

# Surplus in Our Own Society

Borders, Immigration and Internationalism  
in the Socialist Movement

By Jack F.

The above theory, however, which is also expressed as a law of nature, that population grows faster than the means of subsistence, is the more welcome to the bourgeois as it silences his conscience, makes hard-heartedness into a moral duty and the consequences of society into the consequences of nature, and finally gives him the opportunity to watch the destruction of the proletariat by starvation as calmly as other natural event without bestirring himself, and, on the other hand, to regard the misery of the proletariat as its own fault and to punish it. To be sure, the proletarian can restrain their natural instinct by reason, and so, by moral supervision, halt the law of nature in its injurious course of development.

--Karl Marx, Wages

Proles in the imperial core of the world have, for a long time, flirted with, been sold and acted upon racist and xenophobic ideologies.

These ideologies, which of course have their origin in an international division of labor and thus private property, have been a part of capitalism since its genesis. But to simply leave it at that - that violent, anti-immigrant rhetoric and politics are, like most other ills in our modern world, products of our social relations - would be lazy and not particularly helpful. It would fail to explain the specificity of our own historic moment - a moment defined by ICE raids, small boats, shifting alliances and migrating populations.

Why have the global ruling classes closed ranks and built cross-party support for harsh immigration policies in recent years? Why does this manifest as racist ideology sold to the proletariat? And what does all this mean for a modern socialist movement?

### **The lesser of two evils**

Immigration has come to dominate an ever-expanding portion of political discourse. Everything from public services to environmental concerns to foreign policy is increasingly refracted through the lens of immigrants and their supposed effects on society. Unsurprisingly, this entire conversation has lurched dramatically to the right in recent years, with liberal and left parties in the imperial core tailing their wannabe fascist colleagues on the right by demonizing both illegal and legal immigrants.

This included both the United States under Biden and its European satrap, the United Kingdom currently under Keir Starmer's Labour Party. Examples include:

- The Biden administration's chaotic yet ultimately vicious stance on immigration, from defending in court the Trump I invocation of Title 42 (a method of turning away asylum seekers at the border, a practice that was invoked nearly 3 million times in the several year long modern lifespan of Title 42)

before replacing it with even harsher, more permanent policies;<sup>1</sup> to the strong arming of Mexico to force it to track, arrest and deport migrants travelling through Mexico before they reach the US border (problem solved! Oh wait he still lost the next election).<sup>2</sup>

-The Labour government in the UK maintaining Tory restrictions on immigration introduced in 2024 including the “ban on partners and children of care workers and most overseas students,” as well as massively curtailing refugee family reunions, an increase in wait times for the granting of permanent settled status and raising the skilled worker salary threshold first from £26,200 to £38,700, then again in 2025 to a staggering £41,700.<sup>3</sup>

The browbeating that middle class liberals give other, more progressive proles every election to “vote for the lesser of two evils” have suddenly seen their hopes for a kinder technocracy dissipate before their eyes. Starmerites in the UK have seen their beloved Labour Party repeat fascist dog whistles copied directly from Enoch Powell<sup>4</sup> and Democrats in America have been forced to defend why “kids in cages” at the border are actually good for US civil society, as Biden carried the policy of storing immigrants in filthy, crowded tent cities before their eventual deportation through his administration.<sup>5</sup> Even little Ireland, in a far, foggy corner of Europe has seen many of its major parties spout anti-immigrant hate, concealed to varying degrees, with the current government rolling out new, stricter criteria for immigration that smack of copying the homework of the British Labour Party (who in turn, are simply copying Reform).<sup>6</sup>

It would be nice if we could hope that this shocking dose of reality would eschew the ideas many voters have in their heads about politics simply being an issue of “voting the right people into office”, but that is unlikely. Even if politics were simply a matter of the right people in the right offices, we would still be talking about political actors tied both

structurally and financially to the rule of capital. Some are just nicer in the way they verbalize their intentions. Ultimately, the set of actions politicians have to choose from to navigate from one crisis to another are narrowly constrained by the requirement to maximize profitability for as many sectors as possible while maintaining political support. We can reason, then, that the shift to the right and rising importance of immigration politics is owing to the needs of capital in a rapidly changing world.

