inqaba YA BÀSEBENZI

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Introduction

These five articles are part of a series that Frederick Engels, the life-long comrade of Karl Marx, wrote exactly 100 years ago in **The Labour Standard**, a trade union newspaper published in London at that time. Why does **INQABA** reprint them today?

In the first place, the questions discussed by Engels are very much to the fore in the struggles of the South African workers at the present time. Over the past ten years, out of the renewal of industrial struggle on a massive scale, trade unions have begun to be rebuilt among the black workers. Although these unions as yet represent only a small fraction of the workers, their strength is increasing with every new upsurge in the movement.

In the last year alone, trade union membership has tripled from some 68 000 to nearly 200 000 workers. Growth has been particularly rapid in East London and in the Johannesburg municipality.

This rapid growth under the conditions of a police state indicates the strength possessed by the black working class throughout South Africa. The vital question now is the road forward—the way in which the power that the workers have built up in the factories and the trade unions can be used to take forward the struggle for liberation from national and social oppression.

Engels's reply to this question remains as true for the workers of South Africa today as for the British workers to whom it was originally addressed. On the one hand he shows that trade union organisation and struggle is a necessary instrument for the working class in lifting itself above the level of poverty and degradation that the capitalists, if unchallenged, always inflict. As proof, Engels points at the contrast that existed between the relatively high wages paid to members of strong trade unions, and the miserable wages paid to unorganised workers at that time.

Today in South Africa we find precisely the same contrast among the oppressed black workers themselves. Thus in the motor car industry in Port Elizabeth, the militant and organised African workers have been able to enforce a minimum wage of R72,00 per week as at December 1980. But in industries such as mining, for example, the workers' organisation and struggles have not been developed to the same degree as in the car factories. Thus in the mining industry the minimum wage laid down in July 1980 was only R100 per month (R23,33 per week).

Object

On the other hand Engels shows that the struggle of the workers is not confined to the fight for better wages and working conditions. The trade union struggle, he explains, "is not an end in itself, but a means, a very necessary and effective means, but only one of several means towards a higher end: the abolition of the wages system".

Here is expressed a second and even more important aspect of the articles. Not only does Engels outline the nature of the struggle with which the working class is faced, he also explains the **cause** and the **essential object** of that struggle. Scientifically and simply, he shows that the system of wage labour is a system whereby the product of the workers' labour is stolen from them by the capitalist class, and only a small part is paid back to them as wages. **Wage labour can only mean exploited labour.**

In order to free itself from exploitation, the working class needs to abolish the instrument of that exploitation—the system of wage labour. In the final article Engels indicates what this means: the ending of the capitalists' ownership of the means of production, by which the workers are forced to submit to exploitation, and the taking over of the means of production by the working class itself.

Only the reorganisation of society on this basis can make possible the full liberation of the working class from the many chains that tie them down at present, and allow the downtrodden masses in society to rise to their full stature.

These conclusions are fully in accordance with the experience of the oppressed black workers in South Africa today. Compare Engels's words on the role of trade unions with the defiant answer of a black trade unionist to an American journalist recently:

> "The ultimate aim of all genuine unions is first to get a bargaining place for the worker, then use his stronger position in the economy to change the political situation."

"Act politically"

Of course this does not mean that trade union struggle comes first and that political struggle must wait. Capitalism in South Africa has been built on the foundations of cheap black labour. Historically, wage labour was established here in the form of migrant labour—a system which

has enslaved not only the millions of working people caught up in its web, but has also extended its tyranny over the workers who have managed to gain 'section 10 rights', by forcing them to 'compete' with the migrants. The entire monstrous machinery of apartheid is only the necessary tool of the capitalists in enforcing the system of wage labour in its brutal South African form.

Central to the interests of the capitalist class are the merciless attempts by the state to undermine and smash the independent black trade union movement, in order to prevent the workers from challenging the system of cheap labour. Thus the struggle to build up independent trade unions is at one and the same time a political struggle—part of the overall struggle against racist repression and social destitution.

"It (the trade union struggle) goes beyond the factory floor", a trade unionist at Chloride in East London explained to the same American writer. "In fact workers are oppressed politically, so they must **act** politically in order to free themselves."

Engels spells out the task that inevitably follows from the nature of the struggle between the workers and the bosses: "At the side of, or above, the Unions of special trades there must spring up...a political organisation of the working class as a whole."

