

The Socialist Aim

Jean Jaurès

The essay by Jean Jaurès, the French Socialist leader, from which this excerpt is taken, was published in Studies in Socialism in 1906 by the Independent Labour Party. Spokesman Books are republishing this volume with a new introduction by Jim Mortimer (price £15). Order online at www.spokesmanbooks.com

The first condition of success for Socialism is that its essential characteristics should be explained clearly, so that everyone can understand them. There are many misunderstandings created by our adversaries, and some created by ourselves. We must do away with these.

The main idea of Socialism is simple and noble. The Socialists believe that the present form of property holding divides society into two great classes. One of these classes, the wage earning, the Proletariat, is obliged to pay to the other, the Capitalist, a sort of tax, in order to be able to live at all, and exercise its faculties to any degree. Here is a multitude of human beings, citizens; they possess nothing, they can live only by their work. But in order to work they need an expensive equipment which they have not got, and raw materials and capital which they have not got. Another class owns the means of production, the land, the factories, the machines, the raw materials, and accumulated capital in the form of money, and naturally this capitalist and possessing class, taking advantage of its power, makes the working and non-owning class pay a large forfeit. It does not rest content after it has been reimbursed for the advances it made and has repaired the wear and tear of the machinery. It levies in addition every year and indefinitely a considerable tax on the product of the workman and farmer, in the form of rent for farms, ground rent, rent of land in the cities, taxes for the payment of the public debt, industrial profit, commercial profit, and interest on stocks and bonds.

Therefore, in our present society, the work of the workers is not their exclusive property. And since, in our society founded on intensive production, economic activity is an essential function of every human being, as work forms an integral part of personality, the proletarian does not own his own body absolutely. The proletarian alienates a part of his activity, that is, a part of his being, for the profit of another

class. The rights of man are incomplete and mutilated in him. He cannot perform a single act of his life without submitting to this restriction of his rights, this alienation of his very individuality. He has hardly left the factory, the mine, or the yard, where part of his effort has been expended in the creation of dividends and profits for the benefit of Capital, he has hardly gone back to the poor tenement where his family is huddled together, when he is face to face with another tax, other dues in the shape of rent. And besides this, State taxation in all its forms, direct taxation and indirect taxation, pares down his already twice diminished wage, and this not only to provide for the legitimate running expenses of a civilised society and for the advantage of all its members, but to guarantee the crushing payment of interest on the public debt for the profit of that same capitalist class, or for the maintenance of armaments at once formidable and useless. When, finally, the proletariat tries to buy, with the remnant of wages left to him after these inroads, the commodities which are necessities of daily life, he has two courses open to him. If he lacks time or money, he will turn to a retail dealer, and will then have to bear the expense of a cumbrous and unnecessary organisation of intermediary agents; or else he may go to a great store, where over and above the direct expenses of management and distribution he has to provide for the profit of ten or twelve per cent on the capital invested. Just as the old feudal road was blocked and cut up at every step by toll-rights and dues, so, for the proletariat, the road of life is cut by the feudal rights imposed upon him by Capital. He can neither work nor eat, clothe nor shelter himself without paying a sort of ransom to the owning and capitalist class.

And not only his life but his very liberty suffers by this system. If labour is to be really free, all the workers should be called upon to take part in the management of the work. They should have a share in the economic government of the shop, just as universal suffrage gives them a share in the political government of the city. Now, in the capitalist organisation of labour, the labourers play a passive role. They neither decide, nor do they help in deciding, what work shall be done nor in what direction available energies shall be employed. Without their consent, and often even without their knowledge, the capital which they have created undertakes or abandons this or that enterprise. They are the 'hands' of the capitalist system, only required to put into execution the schemes that capital alone has decided on. And the proletariat accomplishes these enterprises planned and willed by capital under the direction of chiefs selected by capital. So that the workers neither co-operate in determining the object of the work nor in regulating the mechanism of authority under which the work is performed. In other words, labour is doubly enslaved, since it is directed towards ends which it has not willed by means which it has not chosen. And so the same capitalist system which exploits the labour power of the workman restricts the liberty of the labourer. Thus the personality of the proletariat is lessened as well as his substance ...