

Themselves Must Strike the Blow: The Socialist Argument for Strikes and Self-Emancipation

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ABSTRACT. Socialists know that they ought to defend strikes, but why? The best argument is that strikes are acts of self-emancipation. The ideal of self-emancipation lies at the heart of socialist political theory. It is up to workers to emancipate themselves, not just because it takes class power to overthrow capitalism, but because there is an intrinsic connection between class struggle and socialist freedom. Workers can only possess and exercise the freedoms they are denied, but ought to enjoy, if they demand that freedom for themselves, through their own, collective activity. Strikes are an essential way of both winning and exercising those denied freedoms. They are therefore a path to, and partial realization of, the ideal of self-emancipation to which socialists are, or ought to be, committed.

*Hereditary bondsmen! know ye not
Who would be free, themselves must strike the blow?*
—Lord Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrim, Canto ii, Stanza 76*

*The emancipation of the working class
must be the act of the workers themselves.*
—Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels,
Rules of the International, 1864

Why should socialists defend strikes? It seems obvious. Strikes are class-conscious activity. Socialists favor class-conscious politics. Therefore, socialists defend strikes. That is right, as far as it goes. But it only goes so far. What is the connection between class-conscious politics and strikes? Aren't there other, more effective and less disruptive paths to socialist outcomes? That very thought is why some socialists have been skeptical of strikes, seeing them at best as defensive measures and at worst as a sign of political immaturity.¹ What about the party? Elections and political revolutions? Voluntary communes?

The best defense of strikes starts from a foundational principle of socialist political philosophy: it is up to workers to emancipate themselves. The working class ought to emancipate itself through a sustained, well-organized struggle for freedom. This ideal of self-emancipation is the nerve of left-wing political ethics. It is not just a first-order principle, or starting premise, it is—or ought to be—the animating purpose of socialist political theory.

The ideal of self-emancipation best explains why strikes are worth defending. Strikes are both an effective means to the end of self-emancipation and they partially realize that very end. This is not an exhaustive list of what someone might say in favor of strikes. But it is the best line of argument for them.

A theoretical defense of strikes has two dimensions. One is an argument for why workers have a *right* to strike. The other is why we should see strikes as a *good thing*, something to be *celebrated and even expected* of workers. Elsewhere, I have provided the argument for why workers have a right to strike (Gourevitch 2018). Here, I want to focus on the less considered but in certain ways more important argument for why strikes are a good thing, to be celebrated and even expected of workers. Focusing on this argument draws our attention to some of the most challenging issues in socialist political philosophy. For instance, if we expect the oppressed to emancipate themselves, then are we just blaming them for their oppression? How does this fit with the socialist critique of capitalism as an impersonal form of systematic domination? Who are 'we' to expect such things of workers?

I will only offer the basic elements of an answer here. First, I will point to the way strikes raise some special problems when it comes to collective resistance under conditions of oppression. There is no way to purify resistance or to fully displace responsibility for the effects of strikes, which explains why we need a full account of their value. Second, I will show why strikes can be seen as acts of self-emancipation. Then, third, I will step back and develop the socialist argument for the value and necessity of self-emancipation.

1. Karl Kautsky, though he softened his view later in life, said "the strike and the boycott" were weapons "inherited from a previous age," reflecting a "medieval" attitude among workers who had not yet given its struggle a "political character" (1971[1892], 184). Other figures, from British American socialist John Spargo to French socialist Jean Jaures, have thought strikes might have a defensive role, but rejected what they saw as a romance or myth-making around strikes, especially general strikes.

I. COLLECTIVE ACTION UNDER CONDITIONS OF OPPRESSION

Oppression is the systematic and unjustifiable deprivation of freedom. Oppression is systematic in that it refers to regular, patterned forms of unfreedom that arise from the way in which society is structured. The basic institutions of society are oppressive when they limit freedom in ways that regularly force groups of people to do some things and not to do other things. That systematic limitation of freedom also explains why the basic structure of society reproduces itself over time. For instance, forcing the working class to work for capitalists at wage rates that prevent them from saving enough to work for themselves explains not just why capitalists make profits but why there remains a working and a capitalist class. Not all systematic limitations of freedom are unjustifiable. Limiting everyone's freedom to murder or assault each other *is* justifiable. Oppressive institutions systematically limit freedom in unjustifiable ways—they do not just limit but deprive people of their freedom.

Capitalist property relations are oppressive because of the way they systematically deny workers a range of freedoms they ought to enjoy. Workers are denied freedoms from overwork and from shouldering more than their fair share of necessary labor. They are denied freedoms to their fair share of leisure time, freedoms to control over their work activity and self-development, and freedoms to participate in the collective management of the economy.² Workers are denied these freedoms in part because of the way workers are forced to find jobs, to submit to the authority of employers, and to endure exploitation.

Workers have a right to strike because they have a right to resist oppression (Gourevitch 2018). However, if the right to strike is justified in the name of resisting oppression, does that mean workers *should* strike? What if strikes increase the oppression of workers or have side effects that deepen the oppression of others? These are practical problems that regularly arise in strikes. For instance, strikers might coerce recalcitrant coworkers into striking or they might trigger violent state responses that can bring severe reprisals down on themselves and others. They might coercively prevent replacements—through intimidation, mass-picketing, sabotage—from taking struck jobs, including replacements who need those jobs even more than the strikers. Strikes might prevent workers and the unemployed from getting goods and services they need, like energy, transportation, food, health-care, or education. Or strikes might indirectly lead to others being unemployed because they drive up the cost of labor, leading to disinvestment/lower levels of employment. Strikes are by nature disruptive. The more effective the strike, the

2. For the sake of space, I cannot explain why the class relations of a capitalist society are unjustifiable deprivations of people's freedom. But both the sense in which capitalism involves unfreedom, and the unjustifiability of that unfreedom, is familiar across a wide range of socialist thinking. To take just a few examples, Cohen (1988a, b), Roberts (2018), Gourevitch (2018), Ezorsky (2007), Stanczyk (Forthcoming), Hagglund (2019).

more likely some of these effects are. It looks like, when they effectively exercise their right to strike, workers might be doomed to *deepen* the oppression of others, including those even worse-off than the strikers.

It might seem natural to say, workers 'should not exercise their right to strike in ways that worsen the oppression of others' or in ways that 'makes the worse off even worse off' or that 'deepens the oppression of innocent third parties'. But there is no way to purify resistance. It is in the nature of capitalist societies that effective acts of resistance will, directly or indirectly, involve the coercion of and potential harm to others. That is because of the way capitalist societies, like all oppressive societies, secure cooperation from oppressed workers. Effective strikes are disruptive, triggering repressive responses from capitalist states and causing harm to lives that presuppose the social reproduction of capitalism.

THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF PURIFYING RESISTANCE

Capitalist societies require the voluntary cooperation of the oppressed. Millions of workers must choose to go to work, buy goods, make labor contracts, develop skills, form families, have children, obey the law. They have to do these things voluntarily in the sense that they choose to take jobs, form families, buy goods, use their abilities to do work. They are not physically forced to take each of these steps.

Socialists regularly observe that one reason that workers voluntarily participate in their own oppression is that they are forced to. You are forced to do whatever you lack a reasonable alternative to doing. That means there are still choices, but the alternatives are unreasonable. In capitalist societies, most workers lack reasonable alternatives to finding a job taking orders from some employer or another.³ They are therefore forced to find a job with some employer or another and to be exploited by them—or do the work necessary to make employers profits.⁴

Workers sometimes resist. They can choose to do other than what they are forced to. But the costs of that resistance are typically high. If they resist collectively, with strikes or mass rebellion, workers tend to face the repressive force of the law, police, and even military—as well as the costs of failure.⁵ This repression, or the threat of it, is a form of social control—it raises the costs of resistance high enough to make it look like an unreasonable alternative to peaceful labor market participation. It ensures that most people do not resist in the socially unsanctioned ways.⁶

3. They cannot steal, because the law punishes them; they have no reliable access to goods other than buying them, but can only get money by earning it first; and most workers cannot themselves become capitalists. The vast majority of workers have no reasonable alternative to finding a job—a job that will not pay them enough to do anything but continue to work for pay for most of their active life.

4. This is a familiar line of argument, most clearly developed in Cohen (1988a, 1988b).

5. The literature on labor repression is vast. For the US case, see discussion and citations in Gourevitch (2015).

6. This does not exclude that an oppressive social order might include large amounts of resistance, or even that it will ritualize some of this resistance—it might even be the case that the more stable

If workers resist individually, instead of collectively, they will again face unacceptable costs. Theft and other crimes lead to incarceration. Refusal to conform to one's talents or sense of purpose to the rewards of the market reliably leads to poverty and low class status. So not only are workers forced to find a job, they are also forced to develop marketable talents, on pain of ending up in low-wage, dead-end jobs or unemployment. That means most workers are forced to shape their very self-development, their desires and abilities, in the direction the market requires. Resistance generates costs that it is unreasonable for individuals to bear.

Capitalist societies do not just induce cooperation through force and coercion. Our economy is also incredibly productive. There is real satisfaction in buying the many, ever-changing commodities for sale. Some jobs also offer nonmaterial rewards—of status, power, control over time, and the like. These incentives elicit effort that pure force cannot. These incentives encourage a degree of self-exploitation—the cultivation and exercise of human talents and abilities—through sustained, voluntary exertions of effort. There are strong incentives in capitalism for workers to develop and exercise real human talents and to cultivate new tastes and desires.

These facts raise the costs of resistance. The lives that workers end up leading—the people they become, the talents they commit to, the expectations and desires around which they shape their lives—assume social stability. If people want to make a life for themselves, they have to take the basic institutions as given, and over time, who they are becomes inseparable from the institutions that make that personhood possible. *Any* serious disruption of those institutions, be it a supply chain or communications network, a public school or for-profit hospital system, will be costly for the life plans it disrupts. The least well-off will be in the worst position to adapt to this disruption. This is no accident, nor is it necessarily an intentional feature of capitalist societies, but it is baked in, so to speak, to their social reproduction.

The foregoing thoughts explain why it is impossible to purify resistance. It is not just that resistance brings with it repression, defeat, unemployment, or poverty. Effective resistance is socially disruptive. The greater the disruptiveness, the greater the potential suffering of those who count on the ordinary functioning of social institutions. The ordinary, automatic operation of capitalist institutions will displace the costs of those disruptions onto those with the fewest resources and the least power to adapt.⁷ Until the basic oppressive structure of society itself is changed, the costs of repression and disruption are unavoidable features

the social order, the more it can permit various forms of dissent and nonconformity. But collective resistance that actually threaten the social order will generally be punished severely or made otherwise very costly.

7. The argument in this sentence is analogous to the argument Charles Lindblom makes about the 'automatic recoil mechanism' of capitalists who, even when seeking no specific political outcomes, will withdraw their investment or go on capital strike when political attempts to manage capitalism change the investment climate in ways adverse to their economic interests (1982).

of resistance. There is no way to purify resistance, especially effective collective resistance like strikes.

OPPRESSION AND RESPONSIBILITY

If we cannot purify resistance, we might instead be tempted to displace responsibility for the effects of resistance. Strikes might deepen the oppression of others, so the argument goes, but workers are not *responsible* for those consequences. Workers are only responsible for the things that they intended to have happen, like the wage increases they win, but not for the predictable but uncontrollable other (bad) effects. That might be a reasonable thing to say in cases where outcomes are entirely beyond the control of workers. If a successful strike leads to more unemployment due to the general equilibrium effects of raising wages it was not the strikers who fired or refused to employ workers at the new higher wage rate. It was the capitalists' fault. They control investment.

Socialists have, at times, been tempted to displace responsibility one step further. Maybe workers are not responsible for any of their actions because they are dominated by capitalists, who bear all the responsibility. Some might even go so far as to say that, in a capitalist society, *nobody* is really "fit to be held responsible" for their actions because everyone is dominated by the impersonal forces of the market.⁸ If, as Marx says, the actual social organization of capitalism happens "behind the backs" of those involved, then the outcomes are not just unintentional but utterly nonresponsive to human intentions (Marx 1990 [1867]), 135). Nobody's actions are their own.

However, just as we cannot wish away the problems of resistance by trying to purify it, we also cannot solve such problems by displacing responsibility. It is true that workers are not responsible for most aspects of how the capitalist economy functions and that much of what happens is under nobody's control. But that lack of control is part of the oppression that workers resist—it is an expression of their lack of control over their time and activity. Strikes, like other forms of resistance, can be seen as expressions of the desire for control over that which controls them. Displacing or denying responsibility suppresses that emancipatory, self-determining aspect of strikes. The best feature of emancipatory acts of resistance, like strikes, is that they are demands for greater freedom. They are demands for freedom by agents who value that freedom so highly that they wish to take risks to win new freedoms. As such, resistance is an act by human agents who reject their oppression and who refuse to be dominated. No matter how constrained, forced, disciplined, compelled, controlled, and limited, the act of resistance is a

8. In his excellent book on Marx, Will Roberts has helped himself to Philip Pettit's concept of being "fit to be responsible" to describe Marx's view of agency and unfreedom under capitalism social relations. Roberts does not consider the scenarios I have in mind here, but it is not an unreasonable inference to make given the character of his argument there (2018, 82, 74–100). Certain kinds of Marxist arguments about structural domination point in this direction, see note 32.

refusal to be thoroughly reduced to an automaton, utterly caused and utterly irresponsible. Resistance is therefore not just a demand to be free in the future, it is an announcement that one is, here and now, still in some way free *and therefore* in some way responsible. Their domination is the background against which strikers affirm their capacity to govern themselves—through acts for which they cannot avoid responsibility, even as it is also true that they are not yet in control. We can see this as a kind of productive contradiction: the contradiction of dominated agents seeking and realizing freedom in conditions of oppression.

