

# Why class still matters: a reply to Paul Mason

May 4, 2018



*This article is a response to Paul Mason's recent essay 'Labour must become the party of people who want to change the world, not just Britain', in which he argues that there can no longer be any privileged position for organised labour as an agent of socialist change. This reply will respond to that question specifically, leaving aside some other aspects of Mason's essay, and argue that the working class remains the key strategic actor for overhauling capitalism.*

## **The post-class left**

Paul Mason's 2007 book 'Live Working Or Die Fighting: How The Working Class Went Global' described how advanced capitalism had globalised capitalist class relations. The process has been recent, and spectacular. An internationalised proletariat has only recently become the world's biggest single class; there are more wage workers in South Korea now than there were in the entire world when Marx and Engels wrote the 'Communist Manifesto'. Vast new working classes have been created in Brazil, India, Mexico, Nigeria, Bangladesh, and elsewhere. Objectively, the material potential for socialism as a politics of working-class self-emancipation, based on workers organised as workers at the site of production, exists on an unprecedented scale.

But the Paul Mason of 2018 faces in a quite different direction to the Paul Mason of 2007. He is now one of the figureheads of what might be termed a new "post-class left", writers, commentators, and activists who no longer believe in any privileged role for the working class as an agent of socialist change.

Mason argues that: "Networked technology, combined with high levels of education and personal freedom have created a new historical subject across most countries and cultures which will supplant the industrial working class in the progressive project." What has caused Mason to give up on the idea of the centrality of class? The proletariat, it seems, has let him down. "It persistently refused to play the role of capitalism's gravedigger", he complains.

Some facts appear to lend weight to Mason's argument. While new and powerful labour movements have emerged around the world, on the whole labour is weak and on the defensive. It is certainly the case that the past generation has been characterised by defeat and decline for organised labour in Britain. The trade union movement is now half the size it was at its 1979 peak, with vastly fewer elected workplace reps and shop stewards. In 2016, strike levels were at their lowest since records began. In 2017, after a period of stagnation, trade union membership fell. Recent high-profile national disputes - my own union's fight against the imposition of "Driver Only Operation" on the mainline railway, or university workers' strikes against pension cuts - are very much exceptions rather than a rule.

Do those sobering and disappointing statistics speak to an objective change? Is the organised working class disappearing from the historical stage as a distinct actor? What the statistics in fact reflect is working-class *defeat*, not changes in the structural position of labour under capitalism.

That defeat is not eternal, or insurmountable. Mason and the rest of the post-class left have extrapolated erroneous claims of objective changes from those subjective realities of those defeats. Rather than attempting to challenge and overcome them, they have assimilated them into their worldview. Mason describes what the French labour movement called “*la vie ouvrière*”, what has elsewhere been called the “union way of life”, as having been “vapourised”. A more accurate metaphor might be to say that it has been smashed. Not much more comforting, perhaps, but containing an implicit potential for rebuilding that Mason rejects.

The post-class left is not a new phenomenon. It is a political tradition with a long history, that reasserts itself in periods of retreat for organised labour. In 2017, Paul Mason won the inaugural Ellen Meiksins Wood Prize. Three decades previously, the Marxist theorist after whom the prize was named wrote ‘The Retreat From Class’, a superb polemic against those careering away from the idea of working-class agency in the direction of, amongst other things, liberal “social movement” politics. The new agents to whom Wood’s targets looked greatly resemble Mason’s “networked individuals”, including in the respect of being largely non-existent as a cohesive social element with any structural power within capitalist society.

Wood described the post-class socialists’ perspective like this:

*“The formation of a socialist movement is in principle independent of class, and a socialist politics can be constructed that is more or less autonomous from economic (class) conditions. This means two things in particular [...] A political force can be constituted and organised on the ideological and political planes, constructed out of various ‘popular’ elements which can be bound together and motivated by purely ideological and political means, irrespective of the class connections or oppositions among them. [...] The appropriate objectives of socialism are universal human goals which transcend class, rather than narrow material goals defined in terms of class interests. These objectives can be addressed, on the autonomous ideological and political planes, to various kinds of people, irrespective of their material class situations.”*

Wood was prescient. She could have been describing Paul Mason in 2018 directly. His incantational listing of movements such as the Arab Spring, Occupy, Scotland and Catalonia’s independence movements, demonstrations against Orban in Hungary and more besides are precisely an attempt to conjure a new agent “out of various ‘popular’ elements which can be bound together and motivated by purely ideological and political means, irrespective of the class connections or oppositions among them.”

