

Reserve Army of Labour

Solidarity Breakfast, 3CR

Who's in the 'Reserve Army of labour'? How are they recruited? The phrase 'Reserve Army' is bandied about as if it applies only to the unemployed. That link feeds a suspicion that the Reserve Army is useful to capital only to hold down wages and conditions – perhaps as strike breakers. For Marx, the Reserve Army is a much wider and a far more flexible category. For a start, capital deploys its Reserve troops throughout its Active Army.

Economic conscripts

Why does Marx use the term 'Army'? 'Free' labourers (aka wage-slaves) are economic conscripts, disciplined by NCOs, as Marx calls overseers. In bourgeois democracies like Australia, the compulsion to sell our labour-power is backed up by a covert dictatorship in the machinery of the state. In most places, at almost every time, exploitation is marshaled by overt dictatorships.

Form ranks

As in the military, each economic Army is organised into battalions. The Active Army is positioned by degrees of skill to suit the divisions of labour inside workshops and across the economy. These patterns of profit-taking make it difficult – impossible? – to switch between sectors. A tradesman is likely to end up as a security guard, or on a disability pension.

Marx has five Battalions of the Reserve Army march past:

1. floating - able and qualified but no longer rated 'efficient';
2. latent - outside the paid workforce but needing to join;
3. stagnant – outside paid full-time work most of the time;
4. Paupers – homeless and beggars;
5. lumpens - petty crims.

In 'reserve' for what?

What is the Reserve Army held in reserve to do? To answer that question we need to know what the Active Army is active at? In both cases, the troops are there to add value to the wealth of nature for capital to expropriate.

Detachments of the Reserve Army are forever being flung in and out of the Active Army. During downturns, platoons in the Active Army are 'retired' to Reserve regiments. The same happens because of new methods of production. The border between the two Armies is never shut tight.

Casual is permanent

Across the past 30-40 years, one big change has been that the Active Army is again subject to conditions which Marx associates more with the Reserve Army. The result is that a wage-slave can now be in the Active Army but experience casual, broken shifts during the course of the week – or even a day. The Reserve Army still endures those penalties across a year, or an entire working life.

Nothing is new in that. The Reserve Army has always been staffed by casuals denied 'entitlements'. Those burdens did not appear in the 1980s. The Long post-war Boom was really a long trough in unemployment rates.

War: On Active Service

Most of the time, both Armies are on the battlefield of class struggles at home. But both Armies are also conscripted to fight against rival states for control over labour, resources and sales. Until the 1950s, women were by far the largest contingent of the latent strand in the Reserve Army. During the two world wars, many women outside the paid workforce were called up. After that, they were ordered back to domestic duties to produce the next generation of economic conscripts and cannon fodder.

In addition, a million African 'colonials' lost their lives in the Great 'European' War of 1914-19.

Changes

We must never plonk passages from *Capital* down on conditions today. For historical materialists, change is the sole constant. When Marx wrote in the 1860s, few women were in paid employment other than as domestics. On the other hand, girls and boys went out to work far younger than in Australia today.

Britain still had large agricultural workforces. Its capitalist farmers were torn between holding down labour costs and their need to keep a floating body of labourers on hand for seasonal harvests or shearing. Many farmers therefore encouraged their labourers to keep cottage gardens to cut the wages bill.

The slave-owners' rebellion in the early 1860s hit Britain with a cotton famine. Hundreds of thousands of textile operatives in the Active Army lost their jobs. Mill-owners refused to let them emigrate. The Masters knew that it could take years for natural population growth to replace them. More years would be needed to train up new spinners and weavers.

Nowadays, declining birth-rates are increasing investments on high tech for 'human' services. Robots are programmed for childcare and aged-care.

Machines

Machines form a 6th Battalion in the Reserve Army. Rarely are they used to full capacity. Some are on stand-by for rush orders, or as back-up during maintenance. The pace of their operation can be speeded up to drive the Active Army into adding even more relative surplus-value. Hence, machines do much more for the expansion of capital than shove workers out of the Active Army into the Reserve Army.

