Response to 'Developing a Marxist approach to the struggle against patriarchy in SA'

Pat Horn assesses the SACP initiative (see AC 173), arguing that workers in the informal economy must be included in the broader working class

'Developing a Marxist approach to the struggle against patriarchy in SA' is a welcome breath of fresh air, tackling as it does two of the most vexed issues for Marxist theory today: (a) patriarchy and how we should understand and analyse gender relations, and (b) the "second economy" about which we are hearing a lot these days in South African policy documents.

Patriarchy and the class analysis of gender dynamics

The paper argues that the 1998 SACP position of giving more attention to reproductive labour as the locus of the "intersection between class and gender oppression" needs clearer conceptualisation. The reader takes this to refer to reproductive labour based specifically on patriarchal household relations, such as the various forms of unpaid work which women are routinely expected to perform in the household or extended family, understood to form the basis of the gender oppression which operates side-by-side with the exploitation of the productive labour of the working class in the capitalist system.

From this basis, then, it would make sense to start looking at some of the forms of vulnerable work which are the overwhelming preserve of women, such as home-based production, seasonal farm work, domestic work, etc – as well as the feminisation of various forms of low-paid productive labour in the 20th and 21st centuries – to examine how the exploitation of the unpaid labour of women in the patriarchal household gets to extend to the domain of productive labour. The class analysis of the gender basis of this kind of "women's work" cannot be put down simply to the relationship between patriarchy and CST (Colonialism of a Special Type), or the relationship between patriarchy and slavery in the Cape, because the class and gender characteristics of this kind of labour are shared throughout the world as globalisation increasingly blurs the differences between the national characteristics of both productive and reproductive labour.

The world of work as we see it evolving today under global capitalism is such that our class analysis must necessarily take on a global character. What we see is a substantial blurring of the distinction between the productive labour performed by women and their reproductive labour – resulting in common scenarios where the main difference between "women's work" and "men's work" is not in its reproductive character, but in the fact that "women's work" is that which has come to have a

lesser value, and is therefore paid at a lower rate and comes with less social security and employment security. It is certainly the case that reproductive labour, starting from the unpaid, has a lower social value than productive labour – so domestic work, being reproductive labour for a wage, performed by women in somebody else's home, is also not valued particularly highly on the labour market. And farm labour, the production of food whether it is for the domestic market or for the export market, can possibly also be characterised to some extent as reproductive labour, even when it is performed for a wage. It also commands lower wages, even though the more insecure forms of farm labour done mainly by women (such as seasonal labour) are not more reproductive in nature than the more secure farm jobs done more by men. However, the patriarchal social relations in a capitalist society permeate not only the reproductive realm, but also the capitalist workplace. In a patriarchal capitalist society it is still easier to get away with attributing a lower value to the work done by women. For example, in the paper and wood industry, we see the highly-paid skilled technical work of operating big room-sized paper machines being dominated by men pressing buttons all day, while the low-paid heavy manual labour of lugging massive logs around in a rural saw mill is dominated by women. There is no reproductive basis to this division of labour, and it apparently contradicts the traditional notion that men are more suited to heavy manual labour because of their superior physical strength. A more plausible explanation is that the capitalist does not want to invest in the technical training to train women paper machine operators (because they regard women's primary function as reproductive and therefore training them as a bad investment) but when women offer their labour for jobs requiring minimal skills training, no matter how manually heavy, and there is the added bonus that they are often willing (through lack of alternatives) to perform this work for even less than their male counterparts – then they are happy to use the cheap productive labour of women.

The question is: why are women willing to work for lower wages than men in patriarchal capitalist societies? This is an international phenomenon, epitomised in a seminal finding in some United National study 15 – 20 years ago that "two-thirds of the world's work is done by women, 10% of the world's income is earned by women and 1% of the world's property is owned by women". Basically, in the majority of cases, working class women take primary responsibility for the welfare and maintenance of their households, i.e. their reproductive function in the capitalist society, and despite not having been trained for the capitalist labour market in most cases, have to therefore settle for whatever under-valued productive work they can find in today's capitalist world of unemployment and under-employment, to fulfil their reproductive obligations in the household. It is therefore the social reproductive role assigned to women in the patriarchal society – and not merely the reproductive labour which they perform in the household or even the workplace – which forms the basis of the mix of class and gender oppression which characterises modern global capitalism.

This social reproductive role is not only assigned to women by the bourgeoisie or the capitalist owners of the means of production, but even in working class communities, when women have been known

to be assigned to a (low-paid or unpaid, and definitely undervalued) "community care" role for the aged, the disabled, the mentally ill, etc. Community alternatives to bureaucratic institutions for these forms of social reproduction, because of the patriarchal relationships embedded in those very communities, then become as much an agent of the gender oppression in the working class as the capitalist employer.

Class position of workers in the informal economy

Globalisation has led to continuing changes in labour markets internationally. Traditional wage labour has given way to a number of forms of "a-typical", precarious, vulnerable and other informalised labour. The informalised labour force works under conditions which resemble those of the more traditional types of informal work, such as petty commodity trading and production.[1] As Marxists, it is incumbent upon us to incorporate the changing nature of the working class as a consequence of these changes in the global labour markets in our class analysis. It is not appropriate to simply dismiss all informal workers as members of the lumpen-proletariat. This would have very disastrous implications for the future of class struggle as the global labour force continues to become increasingly "a-typical" – and in countries such as India (where 92% of the labour force is in the informal economy) and more than half of the countries on the African continent, it would imply that class struggle is not a revolutionary possibility. This is unnecessarily pessimistic.