But again, an analysis at this level of flippancy risks not being useful, even if it is broadly true. We need to understand what it is that has changed in the economic base of our society that has necessitated this political and social shift.

### **Common Sense (derogatory)**

Perhaps counter-intuitively, it is most obvious to see how modern immigration politics serve capital by looking not to the fascist ideologies of Reform, the GOP, One Nation, Rassemblement National, AfD or even the wannabes in Ireland First, but to the centrist liberal parties.

Within all “centrist” discussions of immigration, we find the idea of Common Sense. What is Common Sense in regards to immigration? It’s the maintenance of strong borders in the interest of supposed rationality. It therefore praises the hard working attitudes of the “good” migrants - the migrants that come “here” from “there”, that don’t ask for too much, are willing to follow the rules and wait their turn to become hard-working members of society (i.e., willing to be exploited by the native capitalist class). This latter point is the most enlightening, as it becomes clear that what separates the “good” from the “bad” migrants is their ability to contribute to the domestic economy. “Bad” migrants might be found sitting around, living off the dole. “Good” migrants work hard (for low wages), learn the language and assimilate to the culture of the country they’ve come to. To the liberals, immigration is something to be welcomed, because it is something to be profited off of in specific conditions of economic growth. Let us ignore for now the change in attitude we see among liberals when the profit rates dry up.

To be clear, Common Sense is in this instance, as in every other, a synonym for profitable. This is clearly a preferable approach to the out-right pogroms of the aforementioned fascist groups, but Adam Hanieh warns us against such an attitude by stating that

...such arguments in defence of migration frequently reinforce the implicit categories of ‘deserving’ and ‘non-deserving’ migrants, with a balance sheet ultimately measured in relation to an ill-defined national good. The bogey of the ‘good’ migrant versus the ‘bad’ emerges, and the policy challenge becomes one of managing, identifying, and filtering the movement of people across borders in accordance with the needs of the national economy.<sup>7</sup>

Ah yes, the national economy, that thing that sits in isolation in an economic vacuum, with no connections to the rest of the world at all. The modern ideology of immigration politics uses this methodological nationalism as its starting point. To offer a correction, we’ll simply say there is no here (good culture, hard working) as counterposed to there (bad culture, lazy workers). The modern economy is a truly global one, with supply chains that bring commodities together to be assembled into even more commodities and logistics chains that stretch thousands of miles and cross many borders. This includes the proletariat, who does not travel thousands of miles itself, losing many of its numbers in the dangerous process of immigration simply because it feels like it. We flee war and we go where there is work, because without a wage we cannot survive. But it is not this simple.

To Hanieh, “...borders act as filters, mediating the concrete ways that classes come into being.”<sup>8</sup> It therefore does not make sense to ascribe a complete hatred of immigrants to one sector of the ruling class and a fetishizing of immigrants to another (though no doubt, certain of these bigotries are widespread among the individuals of the ruling class). Borders are designed in all nations to be dynamic and ever-responsive to the needs of capital. At times, when profit rates are high and industry is

booming, certain national economies will need a larger labor pool, and this will manifest itself as a kind of liberal welcoming of any and all immigrants who want to come “here” to build their nation together.<sup>9</sup>

The United States, for example, was founded as a series of colonies that, like Australia, required a massive labor pool to be profitable (due in part to the genocides attendant to the settler project). The ideology that grew from there was, symbolically at least, the Statue of Liberty, with her welcoming gaze to all the huddled masses of over-crowded Europe making their way across the Atlantic (the fact that that this also included a large number of indentured servants, prisoners and, of course, slaves, serves only to show that when traditional immigration cannot meet the needs of capital, it simply will find other ways of sourcing labor).