That contradiction lies at the heart of the ideal of self-emancipation. The ideal of self-emancipation is a kind of answer to the fact that we can neither purify resistance nor fully displace responsibility for its effects. We have, instead, to see in the very readiness to take responsibility the seed of what is good in strikes—a good that outweighs the predictable bads of mass resistance. That readiness to take responsibility is implicit in and emerges from the way strikes are about winning and exercising freedom.

II. STRIKES: WINNING AND EXERCISING FREEDOM

Strikes are work stoppages to achieve some end. As work stoppages, strikes are a way workers exercise the core power that they have in a capitalist society. They have the power to refuse to do the thing demanded of them: work. The reason their power appears ‘in the negative’, or as a refusal, is because it is a response to oppression. Strikes are refusals to cooperate, to go along willingly without complaint in the very thing that they are forced to do.

But strikes are not merely negative acts. As responses to oppression, strikes are acts whereby workers seek to claim some piece of the freedom that they are denied. They claim that freedom either by winning new freedoms, by exercising the very freedoms they are usually denied, or both. Strikes are therefore complex acts of self-emancipation.

The most straightforward way in which strikes can be emancipating is that they are acts of redistribution. They reallocate power to those who ought to have more of it by limiting the power of those who should not have so much. More pay for workers means lower profits for bosses. Laws keeping workers free from unsafe working conditions mean more legal restraints on employers. In each of these cases, strikers win new freedoms by redistributing the social restraints that different actors face.

But the redistribution of power and restraint is only one way strikes win new freedoms. Strikes can also be ways of exercising freedoms and of bringing into being new relationships that make possible the exercise of those freedoms. They can do so without denying anyone else the opportunity to exercise those same capacities. Strikes can be not just redistributive but creative. The very activity of going on and remaining on strike can involve exercising new freedoms themselves.

Instead of having to take orders, strikers decide for themselves how to coordinate and cooperate during the strike. Workers decide together to stop working, whether to stay on strike, how to conduct the strike, and who shall perform which tasks during the strike. They might create mutual aid resources, educational programs, and community outreach committees. These activities allow workers to take collective responsibility for aspects of work and the wider economy that they are normally denied.

It is no small feature of strikes that they involve workers in formal decisions about how to collectively govern economic activity. Strikers might even make some of that democratic freedom permanent if one of the results of the strike is greater control over the workplace. They might win the right to decide who gets hired and fired, or how new technology is used, or how tasks are assigned.

So, to restate the case, strikes are valuable because they are acts of collective self-emancipation.⁹ The connection to self-emancipation is twofold: strikers both exercise and win new freedoms. When workers go on strike they decide to use their own collective power to push back against some element of oppression they face. Exercising that collective power is an act of freedom in itself—already a moment of self-emancipation. And the winning of new freedoms as a result of the strike is also emancipatory. Since those outcomes are the product of the activity of workers themselves that emancipation is self-emancipation.

Strikes are not always successful. They sometimes end in defeat. That experience of defeat has weighed heavily over socialist politics for about the last half century. The most well-known strikes—like the 1981 air traffic controllers strike in the USA, or the 1984 miners strike in the UK—stand as landmarks of the decline of working-class militancy, the futility of struggle, even the end of history. But the recent past is not the last word. If anything, the recent past weighs too heavily on socialist political philosophy. It has eroded not only the practice of politics, but the commitment within socialist political thought to the ideal self-emancipation. Yet if we can see why strikes are in some way self-emancipatory, why is self-emancipation an ideal in the first place?

III. WHAT ONLY WORKERS CAN DO

The ideal of self-emancipation has two elements: what is it *only* the oppressed can do and why *should* they do it. There might not be a uniform and universal answer to that question because there are many kinds of oppression. Slavery is different from capitalist wage labor, colonialism is different from patriarchy. The argument I provide here is for a socialist theory of the role of the working class in a capitalist society. That is not because the argument only applies to the working class, but

9. I develop the full sense in which strikes are cases of winning and exercising freedom in my forthcoming book on the political ethics of strikes.

because further premises are needed to extend the argument—when an extension is possible—to other cases of oppression.

ANSWER 1: POWER

Here is one reason why we might think only the oppressed can win the freedom they deserve. Who else will do it? The powerful do not voluntarily give up their power. That is a basic sociological fact. Oppressive social systems would not endure in time if the ruling class simply abandoned its privileges and authority to everyone else. Capitalists have shown time and again their readiness to defend their interests, sometimes with cataclysmic violence. We have no reason to think the future will be different. Whatever nuance we want to add, there is no getting around the fact that the working class will have to fight the capitalists to get even part way toward socialism.

On this account, socialists value self-emancipation in a very instrumental way. If there were some other feasible, less conflictual path to socialism, there would be nothing else to say in favor of workers taking part in struggle. There is no deeper connection between the agency of workers and socialist institutions.

Though sociologically sound, this first argument is incomplete. It does not make the right kind of connection between the agency of workers and socialist freedom.

ANSWER 2: SELF-RESPECT

There is a stricter sense in which only workers can emancipate themselves. Recall that capitalism involves workers participating voluntarily in their oppression. Wage laborers choose among employment options, sign labor contracts, and choose what to buy. To a degree, all oppression involves voluntary submission. Some have even said slavery involved a degree of voluntariness. Though unfree in nearly every important way, slaves sometimes policed each other, cooperated with masters, took initiative with respect to some work, and otherwise complied or failed to resist. “That slave who has the courage to stand up for himself against the overseers,” Frederick Douglass wrote in his autobiography, “becomes, in the end, a freeman, even though he sustain the formal relation of a slave” (2018[1855], 77–78).¹⁰

Mere voluntary participation in one’s own subjection is not evidence that one has done so willingly. Outward agreement is not the same as inward assent. However, if one never resists, never evinces the conflict between inner resistance and outer consent, then the space between voluntary actions and real expression of one’s will starts to collapse. This is not a point about adaptive preferences, or that the unfree come to like or desire their subjection or those who dominate them.

10. Douglass goes on to say, “. . . he was neither whipped nor shot. If the latter had been his fate, it would have been less deplorable than the living and lingering death to which cowardly and slavish souls are subjected.”

The point is narrower. In all cases where the oppressed participate voluntarily in their oppression, it can become the case that they also participate willingly. If they never resist, then it comes to look like, at every moment, there is something more important than their freedom. They have come to accept the systematic deprivation of their freedom.