Just as the separate trade unions serve the workers to fight for improved conditions in their separate places of work, so the political organisation of the workers must serve the working class **as a whole** in winning its freedom from oppression and exploitation. In South Africa in the coming period the mass of the working class will have no alternative but to turn to the African National Congress. It is the ANC that they will have to build and transform as the instrument for their organisation as a class.

At the same time, as Engels makes clear, the workers' political organisation must be built around a conscious understanding of the objects of the struggle, from which the leadership must never be allowed to depart. In South Africa, national oppression is the means by which the mass of the black workers are forced to provide cheap labour for the capitalist class. The liberation of the working class will only be achieved when the struggle to overthrow national oppression is carried through to the point of overthrowing the capitalist system. This objective is summarised in Engels's words, "the abolition of the wages system".

This means that the working class needs to take over the means of production—the mines, factories, banks, big farms etc—and reorganise the production and distribution of goods on the basis, no longer of private profit, but of social need.

Only through an organisation and leadership geared to these objectives can the struggle of the workers in South Africa succeed. It is these aims that the Marxist Workers' Tendency of the ANC will struggle to support and promote.

FREDERICK ENGELS

THE WAGES SYSTEM

Editor's note

For the reader today, certain references by Engels to events, developments or the perspectives of that time may be unfamiliar or unclear. To avoid misunderstanding or uncertainty, some of these points should be noted:

1. **Combination laws.** These are the laws by which, prior to 1824, any form of organisation by the working class in Britain was prohibited.

2. **Chartist Movement.** The Chartist movement was the first political movement of the British working class. It developed around the 'People's Charter', published in 1838, which contained demands for the right to vote for all men over 21 and full parliamentary rights. Parliament, however, repeatedly rejected these demands. Chartism, which developed into a mass movement during the 1840's, soon declined and fell apart; but some of the radical Chartists learned the lessons of their experience and went on, as associates of Marx and Engels, to contribute to the building of the workers' revolutionary movement from the 1850's onwards.

3. **Middle class.** A hundred years ago, when Engels wrote, this term meant the capitalist class, which stood between the working class and the feudal aristocracy. Today, the term 'middle class' is used to describe the small capitalists, petty property-owners, traders, etc., who stand between the working class and the big capitalists.

4. **"Full representation of labour in Parliament".** Engels was writing at a time when capitalism in Britain was at its historical height. The struggle for power in Parliament is presented, not as a 'maximum' demand, but as a **transitional** demand—a demand which, within the prevailing conditions, would lead the workers to organise, to build up their forces and strengthen their position in relation to the capitalist class.

In order to gain "full representation in Parliament", therefore, the working class would have to develop an organised power **that would in fact enable it to carry the struggle beyond the limits of parliamentary reforms**—towards "the preparation of the abolition of the wages system".

In South Africa, the revolutionary significance of Engels's approach is even more strongly to the fore. The demand for the right to vote has proved, and will prove, a vital demand in rallying the forces of the working class.

But in South Africa, unlike in Britain, the ruling class does not have the resources to allow the masses any real influence over the government and still maintain its power. The right to vote is a demand which cannot be conceded on any lasting basis as long as the capitalist system prevails. Under these conditions the mass struggle for "full representation in Parliament" must in practice become a struggle for the overthrow of capitalist rule. This will mean, not keeping the capitalist Parliament as we know it, but creating in its place the infinitely more democratic councils of the working masses in order to govern society.

A Fair Day's Wages for a Fair Day's Work

This has now been the motto of the English working-class movement for the last fifty years. It did good service in the time of the rising Trades Unions after the repeal of the infamous Combination Laws in 1824; it did still better service in the time of the glorious Chartist movement, when the English workmen marched at the head of the European working class. But times are moving on, and a good many things which were desirable and necessary fifty, and even thirty years ago, are now antiquated and would be completely out of place. Does the old, time-honoured watchword too belong to them?

A fair day's wages for a fair day's work? But what is a fair day's wages, and what is a fair day's work? How are they determined by the laws under which modern society exists and develops itself? For an answer to this we must not apply to the science of morals or of law and equity, nor to any sentimental feeling of humanity, justice, or even charity. What is morally fair, what is even fair in law, may be far from being socially fair. Social fairness or unfairness is decided by one science alone — the science which deals with the material facts of production and exchange, the science of political economy.

Now what does political economy call a fair day's wages and a fair day's work? Simply the rate of wages and the length and intensity of a day's work which are determined by competition of employer and employed in the open market. And what are they, when thus determined?

