

Hamburgers vs Value

Kämpa Tillsammans
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Written by Kämpa Tillsammans member Marcel. Four paragraphs at the end jointly written by Marcel and French communist Gilles Dauvé. From <https://libcom.org/library/hamburgers-vs-value-riff-raff-group>.

This text has two goals. The first is to try to create an interest in the daily ongoing class struggle that is waged everyday in every workplace. I will try to show that something as completely unglamorous and ordinary as working at a restaurant, or rather the small hidden struggles that are waged against wage labour there, is part of the communist movement¹. The other goal is to show that theoretical notions like capital, communism, use value and exchange value are not something abstract and academic, but rather something concrete that influence our lives and which we in turn influence.

Making hamburgers

My last job was at a privately owned hamburger restaurant. Although the restaurant didn't belong to any multinational company like McDonald's or Burger King, it was quite big and was open every day in the week, only being closed between 7 and 10 in the morning. Most of the people who worked there were teenagers or people like me in their twenties, mainly girls. The majority had another job or went to school while they were working at the restaurant. People came and went all the time. They didn't cope with the work conditions or they thought that the wage was too lousy. The majority of the staff were employed illegally and you had to work more than a year to get an ordinary contract and an ordinary wage. Before that, you were an apprentice with a much lower wage. Being an apprentice also meant that the boss could give you the sack whenever he felt like it. Most of the people who worked there chose not to work at the restaurant for more than a couple of months. We were all constantly looking for other jobs or other ways to get money.

Many people believed that it was better for the employees at that restaurant than at McDonald's for example. They thought this because the restaurant was not owned by a big company but by one man and also because there were rumours that the owner gave money to football teams and charities. We who worked there knew better. Leftist people even dared to tell me that it was good that I worked at the restaurant because it wasn't a multinational company and also because of the rumours about the owners philanthropic personality. They didn't understand that the conflict between proletariat and capital is in

¹ When I state that communism is a movement, I mean that it exists as a dynamic behind the class struggle or as a tendency in it. We don't see communist society in the class struggle, we see communist "potentials". Every struggle against capital has a universal aspect because it is a protest against an inhuman life, and that is a seed for a future human community. "A social revolution has thus a universal aspect, because, though it may occur in only one manufacturing district, it is a human protest against an inhuman life, because it begins from the single real individual, and because the social is the real social life of man, a really human life." But it's important to understand that it is just one aspect, and also that the seed cannot grow in just any situation.

all workplaces, whether it is a restaurant or a factory, a small or a big company, owned privately or state controlled. As long there is wage labour there will be capital, and, as long there is capital there will be resistance to it. This resistance, the class struggle, not only shows itself in dramatic forms of resistance like strikes, occupations and riots, but also in the small escape attempts from work and the hidden struggles directed against value like theft, sabotage and work to rule. This small and hidden resistance against wage labour has been depicted as termites that slowly gnaw through the foundations that capitalism relies on ². We in Kämpa Tillsammans! ³ call these struggles “faceless resistance” because one of their characteristics is that they are faceless and invisible, something that often also makes them invisible to so-called revolutionaries.

Communism as a movement

Wage labour is always exploitation. The work conditions are of course much better for a Swedish restaurant worker than, for example, a child that works in a shoe factory in China. The problem is that there is only one world, where the conditions and the exploitation of the workers in Sweden and China are connected with each other. If one is serious about changing the world, one must attack the very basis that capital is dependent on, namely wage labour.

The central problem for capital is to put people in work so that they can create value. Under capital work as a human activity and the means of production are appropriated from men and we are thus forced to sell our labour power to survive. Our human activity is abducted by the economy, which separates it from us. This makes us forget that it is in fact we, through our own social relations to one another, and by our own actions, that create the world. Capital is a manmade monster, not a mysterious ghost that floats over our heads beyond our grasp. The widespread belief that people can't change the world or even their own daily life comes from this separation. The feeling of meaninglessness and dullness can also be traced to the fact that our activity is separated from us and turned against us like an alien force. As someone has said, Marx's notion that humanity realises itself through his activity has become so strange that it belongs to another world.

That world – communism – shows itself in the struggles and activities that are waged against capital in the workplaces, in the schools, on the streets and in the homes, not as a society of course, but as a tendency, as a movement. If communism is a movement that shows itself, right before our eyes, then we must look for it.

