

## FREE AND UNFREE LABOUR

Historically, free wage labour in the Marxist sense (that is, on the one hand “free” of the means of production, and on the other “free” of non-economic compulsions to work) is the exception rather than the rule. At present, too, there are quite a few forms of wage-dependent labour which, strictly speaking, cannot be defined as free wage labour.

Empirically speaking there is a broad spectrum of intermediate forms of labour (serfdom, indentured labour, family labour, etc.) and mixed forms (for instance, “semi-proletarian”) between pure free wage labour and completely unfree labour. In capitalism, systems with more and less free labour alternate, while according to some authors free wage labour in the capitalist centres is always based on unfree labour in the periphery. Different types of labour have also existed simultaneously in modern non-capitalist development dictatorships (the Stalinist Soviet Union, for example).

Implicitly the *International Review of Social History* has always concentrated on the free wage labourers, their living and working conditions, struggles and organizations. However, for a proper understanding it would seem to be important to pay more attention to the specific historical context of free labour and to compare it with other labour relations. Specifically, there would be research into the problem of the circumstances under which free wage labour develops and the way in which systems make the transition from free to unfree labour and *vice versa*. Here it is important to emphasize the fact that changes in labour relations should not be interpreted in a teleological, unilinear or evolutionist fashion.

There are three areas of interest. Firstly, the development of free wage labour in the capitalist centres. Clearly, even in these centres of the world system proletarianization has always been a never-ending process, seldom completed and not irreversible, either. Wage labour was not an aim in itself, the result of deliberate acts by capitalists; it was rather the unconscious result of those acts. The breakthrough of industrial capitalism was accompanied by the large-scale mobilization of unfree labour: the fact that many capitalists made use of prisoners and beggars was certainly no coincidence or peculiar “deviation from the norm”. Even after the industrial “revolution” use was also made of unfree labour, to an extent which varied per region.

Secondly, the relationship between free and unfree labour in non-capitalist countries such as the Soviet Union. What, for example, was the social role of the millions of forced labourers under Stalin? Was this merely a form of political repression or was forced labour also a vital part of the enforced

industrialization? And if this last is true, how exactly did it function? More generally the measures taken by the “socialist” states to limit the freedom of labour and/or to promote its mobility should be studied more closely.

Thirdly, the relationship between free and unfree labour in the “Third World”. As far as the colonial period is concerned, one can ask oneself under which circumstances the authorities attempted to promote wage labour, but also why they so often preferred unfree labour. For the post-colonial period, it is important to ask to what extent the further penetration of the market economy has overcome or, indeed, strengthened the colonial and local obstacles to free labour and to investigate the role of the state in this process.

When investigating these questions it will probably be fruitful to test hypotheses comparatively and/or to consider modern situations in the light of historical circumstances.

The editorial board invites the reader to submit contributions on these and related issues.

*The Editorial Committee*