A fair day's wages, under normal conditions, is the sum required to procure to the labourer the means of existence necessary, according to the standard of life of his station and country, to keep himself in working order and to propagate his race. The actual rate of wages, with the fluctuations of trade, may be sometimes above, sometimes below this rate; but, under fair conditions that rate ought to be the average of all oscillations.

A fair day's work is that length of working day and that intensity of actual work which expends one day's full working power of the workman without encroaching upon his capacity for the same amount of work for the next and following days.

The transaction, then, may be thus described — the workman gives to the Capitalist his full day's working power; that is, so much of it as he can give without rendering impossible the continuous repetition of the transaction. In exchange he receives just as much, and no more, of the necessaries of life as is required to keep up the repetition of the same bargain every day. The workman gives as much, the Capitalist gives as little, as the nature of the bargain will admit. This is a very peculiar sort of fairness.

But let us look a little deeper into the matter. As, according to political economists, wages and working days are fixed by competition, fairness seems to require that both sides should have the same fair start on equal terms. But that is not the case. The Capitalist, if he cannot agree with the Labourer, can afford to wait, and live upon his capital. The workman cannot. He has but wages to live upon, and must therefore take work when, where, and at what terms he can get it. The workman has no fair start. He is fearfully handicapped by hunger. Yet, according to the political economy of the Capitalist class, that is the very pink of fairness.

But this is a mere trifle. The application of mechanical power and machinery to new trades, and the extension and improvements of machinery in trades already subjected to it, keep turning out of work more and more 'hands'; and they do so at a far quicker rate than that at which these superseded 'hands' can be absorbed by, and find employment in, the manufactures of the country. These superseded 'hands' form a real industrial army of reserve for the use of Capital. If trade is bad they may starve, beg, steal, or go to the workhouse; if trade is good they are ready at hand to expand production; and until the very last man, woman, or child of this army of reserve shall have found work —which happens in times of frantic over-production alone — until then will its competition keep down wages, and by its existence alone strengthen the power of Capital in its struggle with Labour. In the race with Capital, Labour is not only handicapped, it has to drag a cannon-ball riveted to its foot. Yet that is fair according to Capitalist political economy.

But let us inquire out of what fund does Capital pay these very fair wages? Out of capital, of course. But capital produces no value. Labour is, besides the earth, the only source of wealth; capital itself is nothing but the stored-up produce of labour. So that the wages of Labour are paid out of labour, and the working man is paid out of his own produce. According to what we may call common fairness, the wages of the labourer ought to consist in the produce of his labour.

But that would not be fair according to political economy. On

the contrary, the produce of the workman's labour goes to the capitalist, and the workman gets out of it no more than the bare necessaries of life. And thus the end of this uncommonly 'fair' race of competition is that the produce of the labour of those who do work, gets unavoidably accumulated in the hands of those that do not work, and becomes in their hands the most powerful means to enslave the very men who produced it.

A fair day's wages for a fair day's work! A good deal might be said about the fair day's work too, the fairness of which is perfectly on a par with that of the wages. But that we must leave for another occasion. From what has been stated it is pretty clear that the old watchword has lived its day, and will hardly hold water nowadays. The fairness of political economy, such as it truly lays down the laws which rule actual society, that fairness is all on one side — on that of Capital. Let, then, the old motto be buried for ever and replaced by another:

POSSESSION OF THE MEANS OF WORK—RAW MATERIAL, FACTORIES, MACHINERY—BY THE WORKING PEOPLE THEMSELVES.

The Labour Standard,
May 7th, 1881.

The Wages System

In a previous article we examined the time-honoured motto, "A fair day's wages for a fair day's work", and came to the conclusion that the fairest day's wages under present social conditions is necessarily tantamount to the very unfairest division of the workman's produce, the greater portion of that produce going into the capitalist's pocket, and the workman having to put up with just as much as will enable him to keep himself in working order and to propagate his race.

This is a law of political economy, or, in other words, a law of the present economical organisation of society, which is more powerful than all the Common and Statute Law of England put together, the Court of Chancery included. While society is divided into two opposing classes—on the one hand, the capitalists, monopolisers of the whole of the means of production, land, raw materials, machinery; on the other hand, labourers, working people deprived of all property in the means of production, owners of nothing but their own working power; while this social organisation exists the law of wages will remain all-powerful, and will every day afresh rivet the chains by which the working man is made the slave of his own produce—monopolised by the capitalist.