If we are so blind that we don't understand the importance of the daily class struggle, however weak and isolated, then we will never really understand that the dynamic behind these ongoing struggles and activities is in fact communism itself. This everyday resistance is in the worst case even disregarded as something that isn't interesting at all. For the people who have this perspective it is only the glamorous and heroic struggles like big strikes and occupations of workplaces that count. Either they don't care about its importance to workers or they just don't understand it. That the “faceless resistance” is waged day by day against capital and wage labour, and sometimes can even be more effective than these open struggles, and that they are also the first important steps to a wider and larger community of resistance to capital, is something that they don't grasp. That communism hides its face behind these struggles is something they wouldn't even believe in their wildest dreams. For them communism is an economic system that one builds. Not

² This quote comes from the group Kamunist Kranti in India. It can be said that capital has survived those attacks because these termites also work for capital. This is true, but it is also true that capital needs and tries to control and destroy all these secret struggles. And it is also in the conflicts at work, in the proletarian struggle against wage labour, where we can find the liberating activity to free ourselves and destroy capital.

³ Kämpa Tillsammans! means “Struggle together!” and shall be understood as an imperative.

a movement that is born from the womb of the old society, not an activity that fundamentally changes people relationship to the world, to one another, to life itself.

Escape attempts from work

As I said earlier, people came and went all the time at the restaurant. Most of the people only worked there for a few months and then quit. Often they had found another job instead or they'd just been fed up with the place. When I worked at the restaurant there was only the boss, his son and the son's close friends that had worked at the restaurant for more than two years. The conflict between the "new ones" (the majority who worked there) and the few who had worked at the restaurant for a long time, was obvious from the first working day. This showed itself very clearly because it was the boss's son and his friend that did the work schedule and therefore always got the best work shifts. Not only we who had just begun to work there but also people who had worked there several months or up to a year got the bad work shifts, mainly nights, especially Friday and Saturday nights. They also told the boss everything we did and said, therefore they soon became regarded as the boss's spies. It was also these people who told us the rules at the restaurant – for example, that you weren't allowed to talk about the wages and compare them with each other. This of course meant that the first question we asked a new work mate when we met him or her was how much he or she earned.

The "new ones" (the majority who worked there and who hadn't worked more than a year) didn't identify with their work or their workplace. We were there because we needed money and we were open with each other about this. The new ones were also rather open to each other about the fact that we all in our various ways tried to escape from work.

Two work mates and I created something that can be compared with an affinity group. This was not something we'd planned, although of course we had talked about not liking the job, that we thought the pay was too bad and stuff like that. But we had never talked about trying to create some activities against work. This happened almost spontaneously. The first thing we did together was that one of us punched in the other at the time clock. I can't remember who did it the first time, but this small escape attempt from work was something we continued with but now planned together. This meant that two of us could come into work very late and we were paid for the time we weren't there. It also worked very well for the person who worked alone because at the beginning of the work shifts there was often nothing to do. We had to be quite careful so that the boss or his little "spies" didn't catch us. After this we began to take money from the cash register so we could play pinball or listen to music from the jukebox, or sometimes take the money home. One of the boss' rules were of course that we weren't allowed to listen to music or play pinball at work (even if we paid with our own money), which of course we didn't care about. If we didn't take too much money from the till the boss didn't notice anything because he had a small margin to allow for people punching in the wrong price at the tills. Another thing we did to get money was to type in the wrong price at the tills so the boss couldn't even notice that money was gone. When we played pinball or just were lazy we had to see that the customers were not neglected too much, because many of the people who used to go to the restaurant were friendly with the boss.

If you were an apprentice you worked with two others on the evening shift, but when the boss thought that you had learnt the most important stuff, then you worked with only one other person. That meant a lot more work. To counter this we made a lot of small "mistakes" so that the boss didn't believe that we were mature enough to work in pairs yet. It was of course very important that we didn't make mistakes that were too big – in that case we would just have lost our jobs. We had to be careful. This escape attempt

from work was actually created by a mistake. One evening we had a lot to do so we didn't have all the things ready that we should have had before the night shift started. We had to work an extra fifteen or twenty minutes and do the last dishes, fill the food supplies and so on. The boss worked every night shift so we did these mistakes quite often, which meant that we worked maybe an extra fifteen minutes or something but we could still work with three of us on the evening shift, which made the workday much easier and more fun.