However, if they have any respect for their capacity for choice, for the human capacity to determine that part of one's life that one can intentionally shape, then there ought to come a point beyond which they refuse to go. There must be something to which they will not consent, something that they will not do voluntarily—some resistance the will puts up to being made use of. If the oppressed never refuse being made into a mere instrument of someone else's will, or being made to submit to some utterly purposeless activity, then they never show the respect for their own autonomy that they ought to show. In these cases, *only* they can resist their own subjection because *only* they can refuse to assent to giving over control over that aspect of their activity. Only they can make a contrary expression of *their* will. If anyone else does the resisting, then it is those others, not the oppressed themselves, that have done the resisting. It is others who used their capacity for choice to decide when and how to act.

So one thing that only the oppressed can do is make evident to themselves their self-respect. Only they can refuse permanently to suppress the exercise of that autonomous capacity. Since it is good to have that kind of respect for one's own personal autonomy, we also have a reason why it is good that workers refuse to submit willingly. Unlike our first argument about the political sociology of oppression, what we have here is not an empirical conjecture about how to change society but a logical point. To the degree that the employment relationship is a relation of oppression, workers can only show respect for the denied, frustrated autonomous capacities by resisting in some way. In that sense, only the oppressed can emancipate themselves.

But resist how? Grumbling about one's boss, foot-dragging, anonymous complaints to HR, breaking machinery, striking, all seem to count and count in the same way. Even costless forms of refusal might count. If the point is to register one's will, then any negative expression of the will toward one's oppression will do. Any and all negative acts register the same refusal to be made use of without complaint. In principle, even an internal, grudging attitude might be sufficient to indicate that you are not content just to go along. The connection between means and ends is exhausted in the negativity of the act. Nothing beyond registering one's dissent has to be achieved in order to indicate that you are not submitting willingly, even if you are nonetheless forced to submit. So it appears that the argument from self-respect makes it possible for the oppressed to emancipate themselves without changing the world in any significant way. At least, there is no special reason why anyone is under the burden to choose actions that are more threatening to the social order than those that are merely symbolic. And there is no special reason to choose collective action over individual dissent.

Though limited, the argument from self-respect is an important step toward the full argument for self-emancipation. It is familiar to anyone who studies strikes (and other forms of resistance) that they often start out of sheer desperation—a refusal to be ‘treated like that anymore’. The argument from self-respect does mean there is *something* the oppressed ought to do that only they can do. The oppression they are responsible for altering is the oppression of the self, so to speak, not of the institutions. The argument from self-respect requires that workers resist in a way that shows that, though they participate voluntarily, they do not do so willingly. There are many acts of resistance that qualify, many that pose no significant threat to existing institutions. The limit of the self-respect argument is that workers are responsible not so much for changing oppressive institutions as for changing their disposition toward these institutions.

ANSWER 3: SELF-DISCLOSURE

There is, however, a further argument for what only the oppressed can do that requires them to take on some risk by engaging in some kind of costly, public act of resistance. As Bernard Boxill has pointed out, most known systems of oppression involve not just willing submission, they also include an ideological belief that the oppressed are indifferent to the freedoms they are denied (2010). The oppressed are said to submit willingly *because* they do not see the value of the freedoms they are denied or *because* they are incapable of exercising them and are therefore better off without them. To the degree that this ideological belief stabilizes oppressive institutions, any threat to that ideology is a kind of challenge to the social order itself.

The only way to challenge the ideological belief that the oppressed are indifferent or incapable of freedom is for the oppressed themselves to engage in some *public* and *risky* act of resistance. The act cannot be private—no grumbling and griping, foot-dragging, or secret sabotage—because the act of resistance only challenges the prevailing view if it is widely known. The act cannot be riskless because the point is to rebut the ideological belief that the oppressed are indifferent toward or incapable of valuing and exercising important human freedoms. If the act comes with significant personal risk then it is a meaningful act of self-disclosure. It gives the lie to the ruling belief about the subject class’s readiness and capacity to value freedom.

An effective act of self-disclosure alters society in at least two ways. First, to the degree that it is a revelation to other members of the oppressed, it reveals to each other a readiness and capacity to rebel where none had appeared. It is evidence of a willingness to make sacrifices for one’s, or even each other’s, freedom. That kind of evidence is unavailable in any other form than engaging in the act itself. So the first socially significant consequence is in the alteration of the prevailing consciousness of the oppressed. Second, to the degree some public, risky act of resistance falsifies the ideological belief about the oppressed, it alters wider social consciousness. So long as the act is legible as an act of resistance to some kind of deprivation,

and the act comes at some personal cost, then it is an ideology-challenging act of self-disclosure. It reveals that those resisting do value freedom and are capable of demanding it. As such, even if the act is unsuccessful in its immediate object, it undermines an important social belief.¹¹

If it is clear why only the oppressed can do this, it is less clear why they ought to. Is undermining a socially important ideological belief important enough to undertake some act of great risk to oneself? Bernard Boxill raised these kinds of examples in the case of slavery, where the punishment for attempted escapes or rebellions were massively disproportionate and violent.¹² But consider examples closer to our topic. While it might be true that only workers can demonstrate how much they wish to control their own work activity, against the managerial ideology of a capitalist society, it is unclear why they *ought* to strike just to prove they value their freedom. It is hard to see why they ought to risk the predictable consequences of a lost strike—unemployment, poverty, loss of community and family ties—if the central point is only to challenge ruling ideas or prove to each other what is possible.

The normative paradox of the self-disclosure argument is the way it treats risk. The actions, to be effective acts of self-disclosure, must be risky. The more you are willing to lose for whatever it is you wish to gain, the more you can say it is your determining principle, the value for which you live. If it is said the oppressed are indifferent to or incapable of valuing their freedom, then the most effective refutation is taking some publicly known, serious risk for that freedom. The riskier the action, the more effective it is as an act of self-disclosure. But those very risks appear to be a reason for thinking nobody *ought* to do them. Why is anyone obligated to do something that is unlikely to succeed but likely to cause dramatic personal suffering?¹³ The very riskiness that gives the act its value as an act of self-disclosing resistance is also what makes it appear that nobody is obligated to do it. We can perhaps go so far as to say ‘it ought to be done,’ in the sense that ‘the oppressed ought to resist,’ without saying any particular person is under the obligation to resist. It is reasonable and excusable for them not to resist, given the risks involved.

One way out of this paradox is to think about it not as a question of why the oppressed ought to act but instead as explaining why it is *good* that the oppressed

11. The foregoing paragraphs are partly a summary of Boxill's view about the responsibility of the oppressed, even slaves, to resist oppression. But I have added the emphasis on the effects of self-disclosure on other oppressed people, not just on prevailing ideological beliefs.

12. I agree with Boxill's view regarding slavery and that there are things only slaves can do. I just can't provide here the reasoning that runs through the much harder case of slavery, where executions and torture are common while the chances of success are far lower.