The Trades Unions of this country have now for nearly sixty years fought against this law—with what result? Have they succeeded in freeing the working class from the bondage in which capital—the produce of its own hands—holds it? Have they enabled a single section of the working class to rise above the situation of wages-slaves, to become owners of their own means of production, of the raw materials, tools, machinery required in their trade, and thus to become the owners of the produce of their own labour? It is well known that not only they have not done so, but that they never tried.

Far be it from us to say that Trades Unions are of no use

because they have not done that. On the contrary, Trades Unions in England, as well as in every other manufacturing country, are a necessity for the working classes in their struggle against capital. The average rate of wages is equal to the sum of necessaries sufficient to keep up the race of workmen in a certain country according to the standard of life habitual in that country. That standard of life may be very different for different classes of workmen. The great merit of Trades Unions, in their struggle to keep up the rate of wages and to reduce working hours, is that they tend to keep up and to raise the standard of life. There are many trades in the East-end of London whose labour is not more skilled and quite as hard as that of bricklayers and bricklayers' labourers, yet they hardly earn half the wages of these. Why? simply because a powerful organisation enables the one set to maintain a comparatively high standard of life as the rule by which their wages are measured; while the other set, disorganised and powerless, have to submit not only to unavoidable but also to arbitrary encroachments of their employers: their standard of life is gradually reduced, they learn how to live on less and less wages, and their wages naturally fall to that level which they themselves have learned to accept as sufficient.

The law of wages, then, is not one which draws a hard and fast line. It is not inexorable with certain limits. There is at every time (great depression excepted) for every trade a certain latitude within which the rate of wages may be modified by the results of the struggle between the two contending parties. Wages in every case are fixed by a bargain, and in a bargain he who resists longest and best has the greatest chance of getting more than his due. If the isolated workman tries to drive his bargain with the capitalist he is easily beaten and has to surrender at discretion; but if a whole trade of workmen form a powerful organisation, collect among themselves a fund to enable them to defy their employers if need be, and thus become enabled to treat with these employers as a power, then, and then only, have they a chance to get even that pittance which according to the economical constitution of present society, may be called a fair day's wages for a fair day's work.

The law of wages is not upset by the struggles of Trades Unions. On the contrary, it is enforced by them. Without the means of resistance of the Trades Unions the labourer does not receive even what is his due according to the rules of the wages system. It is only with the fear of the Trades Union before his eyes that the capitalist can be made to part with the full market value of his labourer's working power. Do you want a proof? Look at the wages paid to the members of the large Trades Unions, and at the wages paid to the numberless small trades in that pool of stagnant misery, the East-end of London.

Thus the Trades Unions do not attack the wages system. But it is not the highness or lowness of wages which constitutes the economical degradation of the working class: this degradation is comprised in the fact that, instead of receiving for its labour the full produce of this labour, the working class has to be satisfied with a portion of its own produce called wages. The capitalist pockets the whole produce (paying the labourer out of it) because he is the owner of the means of labour. And, therefore, there is no real redemption for the working class until it becomes owner of all the means of work—land, raw material, machinery, etc.—and thereby also the owner of THE WHOLE OF THE PRODUCE OF ITS OWN LABOUR.

The Labour Standard,
May 21st, 1881.

Trades Unions I

In our last issue we considered the action of Trades Unions as far as they enforced the economical law of wages against employers. We return to this subject, as it is of the highest importance that the working classes generally should thoroughly understand it.

We suppose no English working man of the present day needs to be taught that it is the interest of the individual capitalist, as well as of the capitalist class generally, to reduce wages as much as possible. The produce of labour, after deducting all expenses, is divided, as David Ricardo had irrefutably proved, into two shares: the one forms the labourer's wages, the other the capitalist's profits. Now, this net produce of labour being, in every individual case, a given quantity, it is clear that the share called profits cannot increase without the share called wages decreasing. To deny that it is the interest of the capitalist to reduce wages, would be tantamount to say that it is not his interest to increase his profits.

We know very well that there are other means of temporarily increasing profits, but they do not alter the general law, and therefore need not trouble us here.

Now, how can the capitalists reduce wages when the rate of wages is governed by a distinct and well-defined law of social economy? The economical law of wages is there, and is irrefutable. But, as we have seen, it is elastic, and it is so in two ways. The rate of wages can be lowered, in a particular trade, either directly, by gradually accustoming the workpeople of that trade to a lower standard of life, or, indirectly, by increasing the number of working hours per day (or the intensity of work during the same working hours) without increasing the pay.

