

'Why I am not a socialist'

A personal study of the forces that made me respect and then conversely reject the title "She's a Good Worker", with particular reference to the part educational institutions have played in inculcating in me the values of capitalist society while at the same time, because of the inherent contradictions at work in these same institutions, perhaps sowing the seeds of an eventual rejection of these same values.

- Leonie Jackson.

After many years spent living an unthinking, unquestioning life, accepting my so-called "limitations" and doing the best with what has been called in the past "my good points", I came to the realisation that I was spending my life in the pursuit of a goal that was unattainable. How this realisation came about is not as important as the effect it had on me, which was to say the least "shattering" and brought some of my previously held values and expectations into question.

I discovered through a series of incidents that no matter how "good a worker" I tried to be, the simple fact that I was female was going to limit my advancement, at a predetermined level, within the company for which I worked. I was resentful and angry that I had been fooled for so long by false promises of advancement I would gain if I kept up the standard of my work, did not involve myself in office politics, and continued to do just that little bit more than employees of similar status. I could not understand why positions of trust, seniority and status could not be doled out on the basis of competence rather than sex. Surely it was of benefit to the company to have the best person doing the job. Apparently not! Even after this shattering discovery that ability

and productive effort on my part would gain me very little in the way of advancement, I still believed that this was only because I was a woman. It never occurred to me that the same situation could be true for other sections of the community as well. Only after a series of events which eventually led to my reading **The Communist Manifesto** did I begin to question all that I had previously believed about the society in which I live.

When re-living now the feelings that I had whilst reading **The Communist Manifesto** the strongest impression I can remember is one of incredulity that this could be the document so many people, myself included, feared. From there I asked myself why I had feared communism, without ever actually having read any of the works of its proponents, and couldn't find an answer. But my fear had been real; I had always assumed that communism meant some terrible and catastrophic change for the worse. I continued asking myself questions and found some enlightening answers. First of all, because I found nothing frightening in **The Manifesto** did not mean that everyone else would feel the same. When re-reading it I discovered that some people would find a great deal to fear in this document - capitalists - because it foretold their demise. That answer creates in itself more questions.

"The essential condition for the existence, and for the sway of the bourgeois class, is the formation and augmentation of capital; the condition for capital is wage-labour. Wage-labour rests exclusively on competition between the labourers. The advance of industry, whose involuntary promoter is the bourgeoisie, replaces the isolation of the labourers, due to competition, by their revolutionary combination, due to association. The development of Modern Industry, therefore, cuts from under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products. What the bourgeoisie, therefore, produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable."

F. Engels, K. Marx, Manifesto of the Communist Party.

I had always considered myself as part of capitalist society and as such its aims were my aims, its justice my justice, its democracy my democracy. Why then did I feel that there was nothing to fear in this document? A simple answer is immediately obvious; the measures propounded would not make my life any less enjoyable than now, in fact, they hold out hope that it could be a great deal more enjoyable. But for the ruling class in capitalist society, the document spells out great changes, in fact it states that by the very nature of the capitalist mode of production they will bring about their own end.

Discovery of these facts still doesn't answer my original question of why I as a member of the working class feared communism, or why I still reject many socialistic ideas that seem eminently reasonable, but they do show that in our society there is a conflict of interest between wage-labor and capitalists. How can I, at one and the same time, accept and reject capitalist society's values? As a member of the working class I now reject the ideology of the superiority of the capitalist system over all others and yet, at the same time, still believe in many of the personal values that the same system teaches us are part and parcel of our "way of life". I hope to show, in the coming pages, that this conflict I feel is caused by the contradictions inherent in capitalist society, but to do so will mean

simplifying a complex series of events to enable me to show the "main" forces and influences over my life until now.

I was born into what appears on the surface as a typical working class family, living in a typical working class area, but underneath the surface there lies a multitude of contradictions in that one statement. First of all, my father at his birth was not part of the working class; his family had some rural property and a small family business, most of which was lost during the Great Depression. He also had a more extensive education than many men received at that time, although this education was always directed towards his eventual take-over of the family business. This meant that when the business failed so did his opportunity to use his education to advantage. All that was left for him to do, and many others in the same predicament, was to sell his labor for a wage and to do this meant leaving the country town of his birth and travelling to Adelaide where more work was available. This movement of people from one class to another is described by Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*.