While recognising the higher incidence of what has been described as "lumpen-patriarchy" in the informal economy and in informal settlements where they thrive in an unregulated environment of informality, it is really most unfortunate to lump the larger number of honest working people in the informal economy together with these elements. On the contrary, in most cases they are their most vulnerable victims.

The challenge facing Marxist analysis today is to try to understand the class relations which exist within the informal economy – which consists of workers (both workers working for some sort of wage rate, however irregular, as well as own-account workers, including home-based producers, street vendors, waste-collectors, etc.) and also entrepreneurs and employers (including labour-brokers and intermediaries).

The question which faces us is how to identify the workers in the informal economy. It is not quite as straightforward as in the formal economy where workers are those who sell their labour power directly to the capitalists. However, in considering the range of employment and labour relationships which exist in the informal economy, it is possible to identify an element of *economic dependence* (albeit not necessarily dependence upon a party identified as an employer – particularly in the case of own-account workers) of certain informal economy operators on other actors, such as local authorities, suppliers, owners of property or assets used by them to perform their work, enforcement agents of public policies and laws, even protection racketeers (to enter into the terrain which has been identified as "lumpen-patriarchy" in the document) just to be able to carry out their livelihood activities. It is suggested

1. See description of different kinds of work in the informal economy in "Conclusions on Decent Work and the Informal Economy" adopted at the 92nd session of the International Labour Conference of the ILO in June 2002 http://www.ilo.org/public/english/standards/relm/ilc/ilc90/pdf/pr-25res.pdf

that, in the case of workers in the informal economy, it is this element of *economic dependence* (which can include an employment relationship) which defines the status of *workers* (as opposed to entrepreneurs) in the informal economy.

If we accept this, then our revolutionary task is to develop a clearer analysis of the relations of economic dependence which continue to oppress the workers in the informal economy and keep the majority of them (particularly the women) trapped in poverty.

What is the "Second economy"?

While the concept of the informal economy has internationally-accepted meaning,[2] the "second economy" is apparently a creation of the South African government. Not only that, but it has a different meaning for different people – even in South Africa. For some, it is simply a synonym for the informal economy. For others, it means the unemployed youth. For others, it means the lumpen-proletariat. For others, it is some sort of collective term for any groups or stakeholders marginalised in different ways by mainstream society. This lack of consistency or common understanding is not helpful in tackling the problems of policy-making, service-delivery or job-creation in relation to the "second economy". There may be good tactical reasons for engaging in dialogue with the government about the "second economy" because of the fact that the term has now entered into the language of South African policy documents – but as Marxists we need to always be clear exactly who we are talking about when we use this language, and how we analyse the class position of these different groups of people vaguely lumped into the "second economy" in policy language.

In global class terms, talking about the "second economy" is a non-starter.

CST in current context

As a Marxist who was never sold on the CST framework of analysis even during the Apartheid years, I am clearly not the best person to pronounce on its relevance in the post-Apartheid South Africa. But it really seems to be stretching things to try to use it to analyse the current context.

The notion that CST is a useful analytical tool for "modernising duality" is not persuasive. In fact, I would argue that it is unnecessary to try to find any sort of justification for notions of duality – which are mostly flawed in any event. The ILO Conclusions on Decent Work in the Informal Economy[3] (while not being a Marxist document) provide a perfectly clear and persuasive picture of a unitary economy and labour market in which there are well-developed backward and forward linkages between formal and informal elements/aspects – operating generally (and specifically at national level) to the advantage of the neo-liberal global capitalist order. This document represents an international consensus of social partners in the context of the United Nations system of which the ILO is part – and there does not appear to be any good reason not to use its unitary conceptual framework instead of trying to invent a more persuasive dualist analysis.

Implication for class struggles – What is to be done?

Having argued for the incorporation of workers in the informal economy as part of the changing global labour market and therefore an integral part of the wider working class, and for a clear analysis of the systematic undervaluation of both the

2. Ibid
3. Ibid

productive and reproductive work most commonly performed by women to inform our understanding of gender oppression in the capitalist system, what does this mean for class struggles?

If we accept that informal economy workers are part of the working class, this means that our revolutionary task is to organise them in alliance with the traditionally organised working class. If we regard them merely as the marginalised poor or the lumpen-proletariat, then we treat them at best as "welfare cases" and victims of the capitalist neo-liberal world order, or at worst as potential enemies of the working class.

There are enough instances around the world where workers in the informal economy have started to organise themselves (mainly in developing countries)[4] to demonstrate that workers in the informal economy are perfectly capable of organising themselves as workers and engaging in collective struggles for their rights. In Guinea, West Africa, workers in the informal economy played a pivotal role in a protracted general strike which finally saw the capitulation of the State to the demand of the masses for the sacking of the Prime Minister in the first quarter of 2007. It is widely acknowledged that the workers in the formal economy would not have been able to secure this outcome without the active participation of those in the informal economy.

Many developing countries, like Guinea, which have more than 50% of their labour force in the informal economy, have no prospect of succeeding in any mass struggles without the participation of that majority who are in the informal economy. Even in South Africa, where 30 – 40% of the labour force are in the informal economy (even though the contribution of the informal economy to the GDP is only 8 – 12%) mass struggles could be significantly strengthened by more seriously incorporating the workers in the informal economy. This does not mean asking those in the informal economy just to support the actions of the formal workers against their employers. It means including the demands of informal economy workers in joint platforms, and then engaging together in the ensuing collective working class struggles. One such joint campaign (initiated by the street vendors' sector of the informal economy) is the World Class Cities for All campaign for the inclusion of the urban poor in the preparations for the FIFA World Cup in 2010. ★

Pat Horn is an SACP activist and international Coordination of StreetNet International

4. www.streetnet.org.za, www.sewa.org and linked websites