And the interest of every individual capitalist to increase his profits by reducing the wages of his workpeople receives a fresh stimulus from the competition of capitalists of the same trade amongst each other. Each one of them tries to undersell his competitors, and unless he is to sacrifice his profits he must try and reduce wages. Thus, the pressure upon the rate of wages brought about by the interest of every individual capitalist is increased tenfold by the competition amongst them. What was before a matter of more or less profit, now becomes a matter of necessity.

Against this constant, unceasing pressure unorganised labour has no effective means of resistance. Therefore, in trades without organisation of the workpeople, wages tend constantly to fall and the working hours tend constantly to increase. Slowly, but surely, this process goes on. Times of prosperity may now and then interrupt it, but times of bad trade hasten it on all the more afterwards. The workpeople gradually get accustomed to a lower and lower standard of life. While the length of working day more and more approaches the possible maximum, the wages come nearer and nearer to their absolute minimum—the sum below which it becomes absolutely impossible for the workman to live and to reproduce his race.

There was a temporary exception to this about the beginning of this century. The rapid extension of steam and machinery was not sufficient for the still faster increasing demand for their produce. Wages in these trades, except those of children sold from the workhouse to the manufacturer, were as a rule high; those of such skilled manual labour as could not be done without were very high; what a dyer, a mechanic, a velvet-cutter, a hand-mule spinner, used to receive now sounds fabulous. At the same time the trades superseded by machinery were slowly starved to death. But newly-invented machinery by-and-by superseded these well-paid workmen; machinery was invented which made machinery, and that at such a rate that the supply of machine-made goods not only equalled, but exceeded, the demand. When the general peace, in 1815, re-established regularity of trade, the decennial fluctuations between prosperity, over-production, and commercial panic began. Whatever advantages the workpeople had preserved from old prosperous times, and perhaps even increased during the period of frantic over-production, were now taken from them during the period of bad trade and panic; and soon the manufacturing population of England submitted to the general law that the wages of unorganised labour tend towards the absolute minimum.

But in the meantime the Trades Unions, legalised in 1824, had also stepped in, and high time it was. Capitalists are always organised. They need in most cases no formal union, no rules, officers, etc. Their small number, as compared with that of the workmen, the fact of their forming a separate class, their constant social and commercial intercourse stand them in lieu of that; it is only later on, when a branch of manufacturers has taken possesssion of a district, such as the cotton trade has of Lancashire, that a formal capitalists Trades Union becomes necessary. On the other hand, the workpeople from the very beginning cannot do without a strong organisation, well-defined by rules and delegating its authority to officers and committees. The Act of 1824 rendered these organisations legal. From that day Labour became a power in England. The formerly helpless mass, divided against itself, was no longer so. To the strength given by union and common action soon was added the force of a well-filled exchequer—"resistance money", as our French brethren expressively call it. The entire position of things now changed. For the capitalist it

became a risky thing to indulge in a reduction of wages or an increase of working hours.

Hence the violent outbursts of the capitalist class of those times against Trades Unions. That class had always considered its long-established practice of grinding down the working class as a vested right and lawful privilege. That was now to be put a stop to. No wonder they cried out lustily and held themselves at least as much injured in their rights and property as Irish landlords do nowadays.

Sixty years' experience of struggle have brought them round to some extent. Trades Unions have now become acknowledged institutions, and their action as one of the regulators of wages is recognised quite as much as the action of the Factories and Workshops Acts as regulators of the hours of work. Nay, the cotton masters in Lancashire have lately even taken a leaf out of the workpeople's book, and now know how to organise a strike, when it suits them, as well or better than any Trades Union.

Thus it is through the action of Trades Unions that the law of wages is enforced as against the employers, and that the workpeople of any well-organised trade are enabled to obtain, at least approximately, the full value of the working power which they hire to their employer; and that, with the help of State laws, the hours of labour are made at least not to exceed too much that maximum length beyond which the working power is prematurely exhausted. This, however, is the utmost Trades Unions, as at present organised, can hope to obtain, and that by constant struggle only, by an immense waste of strength and money; and then the fluctuations of trade, once every ten years at least, break down for the moment what has been conquered, and the fight has to be fought over again. It is a vicious circle from which there is no issue. The working class remains what it was, and what our Chartist forefathers were not afraid to call it, a class of wages slaves. Is this to be the final result of all this labour, self-sacrifice, and suffering? Is this to remain for ever the highest aim of the British workmen? Or is the working class of this country at last to attempt breaking through this vicious circle, and to find an issue out of it in a movement for the ABOLITION OF THE WAGES SYSTEM ALTOGETHER?