13. There are further issues, like the costs to others. If some significant act of resistance leads not just to personal risk, but to innocent third parties also paying the price, we might think there is even greater reason why nobody is obligated to resist. But I take that issue up later, since the immediate issue is how to resist the claim that the oppressed themselves do not value their freedom.

resist.¹⁴ They ought to do it in the sense that, when they are ready to do so, then it is good that they do it. It is good when the oppressed are willing to undertake serious personal risks for the sake of undermining a socially stabilizing ideological belief. Only they can disclose who they really are, to each other and to the wider public, given that the social order is constituted to deny that very recognition and social standing. If this is true, then a related judgment is also possible. It is reasonable for members of the oppressed to hold each other responsible for participating in qualifying acts of resistance. It is right and reasonable for them to say to each other that they ought to resist. That is to say, when some are prepared to resist, it is reasonable for them to believe that others really ought to resist, *because* it is up to them to prove that the prevailing ideology is wrong. Only they can emancipate themselves from the systematic misrecognition that is a part of the oppression that those ideological beliefs visit on the oppressed.

The power of the self-disclosure argument is also its limit. The argument does show that there are things only the oppressed can do and that these must include some public, risky act that can transform society in a recognizable way. However, changing society by destabilizing an ideological belief is insufficient to motivate a full account of both what only the oppressed can do and *why* they ought to do it.

ANSWER 4: SELF-DEVELOPMENT AND ACTING FREELY

The arguments from self-respect and self-disclosure are not wrong, but they are like two notes in search of a third. We only hear the full chord of the socialist argument for self-emancipation when we add the final, defining note. The complete argument explains why it is up to workers not just to dispel supporting ideological beliefs but to transform oppressive institutions themselves.

The core of the argument for self-emancipation is that workers must emancipate themselves because, if they do not engage in decisive struggle for their freedom, they cannot possess and exercise the freedoms they deserve. The struggle for freedom is constitutive of the very freedoms that workers deserve.

Recall that a basic claim of socialist social theory is that, under capitalism, workers do not possess and exercise the freedoms they deserve. That is a feature of the specific freedoms workers are denied *and* of the way in which they are denied them. Among the freedoms that socialists think workers ought to enjoy include the freedoms that come from and are necessary for collective, democratic control of the workplace and the wider economy. Democratic control of the economy is necessary to emancipate workers from the constraints of overwork, insufficient free time, and inadequate opportunity to develop and exercise complex abilities. Democratic control is also necessary because, without that control, workers cannot adequately develop and exercise important capacities for social cooperation

14. It is beyond the scope of this essay, but a stronger claim also holds. Once under way, strikes, and similar acts of resistance, are not just good things but actions that 'we' ought to support. In that case, 'we' refers to anyone not already part of the action itself.

that are only realized in taking responsibility for making collective decisions.¹⁵ Democratic control of the economy is both a necessary means to other freedoms that workers ought to enjoy and is itself part of the freedom that workers ought to enjoy. Though it is wrong to be denied these freedoms, they are only freedoms that workers can possess in the right way if they actually want them. Which means, they must collectively struggle *against* the daily deprivation of those freedoms. There are a number of interrelated reasons why.

(4.1) *The will for self-determination in the abstract*

The very first point to observe here is that those who do not *want* those freedoms cannot have them forced upon them. That fact might appear false for an individual. The state forces me to have religious freedom even if I am indifferent to it or do not want it. But that is a false analogy. It does not hold at scale and it does not hold for the specific, democratic freedoms at stake for socialists.

The argument does not hold at scale because the value of certain basic liberties does not depend on whether a specific individual values that liberty, but the value of that liberty *does* recede when the vast majority does not demand that liberty nor recognize the interest it is designed to protect. That freedom will be systematically exercised—or not exercised—in a way that does not serve the interests that freedom protects.

That is especially the case for *democratic* freedoms—freedoms whose basic function is to enable a group to engage in self-government. For democratic freedoms to actually protect that interest in self-government, those who possess those freedoms have to value that collective decision making and the mutualistic cooperation it makes possible. If, however, workers do not believe they are capable of collective management of the firm and public management of the economy; if they believe a special class of managers and owners is better suited to making economic decisions, when guided by the profit motive, then workers will not exercise those democratic freedoms for the sake of controlling the economy. When given the option, they will exercise their democratic freedoms to alienate that very power. If, on the whole, the working class does not want shared responsibility for managing the economy, then the freedoms necessary for that collective management of the economy will have little value. So one reason why workers have to emancipate themselves is that it is they who have to want the liberties they are denied

15. To be clear, I do not think workers are ordinarily drones, stunted and stultified into a mindless stupor by the ordinary operation of the economy. In fact, as I have written elsewhere, even absent any organized struggle, the typical organization of work forces workers, whether they like it or not, into forms of cooperation wherein they begin to develop certain important capacities for collective action (Gourevitch and Robin 2020). Moreover, outside the workplace, there are still numerous freedoms enjoyed, life plans developed, and opportunities to develop important complex abilities. However, the basic socialist view is that this is a severely inadequate set of freedoms, the way freedoms are distributed are anyhow unfair, and it is still the case that certain very important capacities—like those involved in active democratic management of the economy—are blocked just because *that* freedom is not available to workers.

and they have to want them for the purpose of engaging in ongoing, democratic self-management. Otherwise, new democratic freedoms would be additional *burdens* rather than *emancipations*. Democratic freedoms must, in this general and abstract sense, be the historical achievement of those who seek them.

(4.2) the will for self-determination under capitalism

Even this understates the sense in which workers have to want the freedoms that socialism has to offer. For the question that faces any theory of self-emancipation is not ‘if someone could snap their fingers and create socialist institutions would workers embrace it?’ It is possible that if it were truly costless to transition to a completely socialist society, most workers would at least *say* that they do want to live that way. But the real question that faces workers here and now is whether democratic socialist freedom is worth a long, hard struggle. Given the predictable, ferocious resistance of most capitalists, their readiness to use all available legal and illegal means—police violence and private guards, military coups and proxy wars, imperial adventure and political corruption—to divert and repress socialist movements, do the working class want their denied freedoms enough to engage in prolonged struggle against *that* kind of enemy? That is a question that only workers themselves can answer. What would it mean, after all, for others to answer it for them? The constant will and enduring commitment required for large masses of people to struggle for socialism cannot be forced on them. Workers must come to value socialist freedom for its own sake, not merely instrumentally as a means to other ends, because the struggle involved, even if ultimately successful, might be so personally costly when measured just in terms of future material welfare.

(4.3) knowing freedom and the capacity for it

So far we have established that there is no socialism without workers coming to value socialist freedom. Even if it were costless to transform society into a socialist paradise, you cannot force freedoms on the majority. They have to want those freedoms for the reasons those freedoms exist. Moreover, the question socialists face is not whether workers want socialist freedoms in the abstract, but whether, here and now, they value those freedoms enough to engage in sustained struggle against the capitalist class. They must want, at least in part for its own sake, the responsibility for collective self-management.