All these small attempts to make the workday more fun and less alienating was something that we tried to spread and circulate to other work mates which we didn't usually work with. We didn't do this by talking openly about how to flee work. Instead we tried to let the activities speak for themselves, and then after that we could be more open about them. Many people of course did these things already. We shared tips and everyone had their own way to make the workday less boring and more fun. For example, I shared our small "affinity group's" experiences about how to delay the working day with other people that I worked with, so the boss thought that there had to be three people on the shifts. Most people thought that it was better to finish a bit later than to have to work harder all day. One of the big weaknesses (apart from the fact that they all were very defensive) with our escape attempts from work was that we didn't even try to involve more people, especially the ones who had worked at the place longer than us. We simply assumed that they were all loyal to the boss and the workplace.

Communication, community and play

Talking to each other, communication, was of course an important means to have a better time at the workplace. It grew more important for me personally when the two guys in my "affinity group" stopped working at the restaurant. My work situation changed dramatically because I didn't know which people I could trust and rely on. Of course, as I have explained, most of the people did similar things like my friends and I did, but there were some people who told the boss and his son what people did against his workplace. One of the best ways of finding out if I could trust a person or not was of course to talk about the things we weren't allowed to talk about. Like for example comparing our wages or asking if you worked "illegally" (didn't pay any taxes), and if you did how much of the working day was illegal. When one talked about this you always showed which "side" you were on. Those who didn't talk about these things weren't reliable. If they answered the question you could continue to the next step. For example I dared to steal money from the till, something that before I had mainly done in my "affinity group", with a lot of other people. Doing these small illegal and secret things created a sense of community and solidarity between us. One form of resistance that strengthened this feeling of community and bound us together was the question of who should organise the work and how it should be organised. The boss usually used to come on the shifts and tell us how we should do the work. He wanted to split up the work, so one person was in the kitchen, one did the dishes and one made the hamburgers. This meant that we were all isolated from each other and did things on our own. Fortunately there was almost no one who obeyed these rules. As soon as the boss had gone, we organised the work activities together and helped each other. These things may not be seen as something important, or they could even be seen as a seed of future self-management of capital. But that was not the case because it created a community between us that was important and it also made the workday easier and more fun. It was a resistance against boredom and alienation. It was a means to work less. It was a means not a goal. If we could have found a better job or got money from another place, or if we could be part of a more general and open movement that aimed to abolish capital, then I think we should have left the restaurant, not tried to organise the work ourselves.

All those who worked there had different personal ways to create a more exciting and fun workday and to try to create some sort of community. Often people did things that didn't seem to have any purpose or meaning other than being fun. But often these things were an indirect attack against the workplace. People tried to play and use the commodities at the workplaces for themselves instead of selling them. For example, some young kids used to amuse themselves by deep frying the food that wasn't supposed to be deep-fried. They thought it was fun to play with the stuff. A girl used to juggle with the food and do a lot of circus stuff with it, which was actually quite impressive.

Another one experimented with the sauces and used a lot of spices in them, often so much that they had to be thrown away (when the boss found that out, he went really mad). Everyone tried to use the commodities at work for themselves. Instead of selling them, people used them and had fun with them in their individual, strange and often very child-like ways. This was a small attempt to get control over the activity that had been stolen from them and to lighten up the workday. It was acts against the alienation and boredom at work.

The struggle against value

In capitalist society a hamburger is like every other commodity, not valuable because it can be used but because it can be sold. A hamburger is not worth something because one can eat it, but because one can sell it to a person who is hungry. Under capitalism things not only have a use value (like that of a hamburger that can be eaten) but also an exchange value (the hamburger, like every other commodity, can be sold). This is not something "natural", like capitalism wants us to believe. In fact there is a big conflict in society around these two conditions.

Communism is an activity that among other things tries to suppress exchange value. It means the creation of a human community where the activities of men will, among other things, see things as use values, and not exchange values as under capitalism. This shows itself clearly in the class struggle.