Next week we shall examine the part played by Trades Unions as organisers of the working class.

The Labour Standard,
May 28th, 1881.

Trades Unions II

So far we have considered the functions of Trades Unions as far only as they contribute to the regulation of the rate of wages and ensure to the labourer, in his struggle against capital, at least some means of resistance. But that aspect does not exhaust our subject.

The struggle of the labourer against capital, we said. That struggle does exist, whatever the apologists of capital may say to the contrary. It will exist so long as a reduction of wages remains the safest and readiest means of raising profits; nay, so long as the wages system itself shall exist. The very existence of Trades Unions is proof sufficient of the fact; if they are not made to fight against the encroachments of capital what are they made for? There is no use in mincing matters. No milksop words can hide the ugly fact that present society is mainly divided into two great antagonistic classes—into capitalists, the owners of all the means for the employment of labour, on the one side; and workingmen, the owners of nothing but their own working power, on the other. The produce of the labour of the latter class has to be divided between both classes, and it is this division about which the struggle is constantly going on. Each class tries to get as large a share as possible; and it is the most curious aspect of this struggle that the working class, while fighting to obtain a share only of its own produce, is often enough accused of actually robbing the capitalist!

But a struggle between two great

classes of society necessarily becomes a political struggle. So did the long battle between the middle or capitalist class and the landed aristocracy; so also does the fight between the working class and these same capitalists. In every struggle of class against class, the next end fought for is political power; the ruling class defends its political supremacy, that is to say its safe majority in the Legislature; the inferior class fights for, first a share, then the whole of that power, in order to become enabled to change existing laws in conformity with their own interests and requirements. Thus the working class of Great Britain for years fought ardently and even violently for the People's Charter, which was to give it that political power; it was defeated, but the struggle had made such an impression upon the victorious middle class that this class, since then, was only too glad to buy a prolonged armistice at the price of ever-repeated concessions to the working people.

Now, in a political struggle of class against class, organisation is the most important weapon. And in the same measure as the merely political or Chartist Organisation fell to pieces, in the same measure the Trades Unions Organisation grew stronger and stronger, until at present it has reached a degree of strength unequalled by any working-class organisation abroad. A few large Trades Unions, comprising between one and two millions of working men, and backed by the smaller or local Unions, represent a power which has to be taken into account by any Government of the ruling class, be it Whig [Liberal] or Tory.

According to the traditions of their origin and development in this country, these powerful organisations have hitherto limited themselves almost strictly to their function of sharing in the regulation of wages and working hours, and of enforcing the repeal of laws openly hostile to the workmen. As stated before, they have done so with quite as much effect as they had a right to expect. But they have attained more than that—the ruling class, which knows their strength better than they themselves do, has volunteered to them concessions beyond that. Disraeli's Household Suffrage gave the vote to at least the greater portion of the organised working class. Would he have proposed it unless he supposed that these new voters would show a will of their own—would cease to be led by middle-class Liberal politicians? Would he have been able to carry it if the working people, in the management of their colossal Trade Societies, had not proved themselves fit for administrative and political work?

That very measure opened out a new prospect to the working class. It gave them the majority in London and in all manufacturing towns, and thus enabled them to enter into the struggle against capital with new weapons, by sending men of their own class to Parliament. And here, we are sorry to say, the Trades Unions forgot their duty as the advanced guard of the working class. The new weapon has been in their hands for more than ten years, but they scarcely ever unsheathed it. They ought not to forget that they cannot continue to hold the position they now occupy unless they really march in the van of the working class. It is not in the nature of things that the working class of England should possess the power of sending forty or fifty working men to Parliament and yet be satisfied for ever to be represented by capitalists or their clerks, such as lawyers, editors, etc.

More than this, there are plenty of symptoms that the working class of this country is awakening to the consciousness that it has for some time been moving in the wrong groove; that the present movements for higher wages and shorter hours exclusively, keep it in a vicious circle out of which there is no issue; that it is not the lowness of wages which forms the fundamental evil, but the wages system itself. This knowledge once generally spread amongst the working class, the position of Trades Unions must change considerably. They will no longer enjoy the privilege of being the only organisations of the working class. At the side of, or above, the Unions of special trades there must spring up a general Union, a political organisation of the working class as a whole.