But if workers must value socialist freedoms highly what is it precisely that they must value? How do they know what they struggle for? It is a notorious problem of socialism that we have little or no practical experience of the basic, emancipatory institutions that socialists envision. Actual historical experience remains a limited guide—except mainly to disqualify some past versions of socialism. And the majority of current workers have little direct experience even of the ‘actually existing socialism’ of the twentieth century.

Rather, the primary experience for workers in the actually existing *capitalist* economy is the systematic deprivation of liberty. One of the central wrongs of

that domination is that it deprives workers of that very experience of democratic control that they might come to value. True, they experience political democracy, but mainly as a complement, rather than alternative, to the daily domination of the capitalist economy. Workers are, on the socialist view, deprived of the sustained knowledge of collectively managing social cooperation in a different way *and* therefore of adequate opportunities to develop and exercise the relevant human capacities for self-government and mutual cooperation. That is especially the case given the fact that in the normal course of capitalist activity, workers do not forge themselves into groups engaged in collective self-government but, instead, are induced to act as individuals conceiving of and pursuing their interests separate from, and even in competition with, others. They do not have adequate opportunity to know what democratic socialist activity might look like, and they do not develop—we do not develop—the capacities that we might then value and seek further opportunities to exercise. How then can workers have experience of either the freedoms or the related human capacities such that they would know what it is they value? Only by struggling to create those experiences, against the grain of normal social reproduction.

Here, then, is a further reason why workers must emancipate themselves through certain kinds of struggles. Only certain kinds of struggles, like strikes, can win the self-governing space for the development and exercise of certain capacities. In these moments, workers start to have the experience, and therefore practical knowledge, of what democratic management of the economy looks like. They intentionally make themselves into a collective will, for the purpose of developing and articulating that collective will. This is where the fact that workers have to make collective decisions about when to strike, for how long, using which tactics, as well as having to organize their networks of mutual aid and support, matter for the window they provide onto what a different way of taking responsibility for the economy might look like. Likewise, the fact that these decisions require workers to learn how to make decisions together, take into account each other's needs, and consider the effects of their actions on wider society, also force the development and exercise of capacities related to economic self-government. They can only have these experiences, and begin to know what it is that they would value, if they engage in these activities themselves.

A reason for picking out strikes here is that they are instrumental activities. They are means to ends. The practice and organization of the strike requires workers to consider the effects of different courses of action, on themselves and on others, and they have to take themselves as the authority responsible for those outcomes. So the activity of self-government that workers get up to in a strike is not merely procedure for the sake of procedure. It is decision making that has a point. While other types of struggle will be similar, few combine democratic self-organization with dramatic social consequences quite like strikes. This gives strikes a special standing in this part of the argument for self-emancipation. They are acts whereby workers win a space for collective decision making where those

decisions have weight, and therefore they come to know what it might mean for them to bear responsibility as democratic agents. True, once faced with the prospect of taking that responsibility workers might recoil from it, but the point is they now have knowledge of it. In this way, strikes, and acts like them, that can achieve real social transformation are the best candidates for the activities of self-emancipation. They are the kinds of activities whereby workers begin to emancipate themselves by having the kinds of experiences that they are systematically denied under capitalism and, thereby, might come to know what it is to value socialist freedom. They come to know both the freedom they might exercise and the capacities they could exercise on a permanent basis.

It might sound like the self-emancipation argument is committed to viewing workers-under-capitalism as irretrievably or specially stunted. But that is not the point. There is no way around the claim that capitalism, in systematically denying workers important democratic freedoms, thereby constrains the development of important human capacities. After all, the *value* of those freedoms lies in part in the way they afford the development and exercise of important human capacities. If one of the core goods of socialism is that it renders possible a certain kind of social cooperation, in which various human capacities are unleashed and in which a kind of solidarity can flourish and develop, then it must be the case that that solidarity and the relevant human capacities do *not* adequately develop and flourish in capitalism.¹⁶

But it remains the case that workers, to be emancipated, must emancipate themselves from the constraints of capitalism. That includes shedding the constraints that capitalism places on the development of certain capacities for social cooperation and collective self-determination. Only workers can do that, for themselves, because only they can come to know themselves and each other in a way other than what capitalism makes possible. And that includes coming to know themselves and others as capable of managing their labor and the wider economy on a democratic basis.

Where do the experiences of that come from if they are systematically denied in the normal course of the capitalist economy? In struggle. Not just any struggle, but collective struggle. And not just any collective struggle, but those struggles of real social consequence, which require workers to take responsibility for the decisions they make together—to recognize in the outcomes of their activity their own, joint will, rather than merely the blind operation of an economic process that is beyond their control. The broader and more consequential the struggle, the more that struggle takes on the character of aiming to manage society itself. Strikes are that kind of activity. The broader the strike, the more those strikes are both experiences of self-management and point in the direction of a democratically controlled society.

16. This argument in no way implies that others are more developed than workers.

(4.4) strikes as a core case

We now have a more complete sense of what it is that only workers can do and why it is good that they do it. Given the systematic denial of important democratic freedoms to workers in the capitalist economy, workers do not have immediate practical knowledge of democratic management of the economy, nor do they have adequate opportunity to develop the capacities involved in the solidaristic form of social cooperation that socialism involves.¹⁷ Workers must come to have some kind of practical knowledge of those social practices, and of themselves engaging in those practices, to come to value them in any serious way *and* to know what it is they value. The social and self-knowledge that socialism requires does not spontaneously emerge. It must be won by workers struggling to transform society, having democratic experiences within those acts of struggle, and winning the experience of taking responsibility for areas of social life that had been beyond their reach. If socialist institutions were created any other way, they would just reproduce the very alienation from democratic control that one seeks to overcome through struggle.

This part of the argument for self-emancipation is that workers must engage in forms of struggle that win freedoms—specifically those democratic freedoms to engage in and experience self-determination in the economy. And in winning those freedoms they also exercise freedom, by making decisions together, about matters of major social consequence.

Strikes are not the only kind of struggle through which workers might have these experiences of winning and exercising freedom. But they are a necessary part of the arsenal of self-emancipation because they involve workers organizing themselves in unique ways.¹⁸ Strikes require worker self-organization in the formal, political sense that workers have to create bodies for making jointly binding decisions—about when and how to strike, about strike funds and contract negotiations, about when to stay out and when to accept the contract. While some strikes might really and truly be spontaneous and unorganized in the sense of there being no collective decision to go on strike, which tactics to use, and when to go back, that is extremely rare. It is also generally an approach that fails, which is why workers quickly learn to organize themselves. Successful strikes also generally require, in a more informal sense, the development of relations of mutual trust and recip-

17. The capacities here are, at minimum, those specifically democratic capacities for deliberating and taking responsibility for collective decisions, and those capacities for mutual trust and reciprocity required to sustain an economy based on something like shared contributions or 'contributive' or 'productive' justice (Gomberg 2007; Stanczyk 2012).

