**Proletariat**

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The **proletariat** (from [Latin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Latin) *proletarius*, a citizen of the lowest class) is a term used to identify a lower [social class](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_class); a member of such a class is **proletarian**. Originally it was identified as those people who had no [wealth](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wealth) other than their sons. The term was initially used in a derogatory sense, until [Karl Marx](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karl_Marx) used it as a sociological term to refer to the [working class](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Working_class).

**Usage in Marxist theory**

A 1911 Industrial Worker publication advocating industrial unionism based on a critique of capitalism.

In [Marxist](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marxism) theory, the proletariat is the class of a [capitalist](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Capitalism) society which does not have ownership of the [means of production](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Means_of_production) and whose only means of subsistence is to sell their [labor power](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Labour_power) for a [wage](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wage) or [salary](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salary). Proletarians are wage-workers, while some refer to those who receive salaries as the *salariat*. For Marx, however, wage labor may involve getting a salary rather than a wage *per se*. Marxism sees the proletariat and [bourgeoisie](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bourgeoisie) (capitalist class) as occupying conflicting positions, since workers automatically wish their wages to be as high as possible, while owners and their proxies wish for wages (costs) to be as low as possible.

In Marxist theory, the borders between the proletariat and some layers of the [petite bourgeoisie](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Petite_bourgeoisie), who rely primarily but not exclusively on self-employment at an income no different from an ordinary wage or below it; and the [lumpen proletariat](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lumpen_proletariat), who are not in legal employment; are not necessarily well defined. Intermediate positions are possible, where some wage-labor for an employer combines with self-employment. While class belonging is often hard to determine in the case of each individual person, from the standpoint of society as a whole, taken in its movement (i.e. history), the class divisions are incontestable; the easiest proof of their existence is the class struggle - strikes, for instance. While an employee may be subjectively unsure of his class belonging, when his workmates come out on strike he is objectively forced to follow one class (his workmates, i.e. the proletariat) over the other (management, i.e. the bourgeoisie). Marx makes a clear distinction between proletariat as salaried workers, which he sees a progressive class, and Lumpenproletariat, "rag-proletariat", the poorest and outcasts of the society, such as beggars, tricksters, entertainers, buskers, criminals and prostitutes, which he considers a retrograde class. [Socialist](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socialism) parties have often struggled over the question of whether they should seek to organize and represent all the lower classes, or just the wage-earning proletariat.

According to Marxism, capitalism is a system based on the [exploitation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exploitation) of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie. This exploitation takes place as follows: the workers, who own no means of production of their own, must use the means of production that are property of others in order to produce, and, consequently, earn their living. Instead of hiring those means of production, they themselves get hired by capitalists and work for them, producing goods or services. These goods or services become the property of the capitalist, who sells them at the market.

One part of the wealth produced is used to pay the workers' wages (variable costs), another part to renew the means of production (constant costs) while the third part, [surplus value](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Surplus_value) is split between the capitalist's private takings (profit), and the money used to pay rents, taxes, interests, etc. Surplus value is the difference between the wealth that the proletariat produces through its work, and the wealth it consumes in order to survive and to provide labor to the capitalist companies. A part of the surplus value is used to renew or increase the means of production, either in quantity or quality (i.e., it is turned into [capital](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Capital_%28economics%29)), and is called capitalized surplus value. Other part is used for the consumption of capitalists.

The commodities that proletarians produce and capitalists sell, are valued for the amount of [labor](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Labour) embodied in them. The same goes for the workers' [labor power](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Labour_power) itself: it is valued, not for the amount of wealth it produces, but for the amount of labor necessary to produce and reproduce it. Thus the capitalists earn wealth from the labor of their employees, not as a function of their personal contribution to the productive process, which may even be null, but as a function of the juridical relation of property to the means of production. Marxists argue that new wealth is created through labor applied to natural resources.

Therefore, if someone gains wealth through the monopoly of means of production, then those who work to produce that wealth do not receive the full wealth created by their labor, nor do they have a say in the use of the wealth appropriated by the proprietors of means of production. Thus, Marxists argue that capitalists make a profit by exploiting the proletariat.

Marx argued that it was the goal of the proletariat to displace the capitalist system with socialism, changing the social relationships underpinning the class system and then developing into a [communist](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communism) society in which: "...the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all."

**Other usage**

[Arnold J. Toynbee](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arnold_J._Toynbee) uses the term "internal" and "external proletariat" in his monumental "[A Study of History](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Study_of_History)" to describe the groups within and external to the frontiers of the state, who during the time of troubles, the World Empire and the decay of a [civilization](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civilization), are progressively [disenfranchised](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Disenfranchise), and come to have little loyalty to the survival of that civilization.

**See also**

* [Bourgeosie](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bourgeosie)
* [Blue collar](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blue_collar)
* [Folk culture](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Folk_culture)
* [Laborer](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laborer)
* [Lower class](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lower_class)
* [Lumpenproletariat](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lumpenproletariat)
* [Patrician](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patrician_%28ancient_Rome%29)
* [Peasantry](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peasantry)
* [Plebs](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plebs)
* [Prole drift](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prole_drift)
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* [Proletarianization](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proletarianization)
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* [Slavery](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slavery)
* [Social Class](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_Class)
* [Working class](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Working_class)
* [Wage slavery](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wage_slavery)

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