Thus there are two points which the organised Trades would do well to consider, firstly, that the time is rapidly approaching when the working class of this country will claim, with a voice not to be mistaken, its full share of representation in Parliament. Secondly, that the time also is rapidly approaching when the working class will have understood that the struggle for high wages and short hours, and the whole action of Trades Unions as now carried on, is not an end in itself, but a means, a very necessary and effective means, but only one of several means towards a higher end: the abolition of the wages system altogether.

For the full representation of labour in Parliament as well as for the preparation of the abolition of the wages system, organisations will become necessary, not of separate Trades, but of the working class as a body. And the sooner this is done the better. There is no power in the world which could for a day resist the British working class organised as a body.

The Labour Standard,
June 4th, 1881.

Social Classes – Necessary and Superfluous

The question has often been asked, in what degree are the different classes of society useful or even necessary? And the answer was naturally a different one for every different epoch of history considered. There was undoubtedly a time when a territorial aristocracy was an unavoidable and necessary element of society. That, however, is very, very long ago. Then there was a time when a capitalist middle class, a **bourgeoisie** as the French call it, arose with equally unavoidable necessity, struggled against the territorial aristocracy, broke its political power, and in its turn became economically and politically predominant. But, since classes arose, there never was a time when society could do without a working class. The name, the social status of that class has changed; the serf took the place of the slave, to be in his turn relieved by the free working man—free from servitude but also free from any earthly possessions save his own labour force. But it is plain: whatever changes took place in the upper, non-producing ranks of society, society could not live without a class of producers. This class, then, is necessary under all circumstances—though the time must come, when it will no longer be a class, when it will comprise all society.

Now what necessity is there at present for the existence of each of these three classes?

The landed aristocracy is, to say the least, economically useless in England, while in Ireland and Scotland it has become a positive nuisance by its depopulating tendencies. To send the people across the ocean or into starvation, and to replace them by sheep or deer—that is all the merit that the Irish and Scotch landlords can lay claim to. Let the competition of American vegetable and animal food develop a little further, and the English landed aristocracy will do the same, at least those that can afford it, having large town estates to fall back upon. Of the rest, American food competition will soon free us. And good riddance—for their political action, both in the Lords and Commons, is a perfect national nuisance.

But how about the capitalist middle class, that enlightened and liberal class which founded the British colonial empire and which established British liberty? The class that reformed Parliament in 1831, repealed the Corn Laws, and reduced tax after tax? The class that created and still directs the giant manufactures, and the immense merchant navy, the ever-spreading railway system of England? Surely that class must be at least as necessary as the working class which it directs and leads on from progress to progress.

Now the economical function of the capitalist middle class has been, indeed, to create the modern system of steam manufactures and steam communications, and to crush every economical and political obstacle which delayed or hindered the development of that system. No doubt, as long as the capitalist middle class performed this function it was, under the circumstances, a necessary class. But is it still so? Does it continue to fulfill its essential function as the manager and expander of social production for the benefit of society at large? Let us see.

To begin with the means of communication, we find the telegraphs in the hands of the Government. The railways and a large part of the sea-going steamships are owned, not by individual capitalists who manage their own business, but by joint-stock companies whose business is managed for them by **paid employees**, by servants whose position is to all intents and purposes that of superior, better paid workpeople. As to the directors and shareholders, they both know that the less the former interfere with the management, and the latter with the supervision, the better for the concern. A lax and mostly perfunctory supervision is, indeed, the only function left to the owners of the business. Thus we see that in reality the capitalist owners of these immense establishments have no other action left with regard to them, but to cash the half-yearly dividend warrants. The social function of the capitalist here has been transferred to servants paid by wages; but he continues to pocket, in his dividends, the pay for those functions though he has ceased to perform them.

But another function is still left to the capitalist, whom the extent of the large undertakings in question has compelled to 'retire' from their management. And this function is to speculate with his shares on the Stock Exchange. For want of something better to do, our 'retired' or in reality superseded capitalists, gamble to their hearts' content in this temple of mammon. They go there with the deliberate intention to pocket money which they were pretending to earn; though they say, the origin of all property is labour and saving—the origin perhaps, but certainly not the end. What hypocrisy to forcibly close petty gambling houses, when our capitalist society cannot do without an immense gambling house, where millions after millions are lost and won, for its very centre! Here, indeed, the existence of the 'retired' shareholding capitalist becomes not only superfluous, but a perfect nuisance.