The class struggle is directed against the commodity and exchange value. In the restaurant this was clear when we tried to use the things that we could find at the restaurant directly, without mediations, for our own needs, however strange these needs might seem to be. For example, the young guys who liked to deep fry food till it was destroyed or the girl who juggled with the groceries. But maybe the most open and visible times when we tried to use things as use values and not as exchange values were when we stole food or other things from the workplace. This was rather risky because the boss had a very strict control over the groceries and he knew how much food people bought per day, but thefts did occur from time to time. Sabotage at the restaurant was also directed against capital's transformation of things into commodities and exchange values. One time we destroyed a lot of food (commodities, exchange values and in that case also use-values) because the boss had been very annoying to us. Another guy and I were very mad not only at the boss but at the whole situation, because we hated the place, so we went in to the fridge and took out a lot of boxes of food and destroyed them. This could be seen as rather irrational and meaningless but for us at that time it felt very good and a real relief. After we had done that we placed the destroyed boxes in the fridge, and put other boxes and stuff on top of them, so it would take some weeks before the boss or others would notice it, and then no one would know who had done it. Sabotage and destruction of commodities were more uncommon than other things like, for example, thefts. But every time it happened we noticed that the boss was very intimidated about it and behaved more "properly" towards us after someone had destroyed something. Another thing that happened and was directed against value, was that people deliberately

wrote in the wrong price on the tills. We didn't do this to annoy the boss, but because we thought that it was too expensive to eat there and because it was another way of creating a small community between us. Not a community of workers but rather of proletarians who are tired of being proletarians, a community (however small and isolated) of activities directed against work and value, against the very conditions that make humans proletarians.

The struggle against value is something that can be seen in all parts of society; from thefts from work and the looting of shops to house and workplace occupations. Communism is an activity, which aims to be so powerful that it destroys value through humankind's appropriation of its work and the means of production that it is separated from.

The boss

Although most of us who worked at the restaurant didn't like the boss and his ways of getting us to work harder, we couldn't stop feeling a little pity and sympathy for him. He worked every night of the week, and only took vacations once a year for a week or two. We all worked with him sometimes and he used to hang out in the restaurant, so whether we wanted it or not we all had a personal connection with him. For a few people this created a feeling that they must help him and they started to identify with the workplace. They felt that the restaurant was their place as much as the owner's place. The restaurant didn't go that well economically and it was really the owner who worked hardest of us all. We often asked ourselves why he did work so hard and so often. It was not necessary for his survival to work every night. We even wished that he spent more time with his family that he used to talk about at night. In the beginning I only saw these things as some kind of bourgeois "slave morality" and thought of it as an obstacle. Which in some ways it, of course, was. We were all bound to him emotionally. But after a while I understood that this only affected our activities against wage labour marginally. We were driven by our own interests and needs, which didn't mean that we didn't feel sorry for our boss and wished him another life. Our disgust and our resistance were directed against the workplace itself instead of the boss. The essence of the conflict was about the fact that we had to be there to get money. We wanted to do other things, be with our loved ones, play at the beach or do other more meaningful things. We did not want to exchange our time and our life to get money. We did not want wage labour. Of course the boss wasn't popular but the conflict was never "us" against "him", it was rather "us" against the relation that imprisoned us at the restaurant. Of course some activities were directly aimed at him, but these were very few. Most of us thought that it was a sad consequence that the boss had to suffer from our activities that were against the social relations that imprisoned us there. There weren't any winners at the restaurant – neither the boss nor the workers ⁴.

Like a small capital

The restaurant could be viewed as a small capital. The conflict in capitalism is about much more essential things than the difference between those who possess the means of production and those who are dispossessed from them, or between the rich and the poor. There are of course real conflicts and differences between those who own and those who don't and between rich and poor. And when the proletariat wages its struggle against

⁴ I don't mean that the proletariat and the bosses have the same interests. Every struggle will eventually in one way or another confront the bosses, police, managers or other functionaries of capital. The thing I want to underline is that it is not the bosses who are in control and that at the restaurant our relation with our boss, in a paradoxical way strengthened the "communist perspective" in the struggle. It was clear to all, that it was not the boss which was the enemy, but rather the thing we were opposed were the absurdity to work for money.

capital, both hidden and open, they will necessarily have to clash with the functionaries of capital. But it is not the capitalists that control capital; it is capital that controls the capitalists. It is not only the proletarians that are interchangeable but also the functionaries of capital. In capitalism humans are not worth anything as humans. The only thing that is important for capital is the role that they fulfil in the society, a role, which another one can take over if a person doesn't fulfil it. The class struggle is not a "Robin Hood" project and the proletariat is not only the poor. To say that the conflict is between the rich and the poor hides the real contradiction namely that between communism and capital. And it also gives people a false solution as to how capitalism can be destroyed: namely, that we just have to have to finish off the rich. This is a formulation that stands reality on its head; it is not the rich who create capitalism. It is capitalism that creates wealth and therefore also poverty. We will be rid of this difference if we get rid of capitalism.