It might be noted that the only one of those movements to come anywhere near to achieving any of its goals, the initial Egyptian revolution at the heart of the Arab Spring, did so precisely because of the unique role played by organised labour in huge industrial combines like the Mahalla Textile Company.

What is it that Mason claims gives his “new subject” its revolutionary potential? Neither the mere condition of being “connected” (connected to what? By what means?), nor that of being “educated” (by whom? On the basis of what ideology?) imbue structural power vis-à-vis capital. As Christian Fuchs put it in his critique of Mason’s 2015 book ‘Postcapitalism: A Guide to Our Future’:

*“Almost all managers, CEOs, and other members of the class of the 1% are ‘educated and connected’. They are the globalised, networked, educated, influential – and wealthy. Are the educated, connected and networked hedge fund manager and the educated,*

*connected and networked entrepreneur, who parks and hides his wealth in tax havens, part of this subject? Definitely not! Education, networking and connectedness are not automatically politically progressive.”*

Mason argues that our consumption power may give us leverage:

*“We are ‘pro-sumers’ in many different ways: our fashion choices create the value of global brands. In addition, huge new corporations have adopted business models based on harvesting the positive network effects of our online behaviour.”*

But what common, socially-cohesive, interests, do “pro-sumers” having their data harvested by tech corporations actually have, beyond perhaps a desire for more digital privacy? What structural power can people organised on this basis actually wield? Indeed, how can they even be organised, except perhaps as passive electoral supporters of a party that promises to represent their “values”? Maybe that is indeed Mason’s ultimate aspiration: there is more than a little evidence to suggest this may be the case. He is entitled to this view, but whatever else it is, it is not a strategy for “overhauling capitalism”.

What appears to underlie much of Mason’s wider perspective is a morass of theorisation that contends that capitalism itself has entered a new condition. Sometimes referred to as “information capitalism” and “cognitive capitalism”, the claim is that individualised cognitive labour, based on interface with digital systems, has replaced the collective production processes of “industrial” capitalism.

Certainly, information technology has changed the nature of a great deal of waged labour. But a dockworker who operates a semi-automated crane from a digital workstation is still engaged in an industrial process and in a wage relation. Combination and common organisation with other workers engaged in other aspects of that process – the workers on the ships, the workers driving the containers away from the port, the transport workers running the train networks serving the port – are still the means by which that worker, “cognitive” and technologised though their labour is, can confront their employer and affect change.

It is on that basis, of structural position within the social and economic infrastructure of capitalism, that Marxists have understood the working class as central to the socialist project. As Wood puts it:

*“Revolutionary socialism has traditionally placed the working class and its struggles at the heart of social transformation and the building of socialism, not simply as an act of faith but as a conclusion based upon a comprehensive analysis of social relations and power. In the first place, this conclusion is based on the historical/materialist principle which places the relations of production at the centre of social life and regards their exploitative character as the root of social and political oppression. The proposition that the working class is potentially the revolutionary class is not some metaphysical abstraction but an extension of these materialist principles, suggesting that, given the centrality of production and exploitation in human social life, and given the particular nature of production and exploitation in capitalist society, certain other propositions follow.”*

In other words, it is the position of labour in the machinery of capitalism that gives its unique power.

The wage relation is capitalism's essential core. It is in the workplace where capitalism most fundamentally "happens". Until the answer to the question "where does value come from under capitalism?" is something other than "human labour", organised labour will continue to have this unique potential, no matter how weak, beaten-down, or misled our organisations may be at any given moment.

For all his insistence that it must be supplanted as the agent of socialist change, Mason makes little attempt to account for what has actually happened to the working class, or where he alleges it has gone.

"The bargaining power of the individual worker is weakened by globalisation" he says, without making any attempt to substantiate this. Globalised production process and supply chains in fact provide the potential for a greatly increased bargaining power: what is lacking is a subjective element, an organisation of workers across the supply chain that can take collective and coordinated action.