18. My sights are narrower than broad participation in labor unions because strikes require the self-organization of workers for the purposes of struggle, rather than participation in labor issues generally. The winning and exercising of freedom involved in the self-organization for struggle is different, in ways I cannot elaborate here, from just participating in union business generally. That is not a criticism of unions, especially since they are usually the organizations through which workers organize strikes, but it is an explanation of what makes strikes unique. On unions, see O'Neill and White (2018).

rocal expectation. Failures can, in this sense, be as instructive as success—failures that come from the lack of trust or adequate self-organization.¹⁹ Successful or not, strikes are unique and irreplaceable because they involve worker self-organization, they are acts of self-organization for the sake of changing society and, because of that, are not just opportunities for workers to win and exercise freedom, but are acts by which workers win those opportunities *through their own efforts*. They are one of the few experiences, therefore, where workers have the chance not just to experience democratic self-management and solidarity, but to recognize those as experiences they won through their own collective power.

(5) IS THE SELF-EMANCIPATION ARGUMENT FOR STRIKES UTOPIAN

But why would workers ever do this in the first place? It sounds like the argument for self-emancipation is also an argument for what makes strikes utopian. If strikes are quasi-socialist experiences, in which capacities develop and democratic freedoms won, then why would workers engage in *those* struggles? We might point to the fact that workers *do* strike as counterevidence. But that is insufficient on its own. Workers might engage in strikes for reasons other than the ones that connect strikes to self-emancipation.

However, strikes connect future freedom to present interests in two important ways. First, *whatever* the ends that strikers aim at, strikes tend to demand of *strikers* that they create some of the democratic institutions and develop some socialist capacities if those strikes are going to be successful. Second, the reasons that start strikes are usually not the same as the reasons why they keep going. Strikers often change, develop, and reorient their demands as the strike goes on.

Consider the first point. As accounts of successful strikes frequently observe,²⁰ effective strikes need, first and foremost, massive, near universal support from the striking workers themselves. That is nearly impossible without the development of a strong sense of shared fate or solidarity and that rarely develops without

19. I am not saying it is inevitable that strikes will produce certain attitudes, institutions, or relationships. A failed strike can destroy solidarity, disintegrate militant organizations, and the like. That, to take one example, is what the debate over the Hormel strike has been all about. While some, like historian and participant Peter Rachleff, say it generated some important lessons and institutional legacies for the left, it is difficult not to see it as a devastating defeat for a new organizing strategy, that shattered many lives, scattered important allies across the country as they all made their own way out of the defeat. The general point here is not that strikes inevitably will lead to certain emancipatory outcomes, but that they are a special and irreplaceable kind of struggle. They are a necessary part of self-emancipatory struggle even if there is no guarantee that this or that actual strike/strike-wave will have the desired outcomes.

20. I am drawing on a wide range of cases, from employer specific to industry-wide strikes. Broad, historical studies of successful versus unsuccessful strikes are essentially nonexistent. So I am drawing on my own synthesis of various firsthand accounts. I list here a few useful, representative examples from different periods and of different kinds of strikes: Lawrence 1912, Seattle Strike 1919, Flint sit-down strike 1936–37, JeffBoat 2001, Verizon 2016.

ways of making joint decisions in an open and relatively democratic manner.²¹ For instance, workers usually form committees—negotiating committees, organizational committees, communications committees—each with the function of making decisions about some relevant aspect of the strike. Sometimes these start as reading groups or informal meetings at houses and bars;²² sometimes they grow out of preexisting union structures; other times they are a reaction to sclerotic labor organizations. During the Lawrence strike of 1912, various cultural events and committees were created to ensure class solidarity among the dozens of different participating ethnic groups; important communications were translated into numerous languages to keep all informed. The Verizon strike of 2016 was successful in part because the rank and file had voted out a passive union leadership, elected a more militant one, then developed a culture of weekly mobilization and steward-led “culture of collective action.”²³

Other institution features—like active stewards, communication systems, militant and professional leadership—are also necessary. These organizational features are ways of creating forms of democratic representation among and across workers. The ratification of strike authorization votes, of decisions to continue strikes, and of negotiated contracts, means there is almost always a direct, democratic element to effective strikes, alongside the representative dimension. For instance, during the shipbuilders strike of 2001, the contract ratification vote became the occasion for workers to force their will not just on the owners, but on the corrupt union that attempted to prevent workers from having a say—workers kept voting down the contract the union representatives wanted until the rank and file had one they could accept (Tapp 2017, 84–86, 105–11). The development of a wider culture of mutual support, identification with a common cause, of separation and conflict with employers, and the circulation of new ideas and symbols, is also usually necessary for a successful strike. In other words, regardless of whether workers see any value in either a socialist culture of trust and mutual aid, or in the self-determining activity of formal democratic decision making, workers have an instrumental interest in those activities and capacities because they are generally necessary for an effective strike. So one connection between worker interests, as they happen to be conceived, and democratic socialist organization and culture, is that the latter is instrumentally valuable for the former.

Now add the second mediating point. Striking workers can—and sometimes do—come to value the culture and politics of self-emancipation itself. Here we can think of the many attestations of how workers, having started off striking for one reason, find the experience itself something that they value. They come to value

21. On the need for universal support, see MacAlevey (2018). On cultures of solidarity, see Fantasia (1988).

22. See Terry Tapp’s description of the meetings in rest areas, his home, even hidden parts of the workplace, which led to the wildcat strike (2017).

23. Then political director of Communications Workers of America, Bob Master, quoted in Gourevitch (2016).

the fact that the outcome was theirs and it was theirs because of the way they got there—through their own self-organization and democratic activity. During the Verizon strike of 2016, workers found themselves more ready to speak up against bad management, supported each other when there was a dispute, and afterward spent more time monitoring their supervisors.²⁴ The 1919 General Strike of Seattle started as a sympathy strike in support of a shipbuilders walkout, but it transformed into a demand for worker self-management. “The members of organized labor have had the experience of working together and they appear to want more of it,” according to the strike’s official historian, who pointed to the post-strike formation of new worker-run cooperatives as evidence. Various rank and file members of the participating unions felt “a new sense of power to organize and manage activities of their craft or industry” (History Committee 1919, 53). Or, as Terry Tapp puts it, when discussing the victorious wildcat shipbuilders strike at JeffBoats in 2001, “The thing that happened is we changed. We began to look after one another” (2017, 113). These experiences can start to point beyond themselves. Rather than living in an economy in which these experiences have to be won through endless, risky struggle, whose results are temporary and provisional, workers might want to make them permanent and institutional.

The constraints that capitalist societies place on the development and exercise of important human capacities make it appear that workers will never value strikes for the reasons that the argument from self-emancipation requires. Strikes, however, emerge from all kinds of normal and reasonable human responses, here and now, to the indignities of the market. In struggling against these indignities strikers can—and sometimes do—come to see the instrumental, and potentially also the intrinsic, value of democratic socialist self-emancipation. That is all that is required to show that the argument from self-emancipation is not utopian.