If it is not the rich who are in control, then who is it? It is the "law of value" that governs capitalism and forces everyone rich as well as poor, to hunt for more and more money. This "law" cannot be tamed, all the attempts at doing so have either failed or been crushed. Value must be destroyed if everyone is not to dance to its tune. This was something that showed itself in a very open manner at the restaurant. Of course our boss earned a lot more money than us (and we wanted more money) but just as we, his employees, had to work for survival, he was forced to accumulate value or become bankrupt. In small companies the owner often has to work for himself with the employees, sometimes even both more often and harder than the workers. That he owned the restaurant and earned a lot from our work created a real conflict between him and us, but we would have been fooled if we thought that all the problems we faced would have been solved if we only got rid of the owner. Even if the restaurant had been state-owned or if we who worked there had managed the place for ourselves, we would still have had to obey the tyranny of value and follow the laws of the market and the economy. This also means that most of the problems that existed when the restaurant was privately owned would still exist if the ownership changed. As I said earlier, capital rules the rulers and it tries to reduce everyone, both rich and poor, to something that is useful for capital. It tolerates only people who obey capital and are passive followers of the economy.

The conditions of capital are simply that humanity's activity has been separated from it and that it is we ourselves that uphold this separation through our own social relations. If it is in fact we who create capital, then we can also destroy it. Capital survives mainly through our own passivity (of course we cannot change this passivity by wishing or willing it), but it also has institutions like the police, military, morality, and hierarchy that protect it. Even the left and the workers' movement support it directly or indirectly. The left program is mainly about HOW people should manage production. Social democrats and Leninists want state-owned production, libertarians and councilists want the workers themselves to own it and they both want to distribute the profit fairly and equally. Communism is of course about self-government but it is mainly directed at WHAT people shall and can manage.

If capital is passivity where our activities don't belong to us and where people don't believe that they can change their own situation, then communism is activity and movement. A movement and tendency that is present in the class struggle, in the old society, that tries to abolish it and an activity that will mean the end of separations and mediations and therefore the destruction of value, economy and work. This is a world without money and profit. Which doesn't mean some earthly paradise or that men will have been turned to angels. It only means a world where humanity's activity belongs to humanity itself, something that will for sure create new and unforeseen problems, conflicts and contradictions.

We are the contradiction, by Marcel and Gilles Dauvé

Work is our activity separated from us, turned into something that fuels the economy and dominates us. And this process can be changed because we are the ones that feed it. We are the contradiction. No work is only imposed from outside. It supposes some cooperation from the rank and file, as the Renault worker Daniel Mothé showed in his *Socialisme ou Barbarie* articles in the 1950s. What we've described as petty theft, small scale sabotage and fun (all of which imply self-organization) is also what makes the restaurant tolerable. Resistance to work is a way of retrieving some "humanity" that work deprives us of: it therefore makes our workday less alienating. Denying this is to misunderstand how capitalism functions, and why it carries on in spite of its numerous horrors. The self-organization of the work life (and of its struggles) is paradoxically also a condition for a possible revolution.

The meaning of the communist movement is not to get rid of the painful aspect of work by shifting its burden onto machines that would toil for us while we banquet, write poems and make love. (In ancient times, when little machinery existed, Aristotle justified manual slave labour because it enabled the elite to have a good and intellectual life.) The reader will understand that we don't long for a society where every second is fun. Let's leave such dreams to Vaneigem.

This is related to the content of the actual work done in such a restaurant. Any fast food is an expression of a society where time is money, and vital human acts like eating have to be gone through in the shortest (= most profitable) time. Hamburgers, however, are only one example among many. Steaks (once a symbol of western civilization) are another means of quickly grilling and shoving down enough calories and proteins to send the hurried modern man back to his shopfloor or office. The same is true of cafeteria salads which have become popular in the last twenty years. Meat steaks convey a hard, somewhat manly image, whereas salads go with a supposedly softer, more open, more genderfriendly attitude. And a fashionable successful multinational food company calls itself Slow Food.

We are what we eat... True, but we also are what we do. We eat as we live. It would be naive to assume that there could or will exist one best way of eating, the one and only health food. Here again, the reader will understand we're not advocating universal organic vegan meals.