In many ways, Mason's use of the word "industrial" is misleading. The types of work traditionally associated with this word, such as mining and heavy manufacturing, have certainly declined in Britain. But firstly, that is not the case globally. Read against the backdrop of miners' strikes in South Africa or factory workers' revolts in China, Mason's present thesis seems parochially Anglocentric, even on its own terms.

And secondly, it is not the "industrial working class", or any other section or subset, that Marxists posit as the key agent of change, but simply the working class as a whole: all those live by selling their labour power, and the social collective around them. Yes, certain industries, such as transport, logistics, and telecommunications, may have more strategic significance within capitalist economic functioning than others. But it is neither the case that workers outside these strategic industries are powerless, nor that the strategic industries themselves have disappeared.

Kim Moody's new book 'On New Terrain' examines a generation of change in the American working class, and concludes that far from causing it to disappear as a strategic anti-capitalist actor, many of the changes (for example, the creation of vast logistics hubs and distribution networks) provide a renewed potential to build working-class organisation and power. Again, it is the subjective element of working-class organisation and resistance that is missing, rather than objective changes to the way in which work is structured under capitalism having rendered organised, or potentially organised, labour powerless.

At its height, the great 1984/85 miners' strike involved less than 150,000 workers. Around 20 times that number, close to 3 million, work in the supermarket industry today. This is not a picture of a disappearing proletariat. Many of those 3 million retail workers may not have the same direct leverage in terms of the immediate strategic significance of their labour to the economy as coal miners did, but collectively, their labour is of huge strategic significance.

Imagine a union organised across the retail sector, organising shop workers, warehouse and distribution workers, and drivers. A strike by such a union would have an immense economic and social impact. Many of those workers might, according to some of Mason's categories, also be "networked individuals", in the sense of being connected by their common usage of various social media platforms, for example. Many are young. Many are migrants. All of these conditions and identities are important, but it is their position as workers, and their involvement in the production process and a wage relation, that fundamentally coheres them and gives them socially-transformative power.

Mason also cites “precarious work” and “a culture of individualism that would have been obnoxious even to the dockers of Limehouse fighting over halfpennies on the streets in 1889” as factors that have destroyed the working class’s power to affect socialist change. Neoliberalism has indeed had ideological and cultural impacts (the “culture of individualism” Mason refers to), but there is something of imaginary-golden-age reminiscence about his Limehouse dockers “fighting over halfpennies on the streets”. In any case, those dockers were no strangers to precarious work. Indeed, the organisation of employment on the docks were heavily based in precarious hiring practises and zero-hour contracts. Far from being a uniquely new development, “precarity” has been a feature of capitalism, since its inception.

### **New Unionism, and a new New Unionism?**

Mason’s article makes much of the period of “New Unionism” in the 1880s, a moment of immense upheaval and recomposition for the labour movement in Britain. This is indeed a useful focus. Where was the organised working class movement prior to this period? Weak, bureaucratised, divided in conservative and exclusionary unions based on craft, and still reeling from the defeat of Chartism, the great movement for working-class democracy, a generation previously.

But, as Mason’s article and history records, organised labour revived. That revival did not happen by mere collision of historical forces but because conscious, organised actors within the working class undertook political and educational work to develop an approach that could catalyse struggles, spread them, and help them win.

Mason refers to Eleanor Marx telling a crowd in Hyde Park: “enough of strikes, fight for socialism and the eight hour day”. But this is a gross misrepresentation of Marx’s role in the period. She taught Will Thorne, a gas worker in Beckton and a key strike leader and founder of the ancestor union of today’s GMB, to read. She helped found that union’s women workers’ section, and sat on its executive committee. She spoke repeatedly at rallies for the dockers and other strikers. The role of Marx in New Unionism was absolutely not, as Mason alleges, as a carrier of “the left wing orthodoxy of the previous century”. Indeed, while Marx, Thorne, Tom Mann, and other New Unionist leaders were members of the Social Democratic Federation, Britain’s first organised Marxist group, their political activity as SDF members and their industrial organising were largely separate, and the SDF as a whole tended to take a sectarian attitude to the reviving labour movement. Their roles in New Unionism were precisely to break from orthodoxy and inertia, to find an opportunity to light a fire, and to help it spread.