IV. CONCLUSION

The best socialist case for strikes holds that strikes are good because socialists are committed to self-emancipation. They are committed to self-emancipation because of the way they think about freedom. The freedom that a socialist society offers cannot be realized if workers do not value that freedom and the responsibility it involves. Democratic control and socialist solidarity cannot be imposed, they must develop and be the conscious aim of those who live in the institutions that extend that kind of freedom to them. Since the institutions and capacities associated with democratic socialism do not develop spontaneously in a capitalist society, they can only be known by workers through struggle. Only in those struggles can workers come to know the very practices, institutions, and capacities that they

24. Alex Gourevitch, “From Strike to Shop Floor,” *Jacobin* 6/15/2016. url: <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/06/verizon-strike-wireless-contract-union-cwa-ibew>.

would then have to impose on society, against the resistance of capitalists. Strikes are one of the most important examples of those kinds of struggles.

Until workers seek the freedom that a socialist society might offer, and until they value those freedoms higher than most anything else, there can be no socialism. It is therefore undeniably good that workers strike and, more than that, that they demand of each other that they go on strike for the sake of winning their freedom by their own efforts. In concluding, I want to consider two final objections to the case for self-emancipation and strikes.

OBJECTION 1: DOMINATION, POWER, AND INFEASIBILITY

The first objection is that self-emancipation is impossible. The oppression that socialists condemn is too overwhelming. That thought is potentially present in characterizing capitalism as a form of impersonal or structural domination.²⁵ How can we view capitalism as systematically denying workers liberty through forms of impersonal or structural domination, while remaining committed to the possibility that workers could emancipate themselves from those constraints?

There is a long answer to this question, but for the sake of this essay a shorter answer suffices. The aforementioned analyses of domination have a tendency to overstate the nature of the domination and to miss the way in which workers are dominated only so long as they remain alienated from their own power. My view of the classical Marxist account of domination is that this dominating power is the workers' own collective power but in a form that they do not immediately recognize. That is why Marx uses the term alienation. Class domination appears as the imposition of the alien purposes of an impersonal or structural force by interchangeable agents. One employer is the same as another, because each employer translates the discipline of the market into the orders and commands of a particular manager in a particular workplace. The market is the organizing, social power—until and so long as workers do not attempt to take control of that organization. Workers cannot know, in some theoretical sense, that this dominating power is their own. They have to discover that the operative power in the economy is the form their collective power takes when not yet under their control. But how can they know that power if the economy is not organized to make it present to them as such?

The answer is a further argument for self-emancipatory struggle. Those struggles in which workers come to an awareness of their power, of a power they can only exercise collectively, are moments in which they discover a new scope for action

25. The debate about what this domination entails, in what sense it is 'impersonal' or 'structural', and just how constraining this domination is, lies outside the scope of this paper. For some prevailing Marxian and fellow-traveling accounts of domination, see Roberts (2018, 78–100); Postone (1993); Gourevitch (2013). The argument in this paper applies only to whichever of those theories are validly interpreted as implying or explicitly stating that the impersonal or structural domination of the market is in some sense beyond the control of workers "regardless of how workers are organized."

they had not known before—they could not know before until they actually did it. Strikes can be those kinds of experiences. They are moments when workers lay claim to the power they have, not as individuals making labor contracts, but as members of a class whose work is necessary—and can only be effectively withheld if all do it together. Even smaller strikes bring with them the more revolutionary possibility that workers might refuse to work on a mass scale in order to make demands on society as a whole. There is no a priori reason why workers cannot impose themselves on society in this way—they have occasionally done so in the past. So the fact of oppression does not prove self-emancipation is impossible. If anything, the analysis of structural domination-as-alienation only takes us toward an additional argument *for* self-emancipation. Namely, workers must discover for themselves the power they have, but which they can only exercise together, with each other.

OBJECTION 2: VICTIM-BLAMING AND SELF-EMANCIPATION

The second concern someone might have is that the self-emancipation argument is victim-blaming. Saying it is up to the oppressed to emancipate themselves sounds like we are holding the oppressed responsible for their oppression. Why aren't the powerful—the capitalists, say—responsible for changing things? Shouldn't those who benefit from injustice be the most culpable, the ones most liable for rectifying injustice?²⁶ Or at least, why hold workers responsible for self-emancipation since they are the victims of oppression? Isn't it absurd to expect them to engage in a struggle when the costs of losing are huge, when the odds of success are low, and when they have so much less power to begin with?

These questions express understandable, but misguided, impulses. It is no doubt true that the current beneficiaries, who are also the most immediately powerful, are morally responsible for the wrong of capitalist unfreedom. But the capitalists are responsible in the sense of being liable for punishment and expropriation—in the sense of deserving to lose the power and the unfair advantages they enjoy through their control of the means of production. Who shall do the punishing? Here is where the question not of liability but of political responsibility appears. Throughout this essay, the point has been to say that the workers are politically responsible for transforming society, not that they should be blamed for the injustice of their condition. It is perfectly consistent to say that the oppression that workers face is wrong, while holding them politically responsible for emancipating themselves. The latter does not entail saying that workers *deserve* the unfreedom they are nonetheless responsible for transforming.

Moreover, the victim-blaming objection faces its own problems. If oppressed workers are *not* responsible for their own freedom, because they are victims—rendered so powerless by their condition that they cannot emancipate themselves—

26. This is, in a complicated way, the theory of responsibility operating in Iris Marion Young's important, but I think misdirected, work on responsibility (Young 2006).

then who *is* responsible? Seeing workers as victims invites a wholly different, paternalistic politics that is a poor foundation for socialism. Socialism now looks like it is based not on the capacities of workers to act as self-governing, democratic agents but rather springs from a concern for their helplessness and incapacity. This turns socialist politics into an extension of the will of the already powerful, who act on workers' behalf. And, above all, it is based on a misunderstanding of where power lies in a capitalist society. Capitalists do *not* have the determining power because capitalists cannot create socialist institutions—they cannot transform workers into a self-governing collective demanding and exercising freedom. Only workers have that power, if and when they organize themselves into a collective social force able to impose their will on society. But they can only do that self-organizing if they hold themselves to be political agents capable of managing their lives for themselves, rather than helpless victims.

None of this is to deny that self-emancipation is a demanding ideal. The ideal of self-emancipation is the source both of great inspiration and of enormous pressure. The defense of worker self-emancipation comes from a deep and abiding belief in the capacity of workers to act collectively to transform their own societies. Despite their oppression, workers have to emancipate themselves, and nobody else can do it for them. It is good when, that, and if they do it. When workers hold each other to an obligation to struggle—to engage in strikes and similar acts—they are right to do so.

Not all versions of socialism are committed to the ideal of self-emancipation. What I have developed here is a partisan conception of socialist, or more broadly left-wing, political theory. But this emancipatory ideal is the best of socialist political theory and gives us the best account of why, when, and how socialists should defend strikes.

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