My mother was the eldest of seven children who, because her father could not obtain more than six months' work a year, was sent to work at a very early age in a clothing manufacturers. Her education was not only

"Within the exploited classes (and within each member of such a class) ideologies and 'belief systems' are underdeveloped, fragmented, contradictory and internally inconsistent. The experience of daily life gives rise to dissatisfactions which might lead to class conscious or revolutionary positions, on the one hand, or to cynicism, despair and apathy on the other. The ideological institutions operate in such a way as to forestall and prevent the articulation of class interests. Both within the working class and within individual members of the class bourgeois values and positions hostile to the capitalist order are held side by side (in a constantly changing mosaic) with little or no feeling of discomfort."

D.L. Sallach, The Meaning of Hegemony.

limited by the length of time she attended school but also by the continual shifting house which the family went through to escape debt-collectors. There was simply no other way that her parents could feed their seven children than by leaving their debts behind. The depression meant that her father had no control of his earnings, he took what work was available when it was available. Probably due to this deeply felt lack of education, my mother always extolled the virtues of a 'decent education' and the advantages it could bring.

society. This change of location and help from sources outside the family, not normally available to members of the working class, now gave me access to schools of a higher standard than in the old district. Hard work, or "equal opportunity for all" played no part in this change for the better. It was simply that my father had access to connections not available to the majority of the working class.

Unlike the old area in which I had lived, where the schools were mainly state run, in this new area there were quite a number of

"The lower strata of the middle class - the small tradespeople, shopkeepers, and retired tradesmen generally, the handicraftsmen and peasants - all these sink gradually into the proletariat, partly because their diminutive capital does not suffice for the scale on which Modern Industry is carried on, and is swamped in the competition with the large capitalists, partly because their specialised skill is rendered worthless by new methods of production. Thus the proletariat is recruited from all classes of the population."

F. Engels, K. Marx, Manifesto of the Communist Party.

Because my parents were members of the working class, and as such had only a limited earning power, my only chance to "make something of myself" was by gaining the qualifications necessary to start me on the road towards an interesting and rewarding career. The idea being that if I had the ability and was willing to work hard I would somehow overcome the disadvantages that exist for a member of the working class in capitalist society. Does not our society, state that equal opportunity is available for all? Even if opportunities were equally obtainable, which they are not, by starting with an already predetermined inequality, members of the working class can never hope to gain by "equal work" a rise in their status or standard of living. They must, in fact, work much harder than members of the middle or ruling class to gain "equal results".

As a member of the working class and living in a working class area I attended, as a matter of course, the local state school, as did all my friends, most of whom left school at the age of fourteen qualified only for jobs in factories and shops. But my father still had connections with people from his middle class background which enabled him to buy a house at interest rates within the reach of his earnings. These connections made possible a move to an area of Adelaide which contained elements of working class, middle class, and even small pockets of ruling class

private schools. Did I have access to these private schools? Technically I suppose I did, at least I cannot imagine their principals physically barring my entry, but in reality, because the main prerequisite for my attendance was payment of hefty school fees completely beyond my father's earning capacity, I had little hope of attending. So I was sent to the local state school like others of my class in that same area. Within the field of primary education, the move from one area to another would probably have made little difference to the type or quality of the education I received because even though the new area contained a diversity of social classes, they each lived within very set boundaries. Each local primary school reflected the class patterns of the locality surrounding it but in the area of secondary education, where the pattern of large technical and high schools had emerged, students were admitted from all the primary schools in the whole area. Even though students were admitted to these schools from within the total area, in the technical school there were mainly students from working class families and in the high school the majority were of middle class backgrounds.

My education throughout primary school was a continual indoctrination of the values which capitalist society needed to instil in me to help create what I have labelled "A Good Worker". I was taught that girls were very

"... we suggest that economic inequality is a structural aspect of the Capitalist economy and does not derive from individual differences in skills and competencies."

S. Bowles, H. Gintis, Schooling in Capitalist America.

different from boys and the whole arrangement of the school was set up to emphasise this point. From segregated classrooms to separate playing areas, from cooking lessons for girls to woodworking lessons for boys, and from girls being made to look a fool for "stomping down the corridor like a boy", our differences were emphasised and our future roles as aggressor and submitter were laid out for us.

So why were our roles of aggressor and submitter so clearly laid out within the education system? Dividing the labor force into two distinct groups and allowing one group to be exploited more than the other could not happen unless both groups consider that there is nothing strange, unusual, or unnatural about this phenomenon. If men and women had been taught at school that both groups had the same right to employment then this separation or division into two distinct groups could not come about. Women could not be exploited as easily if the schools did not reinforce and stress these divisions in a way that makes them appear as natural, biological, unchangeable facts of life. Therefore, schools are part of the machinery producing the eventual tools for capitalist society's use and exploitation.

The schools' reinforcement of the "Divide and Rule" policy of capitalism does not stop at dividing men from women. Within the workplace many and various divisions of labor are used to control and manipulate the labor force into maximum production.