But industries cannot stay booming for long. The race across industries to be the most efficient and save on labor time that in part comes to define capitalism, sees capital seek new opportunities for investment overseas. The outdated factories of the Rust Belt, for example, are driven out of business by more capital intensive and efficient industries in East Asia, and the proles of Pittsburgh or Gary are left scratching their heads. Capital looks for offshoring opportunities as a way to seek out lower wages and new investment opportunities. Suddenly in the imperial core, manufacturing jobs disappeared, and the states sought to develop industries that could support the higher wage costs left over domestically. My story, for example, is a common one among my millennial, American peers. My great grandparents were farmers, my grandparents soldiers, factory workers and homemakers, my parents, aunts and uncles became service workers, and I’m a pencil pushing administrator whose job only exists as legal CYA for my employing entity.

To Editorial Conatus, writing in a recent piece for Heatwave Magazine, today “...deindustrialization does not free up time or redistribute wealth. It dismantles stable jobs, degrades working conditions, and throws millions into precarious forms of subsistence: underemployment, gig economy, forced migration or illicit economies.”<sup>10</sup> Far from the liberal (and, admittedly, at times socialist) promise of automation freeing up our

time, it comes to represent a massive crisis which threatens the mode of production that produced it in the first place.

But there are some jobs and industries that cannot be spatially abstracted in the same way a factory can just be plopped more or less anywhere. These are the jobs that cannot be automated, and that you probably have a very specific idea in your head of what the people who frequently do them in your country look and sound like. These are jobs bound to a specific place, like construction, agriculture, healthcare services, transportation and delivery work.

And this brings us back to Hanieh's metaphor of borders as filters. Confronted with the problem of being unable to lower wages by sending these jobs to countries where labor power is cheaper, capital creates differential citizenship rights as a method of creating and maintaining precarity among certain segments of the proletariat. It is this precarity that allows for hyperexploitation by the employing capitalists, as the proles employed in these industries frequently are paid less than their "native" counterparts and afforded fewer rights in their workplaces, because, in the eyes of the state, they aren't full citizens and thus aren't given full protection. The threat of deportation hangs over all of this as well, as we saw in the beginning of Trump II, ICE raids targeted workplace organizers and union leaders in some of their earliest raids.<sup>11</sup>

Frequently, capital will also temporarily source precarious workers from outside its own borders. This was the case with the Bracero program of the 20th century which saw workers from Mexico given temporary, low-wage contracts to harvest crops in the US before their eventual deportation back to Mexico. This was the thinking behind much of the freedom of movement in the EU, which sees petty capitalists in the wealthier states employ workers from the poorer states both within and beyond the borders of the EU on low wages, and is also the case in the Gulf States and its particularly stunning immigration practices.<sup>12</sup>

More and more, we are seeing these policies play out on an international level. When the political classes of the global north meet in

London to force Syria and Jordan to “warehouse” potential immigrant populations in internment camps, or when the United States uses its economic and political weight to force states like Mexico to act as a frontier for policing migrants before they get to the US border, we see a very strange reality. A reality where the international hierarchy of capitalist states attempt to navigate a time of perhaps terminal economic crisis. The simple reality is that the reserve army of labor, that segment of the proletariat that Marx recognized as necessary for the dynamic needs of capital, ever-shifting between employment and un- or under-employment, has ballooned to a point we have not seen before. Capital simply requires fewer workers in relative terms than ever before. Much of the global population becomes superfluous to capital; a problem to be managed, with the employed workers of the core states fighting harder than ever to avoid becoming superfluous themselves.

This stratification of the proletariat is given ideological cover through the demonizing of the immigrant. It is not particularly hard to see how this happens. The ruling political parties in every country in the imperial core have two bases: their voting base, and their real base. The voting base is who they appeal to quantitatively to get the votes they need to be elected. Their real base is who they govern for, and often includes a loose coalition of capitalists both large and small, often with competing interests. Their real base gives the ruling parties information on what levels of precarity are required in any given industry at any given time. The parties take this information and use it to craft domestic and international policy, but they must also sell these policies to their voting base. They do this through appeals to “national interest” in the best of times, and racist fearmongering and violent roundups, deportations and killings in the worst.

