
One Nation

critisticuffs

Today, our country risks becoming two nations, with a million young people out of work, the gap between the richest and everyone else getting worse, and hard work not rewarded. My core belief is in leaving this country a better place than I found it, and that when people join together, we can overcome any odds. We did it during the second world war and we did it when rebuilding the country afterwards. That is the spirit Britain needs today.

One Nation, Ed Miliband

With the *One Nation* campaign — from which the above quote is taken — Labour is making its case to rule over us. In the campaign quote Ed Miliband sees that wages are so low, unemployment is so high and inequality so extreme that he fears for the unity of British society. He recognises the problems with poverty that those he addresses are facing and thus asks everyone to stick together as a nation to overcome these and any odds. At the same time, though, he touches on everything we need to know in order to come to a rather different conclusion.

1 “with a million young people out of work”

We cannot find anything wrong with being out of work. If all the required work is done, why do we not get to relax and enjoy life? On the other hand, if there is work to be done because something is lacking, why can we not just produce it, given that we are idle?

In the world we live in, these questions seem naïve. The relationship between work and wealth is somewhat troubled in the society Ed Miliband would like to be Prime Minister of. People being out of work does not mean that all useful things are readily available, that there simply is nothing left to do. Instead, those out of work are poor, i.e. they do not have what they want and need. The first thing to note is that these poor people live in a society where there is an abundance of stuff for those who can afford it, i.e. their problem is not a lack of material wealth in society.

Under the current social conditions unemployed people cannot just produce what they need. They lack the means to produce what they need, if they detect a shortcoming they cannot simply — alone or collectively with others — go about fixing it. They are excluded from the *means of production*. These means are in the hands of companies which decide based on their own calculations whether they employ workers and under what conditions. Those out of work are simply not useful for the purposes pursued by companies.

2 “the gap between the richest and everyone else getting worse”

The purpose pursued by those who control the material conditions of production and therewith command the labour of those who do not, is no secret either: getting richer. Companies are successful if they make profits.

They spend money on “inputs” such as workers to earn more by selling the “outputs”. The difference between the sum of what they pay their workers and other “inputs” such as machines and what they make by selling their products is their profit.

Whatever their industry, the success of a company depends on the poverty of its workers. The purpose of profit-making is not only indifferent towards the gap between rich and poor but produces it and is premised on it. Profit produces poverty because profit is the difference between what it costs to buy machinery and to hire workers on the one hand and for what their products sell on the other hand.¹ This means the exclusion of employees from the wealth produced in their companies is what constitutes profit. Secondly, it is premised on it because the exclusion of those people from the means of production and the products produced with these means makes them come to work. The reason unemployed people seek work is because this is the only way to extricate themselves from state-maintained poverty.

That gap which Ed Miliband notices getting worse is the consequence of a world where most people have no control over the conditions of their own reproduction and hence seek employment with those who do.

3 “hard work not rewarded”

Hence, Ed Miliband is wrong about “hard work not rewarded”. No work is ever done without some expectation of some sort of “reward”. Work is an activity to produce a product. That is, the purpose of labour is not the activity itself — as it is with, say, a hobby — but to produce a particular result: food, shelter, *Star Wars: A New Hope*, profit etc. The products change based on social conditions. You may think highly or little of them, what does not change, though, is that labour is done for some purpose. In any society, if you want food, you need to cook it. In this society, if you need labour to grow your capitalist business, you need to set it in motion, you need to make your workers work. Hard work in this society is indeed rewarding when it realises its intended purpose: profit. It just is not very rewarding for those doing it.

In fact, no “hard work”, or any work performed for a capitalist company, is ever “rewarded”. The wage is not a reward or recognition for a worker’s contribution but simply the lever necessary to convince people to work for a purpose which is not theirs. This lever is as high and low as companies can get away with in the universal competition of workers for jobs (and a lot less often: companies for workers).² The wage is the reason why people come to work, they work to earn a living, but the observed unsatisfactory discrepancy between work and reward, i.e. wage, points to the fact that *their* reasons to work are not the *effective* reasons why labour is put in motion in this society.

¹ That this whole exercise does not imply “unfair trade” but instead works perfectly well with “fair trade” being the norm is something Marx explained very well in *Capital*. A book which we wholeheartedly recommend.

² See <http://antinational.org/en/wage-and-profit-rate> for how the wage functions as a means for profit.

4 “our country risks becoming two nations”

That people toil for a purpose which presupposes and reproduces their poverty, however, is not what Ed Miliband means when he criticises the poverty of his constituency. He and the rest of his party have no intention to get rid of such conditions.³ His problem is not the strange relationship between labour and wealth that exists in capitalist societies but that the wealth gap between the two might become so large that it might threaten the unity of British society.

There are those who work hard, not for their own benefit but for the accumulation of wealth from which they are excluded — one nation! There are those whose ability to labour is not useful to this purpose which is why they are condemned to state-maintained poverty — one nation! The success of companies is based on the poverty of their employees — one nation! Workers and employers — one nation! The Labour Party has no problem with people toiling away for a purpose that is objectively hostile towards their needs. Ed Miliband just fears the whole operation might be undermined, if it is not carefully moderated.

When Labour asks people “to join together” to overcome “any odds” and reminds us of the successful sacrifices in World War II and afterwards, it asks employed and unemployed workers to ignore that their labour serves an antagonistic purpose. Instead, they ought to adopt the “spirit” that sacrifice for Britain is for them, that in some way and at the end of the day their labour serves their own purposes, a claim denied by the poverty (“the gap between the richest and everyone else getting worse”) of those in (“hard work not being rewarded”) and out of work (“with a million young people out of work”).⁴

Ed Miliband makes no promise but to “leave the country better than he found it” by putting a million young people to work for the purposes of capital. He expresses quite openly that his project is directed against those he encourages to campaign for him ... if only people would listen to politicians more, they could learn so much.

³ With its appreciation of these conditions the Labour party does not stand alone. Any other party which is more or less seriously competing for power in the next general election — Tories, Liberal Democrats, UKIP, Greens — agrees with it. This is no accident. Those who want to rule over a capitalist society — perhaps even in order to alleviate its ill perceived effects — will find that they have to obey its principles, which is why a strong capitalist state is not a means to rein in capital and to abolish poverty. For example, those who aim to spend the state’s taxes on poor people must take an interest in the success of those making the profits from which these taxes levied. However, this is a topic for another text, as the question of what a government could or could not do presupposes that there is someone who actually objects to the status quo.

⁴ That many workers share this idealisation of the capitalist mode of production as an harmonic division of labour — if it wasn’t for a few black sheep — and that this idealisation has its material basis in the dependency of workers on a hostile environment which they treat as their means, does not speak for Ed Miliband’s idealisation but against these material conditions.