"Rene Dumont points out that in many zones of tropical Africa today men are often idle, while women are forced to work all day. This exploitation has no 'natural' source whatever. Women may perform their 'heavy' duties in contemporary African peasant societies not for fear of physical reprisal by their men, but because these duties are 'customary' and built into the role structure of the society."

Juliet Mitchell, Women - the Longest Revolution.

The schools teach acceptance and submission to superiors, whether they be students from higher grades or teaching staff, and because of our acceptance of the rights of others to supervise and organise our

lives we also automatically assume our own right to supervise students (and in the workforce, employees) of lower status than ourselves. We are taught that if we work hard, accept discipline, take orders, we will continue to advance from one grade to the next.

So, by the time my primary schooling was coming to an end I had accepted as a part of life the fact that men were considered superior to women (even if it was with a half-felt resentment), that teachers were to be revered, respected and obeyed, and that by working hard and gaining good scholastic results I could be, or do, almost anything I wished.

There then arose a small problem. I could be, or do, almost anything I wished within the confines of the technical school, not the high school. The principal at the primary school insisted that I would not be able to "cope" with the curriculum at high school and that at the technical school I would receive the training I needed to fit me for the workforce. The simple fact was, that of a class of forty-odd students at this working class primary school, the majority were being streamed into the technical school and only a few were going to attend the local high school, and the principal did not consider my results justified my being among the few high-achievers.

My mother, not giving way to the considerable pressure applied by the principal when he stated that I would be with my friends at the technical school, would

find the curriculum easier to handle, and so on, insisted that I should be given the chance of attending the high school. By doing so she won a minor battle, but lost the war, because when I applied for entry at the high school

the staff convinced her that a general education would not be of much use to me. What if I failed? What if I suddenly decided I wanted to leave school earlier than I had originally intended? By enrolling me in a commercial course, it would not matter when I left because I would at least have some recognisable job skills.

had to be trusted to work without much supervision, and more than that, to work consistently. My schooling, by stressing individual achievement and effort as the road to a successful and rewarding career, had given me the incentive to work well with, or without, supervision, because by doing so I would advance my career.

"The division of the labor force is of further importance to Capitalism because it allows certain groups, namely minorities and women, to be super-exploited, used as a marginal work force in order to smooth over cycles in the economy, and to perform vital but menial and poorly paid jobs."

M.P. Goldberg, The Economic Exploitation of Women.

It all sounded so sensible that my mother capitulated. After all, they were only trying to help me. There is nothing unusual about this capitulation, it happens all the time to working class parents with their overabundance of respect for authority in general, and teachers in particular. The only surprising factor about this incident is that my mother had the courage to stand up to the principal of the primary school in the first place. I had at least gained entry to a school with high achievement records and one that was viewed favorably by prospective employers.

I left high school after three years, my certificate in hand, and proceeded to look for an office job of some kind. I gained a position as a shorthand typist (incidentally, I never actually used my shorthand skills) which

That I would only ever advance to a predetermined level did not occur to me for many years, after all, as a junior employee (or student) I had been led to expect that age was a prerequisite of advancement. Even if I had thought about it, and I didn't, the fact that at twenty-one or twenty-five an employee suddenly becomes promotable, whereas previously they were not, did not at that time seem at all unusual.

From my original employment as a shorthand typist (who didn't use her shorthand) I found myself within twelve months being trained as a comptometer operator and this training took a total of only three weeks. So much for the advantages of being taught set job skills at school! I did not find it hard to reconcile these seemingly conflicting ideas of needing set job skills in

"Control over the production process requires the retention of decision-making power at the top Organising production hierarchically and fragmenting tasks divides workers on different levels against one another and reduces the independent range of control for each. Both of these weaken the solidarity (and hence, limit the group power) of workers and serve to convince them, through their day to day activities, of their personal incapacity to control, or even of the technical unfeasibility of such control. Enter the principle of 'Divide and Rule'."

S. Bowles, H. Gintis, Schooling in Capitalist America.

meant typing orders that someone else had written out for me. The fact that I had to have passes in geography, art, arithmetic, english, as well as book-keeping and shorthand, to enable me to sit all day typing orders did not strike me as being strange at the time. But it certainly does now. I could not have obtained my position without these qualifications, but I certainly did not need them, so of what value to my employers was my education? First of all, I was ready to accept authority and take orders, but my employers needed more than that from me. I

order to get a job which must, by the very nature of capitalist production, eventually require completely new skills because it did not occur to me at any time to question the rightness of "the system" in which I lived. If I did not question the rightness of "the system" it stands to reason that I would be even less likely to question my employer's right to order me to take over this new job. After all, if I didn't like it I could always leave and get another! Of course, if there are no other positions available I have a rather difficult decision to make; I do the job or I join

"In sum, in primary and secondary schools the bulk of children receive practice coping with situations structurally similar to those encountered in the routinized sector of the primary labor market. Social relations with the teachers and peers, promotion patterns, content and structure of tasks all have qualitatively similar analogs on the job."

