very technical and often high placed employes the most efficient sometimes find it possible to climb into the most important positions.

All the regular bourgeois prejudices strike deepest root in this class, further, because its members are nourished on the study of unscientific theories. They regard as **scientific truth** that which existed among the small bourgeois as subjective, unreasoned opinion. They have great notions of their own education and refinement, feel themselves elevated far above "the masses;" it naturally never occurs to them that the ideals of these masses may be scientifically correct and that the "science" of their professors may be false. As theorizers, seeing the world always as a mass of abstractions, laboring always

with their minds, knowing nothing or little of material activities, they are fairly convinced that **mind controls the world**. This notion shuts them out from the understanding of Socialist theory. When they see the masses of laborers and hear of Socialism they think of a crude "leveling down" which would put an end to their own social and economic advantages. In contrast to the workers they think of themselves as persons who have something to lose, and forget, therefore, the fact that they are being exploited by the capitalists.

Take this altogether and the result is that a hundred causes separate this new middle class from Socialism. Its members have no independent interest which would lead them to an energetic defense of capitalism. But their interest in Socialism is equally slight. They constitute an intermediate class, without definite class ideals, and therefore they bring into the political struggle an element which is unsteady and incalculable.

In great social disturbances, general strikes, e. g., they may sometimes stand by the workers and so increase their strength; they will be the more likely to do this in cases in which such a policy is directed against reaction. On other occasions they may side with the capitalists. Those of them in the lower strata will make common cause with a "reasonable" Socialism, such as is represented by the Revisionists. But the power which will overthrow capitalism can never come from anywhere outside the great mass of proletarians.

Translated by William E. Bohn.

★ ★ ★
The proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority. The proletariat, the lowest stratum of our present society, cannot stir, cannot raise itself up, without the whole superincumbent strata of official society being sprung into the air.—Communist Manifesto.
★ ★ ★