The potential for labour movement renewal and recomposition today, a new New Unionism, lies precisely in the struggles of the modern analogues of the workers who made the 1880s movement: the precariously-employed, often migrant, often women, often young workers largely on the margins of the existing, bureaucratic unions, whose self-organisation and activity exploded the inertia.

Fast food workers in the Bakers’ union and cinema workers in the Bectu section of Prospect taking on multinational corporate giants in McDonald’s and Cineworld; restaurant workers in Unite; outsourced migrant cleaners in small unions like IWGB, CAIWU, and UVW, as well as in established unions like RMT, fighting for living wages and direct employment; “gig economy” workers exploding the myth that superficially atomising employment practises have robbed them of power and leverage; and politically-disparate but expanding attempts to consider how workers in the immensely strategically-significant logistics and distribution industries can organise. These are sparks that can be fanned into a conflagration if the workers within them, supported by organised socialist activists in the wider labour movement acting as the “memory of the class” and providing a repository of previous struggles, victories, and defeats, undertake the same conscious efforts that Marx, Mann, Thorne, and others took in their day.

## **The Corbyn surge and the return to class: how to transform the labour movement?**

The immediate backdrop for Mason's essay is the Corbyn phenomenon in the Labour Party. Still immensely febrile and in flux, this movement has seen hundreds of thousands of people, many of them young, flood into the Labour Party, inspired by a sharp break from Blairite orthodoxy on many policies. The movement has the potential to radically transform the party, making it more democratic, rooted in working-class communities, and a catalyst, supporter, and political representative of working-class social and industrial struggle.

In this sense, Mason is right to aspire to a party that is both itself a social movement and part of a wider social movement. But to overthrow or even meaningfully confront capitalism, that social movement needs deep roots in capitalism's engine room: the workplace. A return to class on this basis can move past the psephological triangulations between the perceived wants and desires of "metropolitan", socially-liberal workers and youth on the one hand, and those of ex-"industrial", socially-conservative workers in the north and Midlands on the other. A democratically and politically transformed Labour Party could seek to organise, represent, and empower both groups on the basis of a shared class interest.

The Corbyn surge is yet to find a real expression in the trade union movement. Even Unison's Dave Prentis, a notoriously bureaucratic and conservative leader, has managed to position himself as a Corbynite. What the situation requires is not a desperate casting around for a new agency, but a conscious effort to transform and revolutionise the existing labour movement.

In the first place, the young people energised by the Corbyn surge need to express that energy where they work. The US collective *Labor Notes'* Troublemaker's Handbook provides a basic manual for fighting back against the direct and immediate representative of capital in your own life: your boss. Socialists involved in the Labour Party should be seeking to adapt it for a British context, and run workshops on it through local Labour Parties and Momentum groups.

Trade union militants in Labour should be agitating for it to become the party of strikes. For the first time in generations, a genuine organic link can be made between the demands of strikes and Labour Party policy. Labour can say to striking McDonald's workers: we are the political expression of the demands of your strike. If we are in government, we will legislate to secure your demands. And, conversely, McDonald's workers seeking to politically bolster their industrial dispute can join and becoming active in Labour, not as passive electoral foot-soldiers but as conscious actors seeking to express their class interests on the political terrain.

Within unions, the dynamic energy of the Corbyn surge can be a force for democratic renewal, just as it has the potential to be within the party. The tradition of independent rank-and-file organisation and insurgency is largely submerged in the British labour movement, but it is one that may soon be rediscovered by, for example, University and College Union (UCU) members organising to build a counter-power in their union against a capitulatory leadership. UCU is not a Labour-affiliated union, but many of the activists leading the new rank-and-file initiative are broadly situated within the milieu of the Corbyn surge. Many of them, no doubt, would also fall into Mason's category of "educated, young, networked people", but like the skilled cognitive dockworker operating computer systems in a container port, it is their position as workers, and their involvement in transformative struggle within class organisations, that gives them their power.