What is true for railways and steam shipping is becoming more and more true every day for all large manufacturing and trading establishments. 'Floating'—transforming large private concerns into limited companies—has been the

order of the day for the last ten years and more. From the large Manchester warehouses of the City to the ironworks and coalpits of Wales and the North and the factories of Lancashire, everything has been, or is being, floated. In all Oldham there is scarcely a cotton mill left in private hands; nay, even the retail tradesman is more and more superseded by 'co-operative stores', the great majority of which are co-operative in name only—but of that another time. Thus we see that by the very development of the system of capitalist's production the capitalist is superseded quite as much as the handloom-weaver. With this difference, though, that the handloom-weaver is doomed to slow starvation, and the superseded capitalist to slow death from overfeeding. In this they generally are both alike, that neither knows what to do with himself.

This, then, is the result: the economical development of our actual society tends more and more to concentrate, to socialise production into immense establishments which cannot any longer be managed by single capitalists. All the trash of 'the eye of the master', and the wonders it does, turns into sheer nonsense as soon as an undertaking reaches a certain size. Imagine 'the eye of the master' of the London and North Western Railway! But what the master cannot do the workman, the wages-paid servants of the Company, **can** do, and do it successfully.

Thus the capitalist can no longer lay claim to his profits as 'wages of supervision', as he supervises nothing. Let us remember that when the defenders of capital drum that hollow phrase into our ears.

But we have attempted to show, in our last week's issue, that the capitalist class had also become unable to manage the immense productive system of this country; that they on the one hand expanded production so as to periodically flood all the markets with produce, and on the other because more and more incapable of holding their own against foreign competition. Thus we find that, not only can we manage very well without the interference of the capitalist class in the great industries of the country, but that their interference is becoming more and more a nuisance.

Again we say to them, "Stand back! Give the working class the chance of a turn."

The Labour Standard,
August 6th, 1881.

Further Reading

These articles of Engels's are very valuable as an introduction to the Marxist explanation of the capitalist system. For the working class this knowledge is essential as a guide to action. It is vital that the workers and their leaders should be able to give clear answers to the questions that face them daily—inflation, long working hours and overtime in a time of mass unemployment, and the reluctance of the capitalist class to invest in new jobs and production even while record profits are made, to mention only a few examples. Only the method of Marxism—developed over many generations of struggle in the working-class movement internationally—will prepare the workers to cope correctly with these and other questions.

Even more important, the workers and youth will need to be absolutely clear on the tasks of the struggle as a whole. A thorough understanding of the nature of the capitalist system will be vital for comrades in the fight to dispel the misconception that national and social liberation can be achieved without the destruction of this system and the conquest of power by the working class.

The outline presented here by Engels of the working and the typical features of the system remains completely valid. Armed with these basic ideas, comrades will find it much easier to go deeper into the matter.

The fullest explanation of the functioning of the capitalist system will be found in Marx's great work, **Capital**. Volume 1 concentrates on the process of production in the workplace, the exploitation of labour and the historical rise of capitalism. Volume 2 focusses on the circulation of capital, and Volume 3 on the operation of the system as a whole—how the surplus extorted from the workers in production is distributed among the capitalist class as a whole, and the tendencies towards crisis that are inherent in the system.

Volume 4 exposes the theories with which the capitalists have attempted (and still attempt today) to disguise the origins of their wealth—the exploitation of the workers' labour.

Unfortunately it is difficult for workers in South Africa to gain access to these books. In other, shorter works, Marx discusses particular aspects of the capitalist system. These booklets can more easily be obtained and studied as a further step towards building up a clear understanding of the system we are fighting.

In **Wage Labour and Capital** (based on a series of lectures given to workers in Brussels in 1847), Marx sets out the general features of the labour process under capitalism and the tyrannical nature of the economic and social relations created by this process.

In **Wages, Price and Profit** (the text of two speeches to the General Council of the International Workingmen's Association—the First International—in 1865), Marx explains more fully the questions dealt with by Engels in the articles printed here, in particular the importance of the wage struggle as a means of mobilising the forces of the working class for the overthrow of the wages system itself.

A small pamphlet at present circulating underground in South Africa, which comrades may also find useful to study as an introduction to the Marxist analysis of the capitalist system, is **Asinamali! The Workers' Case**, published by the South African Labour Education Project. This pamphlet also exposes some of the false and misleading arguments put forward by the capitalist class on the subject of workers' wages.

Despite the considerable difficulties involved, it is vital that comrades should make every effort to continue their discussion and study of these questions as a necessary aspect of their involvement in the daily struggle. In future supplements **INQABA** will continue to publish material that will hopefully assist them.