The political backlash in the U.S. of A. from losses during the war against the peoples of Indo-China had two results that have overtaken the global economy. Nixon tried to 'Asianise' the war. Since the 1970s, much processing has been Asianised and from machino-facture.

Meanwhile, the Pentagon set out to de-labourise the front-line. That stratagem is now associated with drones. In the economy, the corporate version is in automation, and robotics.

Something similar has overtaken the covert dictatorship. On-line surveillance is the new totalitarianism. The National Security Agency and Google work fist in glove.

Firms will not mechanise for as long as it is more profitable to use living labour. In the 1930s, labourers on the dole built the Great Ocean Road with picks and shovels. The unemployed saw very little of the earth-moving equipment that employers had begun to buy in the 1920s.

But bosses jump at machines as weapons against organised labour, especially after a successful strike. In 1835, that bosses' arse-wipe, Dr Andrew Ure, laid down

'the great doctrine ... that when capital enlists science in her service, the refractory hand of labour will always be taught docility.' (*The Philosophy of Manufacture*,)

Deliveroo

Consider this current instance of bosses being unsure whether it's more profitable to employ Reservists or buy machines. It seems that every food outlet is being forced to offer home delivery to hold off competitors. Hence, there is a demand for cyclists and motor-cyclists. Many are recruited from the Reservists. However, the work is very hazardous and poorly paid. Thus, there are chronic labour shortages, and more so in the wet.

One solution being tried is delivery to the suburbs by drones. But such devices are no use for city apartment blocks into which more of the customers are moving. Hence Google is trialing a robot to roll along the footpath. When it arrives at the customer's address, as shown on GoogleEarth, it posts a text to come down and collect the pre-paid pizza.

Immigrants

Immigration is a major recruiting ground for both Armies. The arrival of skilled adults saves the cost of child-rearing and education. Unskilled 'illegals' are prized because their status makes them vulnerable to every kind of abuse.

It's often said that Britain 'imported' a million hectares during the Eighteenth century. In other words, it imported food and textiles grown in its colonies by a succession of Reserve Armies. More than 12 million slaves were traded out of Africa before 1808. After the 1834 emancipation in the Empire, their ranks in both Armies were filled by bonded labourers from the Indian sub-continent.

Genius

According to one lot of bourgeoisie economists, the Reserve Army does not exist. Indeed, it cannot exist. In Mass Murdoch, the likes of Judith Sloan rave about how a completely free market allows an over-supply to bring about falling prices. When the price of labour-power falls far enough, labour markets clear and all will have prizes.

Through a glass darkly

The very radical economist Joan Robinson tells how she fell out of love with such orthodoxies around 1930. Her Cambridge professors proved algebraically that the unemployed whom she could see through their seminar-room windows were not there. Or rather, they would never have been there had they accepted more wage-cuts.

Here a problem arises. What happens when that wage falls below the level needed to reproduce labour-power on a daily basis, let alone across generations. Those unfortunates are pushed down the ranks of the Reserve Army, out of the from floating or latent levels into pauperdom. But they do have jobs, bleats Professor Sloan. And that will build their moral character. After all, 'Work is the best welfare.'

Surplus population

This introduction has presented a lop-sided account of what Marx says about the Reserve Army. He heads his discussion: 'The Progressive Production of a Relative Surplus Population or Industrial Reserve Army'. Thus, his thoughts on the Reserve Army are tied to the total population, not just the workforce. As ever, he is combatting the Malthusian claim that 'too many hands' is a 'law of nature'. Marx shows that, on the contrary, the 'relative surplus population' is a necessary outcome of laws specific to the expansion of capital.

Sting in the tail

Marx uses irony to twist his knife into the bosses and their lackeys. Here, he pictures the lowest ranks in the Reserve Army, the lumpens, as public benefactors:

The effects of the criminal on the development of productive power can be shown in detail. Would locks ever have reached their present degree of excellence had there been no thieves? ... Crime, through its constantly new methods of attack on property, constantly calls into being new methods of defence, and so is as productive as are strikes for the invention of machines.

Humphrey McQueen