But unfortunately, this is not the end of the story, because it would be in very bad faith to pretend that workers in the imperial core specifically do not also have a material interest in this hyperexploitation. When a proletarian Trump supporter leaves an America First rally where Mexicans are likened to animals and stops on the way home for a burrito, this is not cognitive dissonance. To perhaps be a bit flippant, there is nothing

dissonant to these people about supporting ICE, cheering them on when they kill another prole and being served cheap food by a fellow prole that they see as beneath them, both culturally and economically. It all fits into a hierarchy which is sold to certain proles as natural. It's a hierarchy that allows these proles to justify their own decaying place in society by reasoning that it could be worse, at least they're able to survive a little better due to the worse lives their fellow proles live beneath them, allowing for cheaper services and commodities, as well as a moral smugness at being part of the "superior culture".

None other than Marx, seeing the hatred native English workers had in his time for the immigrant Irish population, knew that "the average English worker hates the Irish worker as a competitor who lowers wages and the standard of life. He feels national and religious antipathies for him."<sup>13</sup> There was nothing inherent in the temperament of people born in Ireland that the English found disagreeable, obviously. What they found disagreeable was the very real issue of the ruling class using precarious immigrants from Ireland to undercut their own wages.

Marx also was able to see that this cleaving of proletarian interests operated then as now on an international level as well, and was (is) one of the major barriers to an international socialist movement.

This antagonism is reproduced also on the other side of the Atlantic. The Irish, driven from their native soil by the oxen and the sheep, reassemble in North America, where they constitute a conspicuous and ever-growing section of the population. Their only thought, their only passion, is hatred for England. The English and American governments (that is, the classes they represent) nourish these passions in order to perpetuate the covert struggle between the United States and England, and thereby prevent a sincere and serious alliance between the working classes on both sides of the Atlantic, and, consequently, their emancipation.<sup>14</sup>

## **The chauvinist left**

It will come as no surprise to anyone active in left circles that there are certain members of the left political scene that harbor nationalist sympathies. These attitudes fall into two categories: those operating in good faith, and those operating in bad faith.

The good faith left-nationalism is more pathetic than anything else. It is simply those members of the proletarian class who, recognizing the downward pressure immigration politics places on their wages, seek to draw fellow proles to socialism by reasoning that unions and parties should defend what workers in their often core countries have by excluding migrants from organizing efforts. This attitude should be stamped out wherever it is found, quickly but sternly. There is no version of socialism that splits the proletarian class into competing camps. Either we all succeed, or we all fail. A classless society is exactly that.

More strategically, this attitude fails to plan in the long term. Let's say a successful revolution in Limerick spreads to the rest of the country, with workers all over Ireland taking control of their neighborhoods and work places, ousting the police and military, and dissolving the civil bonds that keep them operational. Well, without a series of revolutions against the ruling classes of the UK, the rest of Europe, and even, well, the rest of the world frankly, all that will happen is an international wave of repression will form to take back control of Ireland for the capitalist class. A classless society must be global, or at the very least large enough to defend itself (which any one nation cannot do).

The bad faith attitude of certain leftists on the immigration and national questions is much more perverse, and unfortunately is growing in popularity. This is a story as old as time. Certain out of touch proles will recognize the disgruntlement of other proles (almost always in the imperial core) regarding their low wages and use that as a strategic gambit. This gambit takes these at times racist attitudes and amplifies them, believing that we can build social democracy easily, we just need to stop being so damn woke and off-putting to our fellow proles. If they're racist, it's only because the capitalist class is using all these damn immigrants to

ruin our social democratic (fascist) dream. Get the immigrants out and build socialism in one country.