M.A. Carter, *Contradiction and Correspondence.*

the ranks of the unemployed!

After some years had passed, computerism became more and more prevalent in the business world and comptometer operators became almost obsolete. As my shorthand and typing skills had disappeared, I had to virtually begin again by developing my clerical ability. I held a variety of positions in the next few years from which I gained a diverse and widespread background in the accounting field. Again, at a later stage these skills were eroded as my work became increasingly specialised. The quality, variety and type of labor I performed was controlled by its profitability to my employers at any given time and, as such, could be reorganised or changed completely

minimum. They provided bonus payments and luncheons for the successful completion of tasks within an ever-decreasing amount of time. The more you did, the more you were expected to do next time round and eventually our day could be stretched no more and we found ourselves working through lunch hours, of an evening and at weekends. There were rumbles of discontent at our low status and the company issued us with new titles to stick on our doors. That didn't work for very long, as we soon realised that fancy name-plates had not changed our relative position in the hierarchy and that the same men were still issuing us with the same orders. The company then set up a special once-a-month meeting for their women employees to air their problems and

"The long run success of any totalitarian system requires a widely accepted ideology justifying the social order and a structure of social relationships which both validates this ideology through everyday experience, and fragments the ruled into mutually indifferent or antagonistic subgroups."

S. Bowles, H. Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America.*

to suit prevailing market conditions. I had absolutely no control over this process.

I was, by this time, working for a progressive, rapidly expanding company in an era of full employment. The bulk of low-status positions within the company were held by women but because of the streamlined nature of the company's office procedures, if one woman left, the result was usually chaos. If one of the smaller group of women who knew all the accounting and sales procedures was to leave, it compounded the chaos, as they could, and did, step in and keep two jobs going for as long as necessary.

So the company initiated moves to keep the turnover of their women employees at a

make any necessary changes. When complaints were made that women were doing jobs that were under-classified, the reason given for this state of affairs was that we were not "qualified" for higher classification. When confronted by a decision to only undertake work covered by our classification if we were not given the same opportunity as male employees to gain these "qualifications", the company capitulated. It was a hollow victory, as the company well knew, because most of the women involved were married and this fact combined with their already heavy work load left them little time to undertake studies.

Even though I wasn't sure that I could cope with the extra work involved in gaining a

"Particularly after World War I, the capitulation of the schools to business values and concepts of efficiency led to the increased use of intelligence and scholastic achievement testing as an ostensibly unbiased means of measuring the product of schooling and classifying students."

S. Bowles, H. Gintis, *Capitalism and Education in the United States.*

"By their very nature, these jobs afford the worker little intrinsic satisfaction. Hence the motivation to perform them must come from outside the job, from its "circumstances" rather than from the job itself. In this situation the dominant method of eliciting steady high levels of performance and output has been to arrange the various jobs in hierarchical structures."

M.A. Carter, Contradiction and Correspondence.

qualification of some kind, I decided that it was at least worth trying. But when I wished to enrol in a course that interested me the company insisted I would have to sit through a series of aptitude tests to discover what I would be best suited to study. The results of these tests showed a high mathematical ability and so I was told to enrol in an accounting course which was not the field of study I wished to undertake. I decided to leave my decision for a year as I wanted to be sure I was doing the right thing before I went ahead.

When I now think about the results of my aptitude testing, I am not at all surprised

"The major point is that jobs higher in the hierarchy are more desirable on virtually every criterion. Access to these coveted jobs is determined generally on a seniority basis - not on the basis of productivity. Nevertheless, a regular high level of productivity must be maintained on jobs at the lowest level of the hierarchy if the employee is to attain seniority. Thus this scheme holds out to the worker the promise of relatively easy work at increased wages in the future, if only he/she works hard, follows the rules, and doesn't 'rock the boat'."

M.A. Carter, Contradiction and Correspondence.

they turned out as they did. After all, I had spent most of my working life dealing with arithmetical problems and for the results to show a deviation from this fact would need a miracle.

