

Socialism Doesn't Liberate Workers from Domination

Capitalism makes workers rich. But socialists worry about the ways in which capitalism affects workers' freedom. Here's Corey Robin defending socialism in the *New York Times*:

The socialist argument against capitalism isn't that it makes us poor. It's that it makes us unfree. When my well-being depends upon your whim, when the basic needs of life compel submission to the market and subjugation at work, we live not in freedom but in domination. Socialists want to end that domination: to establish freedom from rule by the boss, from the need to smile for the sake of a sale, from the obligation to sell for the sake of survival.

Writing in *Jacobin*, Ben Burgis argues that libertarians implausibly understand freedom as mere non-interference. In his view, a better understanding is one that affirms “that the kind of freedom that matters most is the freedom from arbitrary domination.” In Burgis's example, “the boss [who] tells you that you can't get a tattoo if you want to keep your job at his restaurant” subjects you to arbitrary domination and so makes you unfree.

What should we make of this objection? First, I'll emphasize that we shouldn't reject capitalism simply because it's flawed—we'd need good reason to believe that the proposed alternative will be *less* flawed. By analogy, it would be silly to bench Steph Curry on the grounds that he misses more 3 point shots than he makes. Why? Because every other shooter in the NBA is even worse! So the domination objection to capitalism should only move us toward socialism if socialism fares better. And it doesn't. If anything, workers are *more* likely to face domination under socialism than capitalism.

To start, imagine that Alice is living under capitalism and owns a restaurant. She has somewhat puritanical sensibilities and doesn't like the look of her employee Tate's new tattoo. However, she would suffer a significant material cost if she acted on her anti-tattoo bias and fired him—namely, the loss of a productive employee. So even though Alice doesn't like tattoos, she has an economic incentive to grit her teeth and keep Tate on board. Indeed, it's plausible for Becker-type reasons that if Alice *does* start making hiring and firing decisions on the basis of occupationally-irrelevant considerations like tattoos, she'll lose productive workers to competitors and see her business languish as a result. The system as a whole will punish arbitrariness even if a particular employer indulges in it.

Now suppose Alice is living in a socialist society that's characterized by democratically-run,

worker-controlled cooperatives. She still doesn't like tattoos and Tate—now her fellow worker-owner—still decides to get one. As an individual worker-owner in the cooperative, Alice can cast a vote to fire Tate. Notice that her material incentive to *not* indulge her anti-tattoo bias is much weaker in this scenario. Under capitalism, Alice's decision about Tate's employment is decisive—if she wants him fired, he's fired. Consequently, an arbitrary decision comes with a 100% chance of losing a high-productivity employee and taking money out of her own pocket.

However, under socialism, even if Tate is productive and firing him would make Alice worse off economically, it may still be rational for her to *vote* to fire him to express her distaste for tattoos. The vote, unlike the firing decision in the capitalist scenario, is not decisive—it comes with a much smaller chance of actually resulting in Tate's termination. Since there is a comparatively low chance that her vote to fire Tate will get him fired, the vote has a comparatively low material cost to Alice—making it more likely that she'll cast it. And the point holds for all of the other worker-owners, meaning this is a cooperative-wide problem. (It's true that Tate also gets a vote, but a single vote isn't much of a safeguard against domination.) While socialists claim that collectivization will liberate workers from the whims of their bosses, they tend to ignore how collectivization subjects workers to the whims of other workers. Indeed, worker-owners have stronger incentives than capitalist employers to make arbitrary decisions, so we should expect arbitrary decisions to be more prevalent under socialism than capitalism.

If you're still not convinced, consider that there are also plenty of ways to further mitigate domination within capitalism. We could (and should), for instance, deregulate the housing market and make it easier for workers to switch to a new job in a different city if their workplace takes a turn for the worse. We could even institutionalize a negative income tax to soften the blow of quitting your job. (These policies would also disincentivize workplace domination in the first place.) At most, then, the domination argument is an argument for reforming capitalism rather than shifting to socialism.

Lastly, we cannot move directly from the claim that it's wrong to subject someone to your arbitrary will to the claim that it should be *illegal* to subject someone to your arbitrary will. Suppose your siblings—whom you love dearly and to whom you are quite close—have terrible taste in music and announce that they'll permanently dissociate from you if you get a Limp Bizkit tattoo. You get the tattoo anyway and they make good on their threat, leaving you dejected and lonely. What your siblings did was awful, but lawful nevertheless. So if socialists want to use the domination objection in the service of conclusions about what our political institutions should look like, they have even more work to do.