A few things to say here. Firstly, and most obviously, none of these people promoting these ideas have any clue what a classless society would look like. It's just some bullshit about nationalizing certain sectors and having a big state. Politically, they confuse big state Soviet style "socialism" for communal property relations, and because they do this, they're able to see a path to socialism that more or less involves tricking proles into doing electoralism. Secondly, and I won't harp on this point again, socialism needs to be international for practical, strategic, moral and definitional reasons. Thirdly, these people need to get off social media. The majority of the red-brown talking heads you hear about who believe in this shit are just egotistical media types chasing the algorithm. Building socialism to them is not a matter of hard work to build up our collective capacities as a class, but hard work to build a brand to get clicks. This needs to be stamped out quickly and harshly.

### **It's all gonna be fine (right?)**

If this all seems down on our capabilities of building socialism in the present moment, well, that's fair.

These proletarian stratifications seem insurmountable because they are all based on proles fighting for an ever-shrinking slice of the pie. Where comes more pie? Well, there really is only one answer to that, and it should be obvious. The answer is that the only way forward is to abolish class once and for all and take the entire, byzantine productive apparatus we have built into common ownership, so that it can be rationally and democratically managed.

Easier said than done.

But what we can say is that capital is, once again, showing us that it is digging its own grave. Increasing immiseration among the global population will force proles to work together to act as a class. Sooner or later, there will be very few opportunities for us to sell our labor power,

and we will have to see society for what it is: a class-based system built on exploitation, exclusion and violence. Social democracy and its mirror image fascism are doomed to fail, because they both rely on opportunities for capitalist growth. Either we let the whole thing collapse in a spectacle of farce, or we finally act internationally as a class to see it replaced with a better society. Much of our ability to build this future classless society will depend on what we are able to offer our fellow proles as agitators and organizers, both at home and abroad. We need to be able to promise something positive, and break from the cycle of protecting what we have as owners of labor power. It's only once this promise becomes material, that we can expect mass support.

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9. To be quite abstract and gloss over a number of concrete differences

in the major parties, most modern nations have two types of parties. There are the liberal ones and the conservative ones. The liberal ones tend to be more methodical and structured (in theory) than their conservative counterparts. They are less willing to rock the boat. They maintain the status quo of exploitation by any means necessary, but still would like that status quo to remain in place. The conservative parties, ironically, are more willing to upset this balance. They represent industries that require harsher treatment of the working class, our ecology and even the “rules based international order”. When we see profitability grind to a halt and imperialism at loggerheads, the conservatives win support from the bourgeoisie by promising to step in and do something batshit, like threaten to annex Sudetenland or Greenland.

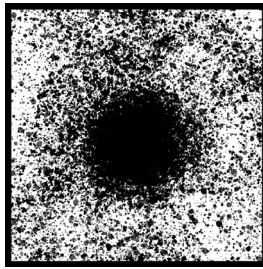
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The greater the social wealth, the functioning capital, the extent and energy of its growth, and, therefore, also the absolute mass of the proletariat and the productiveness of its labour, the greater is the industrial reserve army. The same causes which develop the expansive power of capital, develop also the labour power at its disposal. The relative mass of the industrial reserve army increases therefore with the potential energy of wealth. But the greater this reserve army in proportion to the active labour army, the greater is the mass of a consolidated surplus population, whose misery is in inverse ratio to its torment of labour. The more extensive, finally, the layers of the working class, and the industrial reserve army, the greater is official pauperism.

This is the absolute general law of capitalist accumulation.

--Karl Marx, Capital, Vol I, Chapter 25

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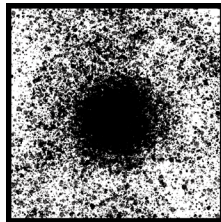
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The ruling classes are closing ranks to militarize borders and demonize migrants. Whole countries are being turned into camps for “surplus” proletariat populations at the insistence of the imperial core.

This has, in turn, birthed an ideology of racist hate that has seeped into segments of the proletarian class, and even supposed left-wing political movements.

What does this tell us about the prospects for an international socialist movement? And why, now more than ever, does everything seem to revolve around the question of the migrant?



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