

Do you really want to overthrow capitalism?

Some of us struggle to articulate our core values and our main ideas in a non-specialist vocabulary. There's a place for specialized vocabulary, but we need to challenge ourselves to be able to make our points in other vocabularies as well. The following two documents attempt this. They were written shortly after the Jimmy John's Workers Union campaign went public in Minneapolis. The first appeared in the newsletter of the Twin Cities branch of the IWW.

“Do you really want to overthrow capitalism?”

Someone asked one of us this question recently. The short answer is, yeah, we do. Our union's constitution says that we want the workers to “take possession of the means of production” and “abolish the wage system.” We think capitalism is morally wrong. In our view, there is no such thing as fair capitalism or morally good capitalism — it's like child abuse, child abuse is always wrong. Capitalism is always morally wrong.

Here's what we mean. Did you ever think about why bosses and companies hire workers? The reason is that workers make things and perform services that the company sells. In general, employees make things or do stuff which employers charge other people a fee to purchase. Employers take in money by selling the goods and services that workers make. The money employers take in has to be more than they pay out in wages — otherwise they start to fire people. Why else would companies hire people? What this means is that workers make more money for employers than we get in wages. We think that's wrong. Capitalist society is built around the idea that some people should profit off of others. We think that this is why there are so many people living in poverty right now at the same time that there are a few people with incredible wealth. In 2009 loads of working people lost their jobs, but the top 15 richest people on earth all got richer.

Part of why capitalism continues to exist is that we can't get a lot of what we need and want unless we have money. Most of us can't get money unless we work for someone else. This means our bosses have a lot of control over our lives. If we lose our jobs and can't find new ones, we risk losing our homes, losing access to health care, let alone being able to spend money on the things we enjoy. Bosses know that if they fire us we won't have an income anymore. Many bosses use this to push people around on the job. We basically give up our

democratic rights on the job. We don't have a right to free speech at work, for instance. The boss can tell us what to say and what not to say. We think that's morally wrong too, and many of us find it emotionally intolerable too — we hate how it feels to get bossed around.

For us, all of this is a good reason to get rid of capitalism. Because we want to get rid of capitalism, some people compare us to dictatorships around the world that called themselves Communists. That's not what we have in mind. We're against dictatorships, and we want to point out that workers under dictatorships often have it the worst.

We want to replace capitalism with a world that is more democratic. When we organize on the job we are trying to change the balance of power. Usually the boss calls all the shots. We organize to make it so that the workers have a lot more input. Of course, we can only get so far with this because we still live in a capitalist society. In the long term we want to organize every workplace to make them all democratic. In our view, in a good society, all people would have democracy on the job, instead of leaving our rights at the door when we get to work like we do now.

In addition to democracy on the job, we're for democracy off the job. We think that until all people have democracy at work, we can't have real democracy in the rest of society. Think about how many hours most people spend at work, commuting to and from work, looking for a job, and thinking about work when off the clock. Work takes up a ton of our lives, and work in a capitalist society is undemocratic. With so much of our lives spent in undemocratic workplaces, how could we have real democracy in the rest of our lives?

We also think that all people should have their basic needs met — people should have enough food, and safe secure homes, access to medical care, some access to entertainment

and the arts, and so on. We think it's terrible that our society wastes so many resources on the life

(This was written by IWW member Nate Hawthorne and reflects just my views, not the view of the whole organization.)

Can We Talk About How We Talk About Capitalism?

I recently submitted a short article I wrote called "Do You Really Want To Overthrow Capitalism?" My hope with this is to open up a conversation, not to have the last word. With that in mind, here are a few thoughts about that article.

Here's what I was trying to accomplish with this piece of writing. For one thing, I wanted to be very direct and honest in answering that question: yes, we want to end capitalism. I wanted to sound very reasonable and calm in answering this, because I think people with radical values and vision tend to get depicted as unreasonable and whacko. I also wanted to put this in a straightforward and common sense way. We simply will not have a just capitalist society, because capitalism is unjust. I wanted to say all that with a minimum of jargon. I hope I succeeded somewhat at each of these goals. I would like to hear from people about whether or not they think I did. I'm definitely open to feedback on how to do this better. Or, better yet, people could write more stuff that tries to meet these goals!

I'd also be interested in hearing what other people think our goals should be for pieces of writing like this. Some goals may be incompatible – there's a time and a use for fire-ness, which is different from the time and use of calm-ness. One piece of writing can't do everything, so we need multiple pieces of

writing. Here are a few things that I think this piece of writing fails to accomplish. It doesn't discuss personal experience at all. In my opinion, first-person accounts or writing based on first-hand experience of various aspects of the problems of working class life under capitalism is some of the most powerful writing there is. Especially when these pieces tie in with and underline the fundamental problems of capitalism. We should have more writing like that.

This piece also does not give much detail about what different alternatives are to capitalism. The IWW doesn't really have a clear official view on what should come after capitalism. Multiple visions for what comes after the wage system can co-exist in the IWW. It'd be good if we had some longer document that started with a general statement of vision and values then said "here are a few different detail ideas/models that different people/groups have come up with, each person/group believes their model is compatible with the overall vision and values."

At least two other things are missing here. Capitalism encourages and benefits from divisions between workers. The piece doesn't say anything about racism, sexism, homophobia, discrimination against people with disabilities, or numerous others social problems that divide workers. These are a serious problem for our class, and much of the time capitalism encourages these. The piece also doesn't talk about why some people attack us for being anti-capitalist. I think addressing that would require specifically addressing union busting, and should extend that point outward to a bigger picture — we want to change the power relations in society. Right now most people suffer like crazy from those power relations, and a few people benefit like crazy. Of course they don't want to give up the power arrangement that benefits them, so they attack us for calling for change. I'm sure there are other things we could and should do with pieces of writing about our vision and values. I'd love to have more discussion about all this.

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