At the same time that I was sitting through my aptitude testing, another female employee was doing the same. As she wished to gain qualifications in the area of personnel relations, and her normal work was within that same field, the results were not hard to foresee. This employee started her course, and to the amazement of executives within the company, it became obvious she was determined to continue despite all the obstacles they placed in her way. It would take far too long to list the many and various ways in which they made life difficult for her at this time, but I must state that these "obstacles" became more and more visible as the employment

situation worsened due to the recession, and the corresponding need to keep employees "happy" lessened.

Then suddenly she was sacked and the reason given for her dismissal was that she could not get along with other members of the staff. This excuse may have been believable if she had just recently started working for the company, but I was unable to accept that it could take them three years to discover this fact. Even though employment conditions were not encouraging at that time, and therefore there was little likelihood of her co-workers risking their own jobs in her defence, the company very nearly had a mass walk-out. The situation was saved by

an executive stating that she had been warned about her "attitude" previously and had done nothing to change it. That her co-workers accepted the executive's word and not hers simply reinforces my argument that capitalist society, including the capitalist-controlled education system, has done well its job of dividing workers hierarchically and accepting the ideology that superior ability is the reason for this division. The executive was much higher in this office hierarchy and so therefore must be right!

After this episode it was quite obvious to me that there was absolutely no chance of advancing my position within the company and, as this company was considered progressive and up-to-date, obviously little chance elsewhere. Over a period of time I found myself unwilling to be used as a stepping stone for my superior's advancement, to passively accept someone

"The entire capitalist economic system is a fluid structure of real and potential concrete labor tasks that the worker is forced into and out of depending on underlying and immediate market conditions"

J. O'Connor, Productive and Unproductive Labor.

"One way to increase productive labor relatively is to change or modify the division of labor within a capitalist enterprise with the result that more values and surplus values are produced. This normally takes the form of specializing work functions and dividing up the labor process with the aim of expanding values without any change in total labor-time."

J. O'Connor, Productive and Unproductive Labor.

else using my labor to their own ends. I could not articulate my resentment, I simply felt that somehow I had been cheated of my rights. I decided to apply for entry to teachers' college. I would solve all my personal problems by changing one career for another, little knowing that this change would not solve my existing problems but would open my eyes to a great many social problems I never knew existed.

At college, as I have related earlier, I discovered **The Communist Manifesto** and from there went on to read other socialist articles and books which opened my eyes to the inbuilt inequality that exists in our capitalist society. I hope I have shown within these pages how my education strengthened and supported the capitalist ideology of individual differences of ability being the reason for success or failure, and also that women somehow are preordained to be submissive, take orders, and not challenge male authority. If this is true of the education system, and I believe it is, how is it possible that I now rebel against this ideology? The answer, when looked for, is quite simple. The two ideologies are antagonistic. If you believe one, then the other must be rejected. Both cannot be correct. By discovering that my ability would have no bearing on my success, or lack of it, I first of all blamed my sex but later found I could not accept that explanation. After all, had I not also been taught that ability and productive effort are all that are needed to gain success in our society, no matter who you are? When leaving aside sexual differences and simply looking at the opportunities for members of the working class, as compared with the ruling class, it became quite obvious that our eventual place in society is not determined by individual ability but by the class structure of capitalism.

To enable me to write this article I have had to pull aside all the complexities and look for the basic forces that have affected my life until now. But even when this has been done, contradictions remain. I am a working class woman, but I must have been influenced in some way by my father whose background was not of the working class. If I, and my mother, had not seen the power, esteem, and advantages given to him because of his more extensive education, who could say with any degree of certainty what I would be doing with my life now. If I had not changed suburbs and schools I may never have come to the stage in my life when one capitalist ideology clashed with another so markedly that it made me question the whole of capitalist society.

But no matter where I lived or what I was doing, as a member of the working class I would have come across these ideological contradictions at some time in my life. A society with different sets of values for different occasions and different people cannot hope to forever hide them. When the time comes for testing the validity of all the fancy cliches bandied about in our society, and the facts of life do not fit the theories, is it any wonder that anger and disillusionment are the result. That the education system, even with all its contradictions, does the job of reinforcing capitalist ideology very well is proved by my continual acceptance of many of its tenets. I still find I cannot completely reject the idea that even with all its faults it is the best we can hope for.

Even while writing this I realise that if capitalism is to continue that is just the kind of ideology they need desperately to have me believe, but I cannot wipe out thirty-odd years of indoctrination in a few months. But capitalism be warned - my story isn't finished yet!

"The student-teacher relationship resembles the relationship that primary routinized workers have to management and to engineering and scientific personnel However, the teacher's authority to extract 'labor' from the students derives not merely from a hierarchical relation to them, but also from superior knowledge and expertise. Thus in technical, intellectual matters the teacher is always assumed to be infallible."

M.A. Carter, Contradiction and Correspondence.