In this way, there can be a symbiotic relationship between the radical transformation of both the political and industrial wings of the labour movement. This will be a prerequisite for consolidating and defending, even on its own moderate social-democratic terms, the Corbyn project in government. If a Corbyn-led Labour government attempts to legislate for a £10/hour universal living

wage for example, and rogue employers simply refuse to cough up the increase, how else will that policy be enforced other than by those employers' workers leveraging their own class power and striking to enforce it? That level of militancy and organisation can be achieved if socialists active in the Labour Party and the unions develop a perspective of building for it right now.

There are other voices in the Labour milieu advocating what might present itself as a "return to class". But refocusing on class on the basis of seeking a radical transformation and renewal of the labour movement is quite distinct from the perspective advocated by, for example, the Blue Labour tendency. This ostensible return to class is in fact a form of nostalgic identity politics, with class conceived of as a category of cultural identity, often figured in deeply socially-conservative terms - see Blue Labour's use of the slogan "faith, family, and flag" - rather than a collective social relation.

The working class has never really resembled the picture painted by both Stalinists and Blairite "authentocrats" like Stephen Kinnock, centred on an archetypal male, white, essentialised worker, in a manual industrial job, part of a "stable community". That was not the working class of New Unionism; it is not the working class of today. Our class comprises migrant workers, women workers, LGBT workers, benefit claimants and the unemployed, and women engaged in unpaid domestic labour. A revitalised and transformed labour movement must become the organised expression of our class as a whole.

### **Horizons beyond electoralism**

Accompanying, and informing, Mason's retreat from class is an unacknowledged but massive contraction of his political horizons.

Despite his selective quotations from (Karl) Marx, and despite stating in the introduction to his essay that he wants to "overhaul" capitalism, he now argues that "the ultimate, and most revolutionary form of political action that can be taken amid a neoliberal system in crisis is to put a party into government committed to the positive goals and values of "educated, young, networked people", etc.

Wood answered him in 1986:

*"In the final analysis, the theoretical and political touchstone for the NTS ["New True Socialists", Wood's tag for the post-class left of her day] is not socialism at all, but simply electoral victory. Once we understand that the logic of their argument is an electoralist logic, once we accept that their standards of success and failure have little to do with the conditions for establishing socialism and everything to do with constructing victorious electoral alliances [...] it will at least make some kind of political sense."*

This is not to dismiss the importance of electoral activity, or organisation on the political terrain. Marx and Engels's identification of three fronts of class struggle - ideological (or theoretical), political, and economic - remains a vital frame, and the socialist movement must be actively organised and intervening on all three. Electing a Labour government and shaping, pushing, and radicalising its policies via pressure from below, including extra-parliamentary action, should be a key aim. But it is only by reconnecting with class, the structuring relationship at the core of capitalism, that this electoral horizon can be expanded into a horizon of revolutionary anti-capitalist counter-power.

Mason has retreated from class into the diminished horizons of electoralism, confecting a substitute agent for the project that is part radical-sociological woo-woo (tip: another word for "member of the 'salarariat'" is... "worker") and part psephological fantasy. It is a defeatist recoiling from a situation of

weakness, masquerading as innovation. Contrary to its own claims, it does not develop Marxist politics, but gives up on them.

Our task is to rebuild class power, not to pretend it no longer matters. The socialist project does not need to move beyond class, but return to it. This is not a matter of millennial faith in a historical mission, but of renewing our political resolve and undertaking an act of will to help our class unlock its potential. As Hal Draper, the great writer of the unorthodox-Trotskyist American left, put it in his 1950s article 'Why The Working Class?':

*"The socialist revolution, once observed Rosa Luxemburg, is a war in which there are necessarily a continuous series of 'defeats' followed by only one victory. Nothing can be guaranteed, of course, except the honor and dignity of fighting for a new and better world, rather than the vileness of adapting one's mind and heart to a vile one."*

Young activists eager to forge from today's febrile political moment a movement that can overhaul capitalism and replace it with socialism - radical democracy, common ownership, and social freedom - would do better to take their strategic advice from Hal Draper, Eleanor Marx, and Ellen Meiksins Wood than Paul Mason.

The Marxist project - working-class self-emancipation, and through it, the emancipation of all humanity - is as possible now as it ever was. What it requires is new activists to fight for it.

*Originally posted at [openDemocracy.net](http://openDemocracy.net).*