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## Contribution to the debate on teleworking – An approach from Marxism

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Teleworking has come to the forefront of the labor reality due to the Covid-19 pandemic that forced the partial and temporary closure of economic activity in collective workplaces. Thus, teleworking went from 4.8% of the workforce before the pandemic, to 16.2% in the second quarter of 2020, to stand at the end of 2020 at 9.9%. With the third wave and the restrictions of the beginning of 2021, it rebounded again to 11.2%, to end up standing at 9.4% in mid-2021.



When taking a position on teleworking we have to define well which aspects have to do with the issue at hand and which do not, so as not to deviate from the point to be discussed.

Marxists welcome all technological developments, inventions and new forms of organization of work, which increase the dominion of the human being over nature, which have the capacity to shorten the process of work and make it less painful, and which help to prepare the best conditions for the establishment of a socialist economy and socialism itself.

The Internet is one of the most colossal inventions in human history, prepared by the entire long process of previous development. Its contribution to human development, in all its aspects (economic, cultural, communicational, etc.) does not need explanation. The same can be said of the computer development associated with it (computers, printers, etc.) and of the so-called smartphones (Smartphones). They show us a glimpse of the inexhaustible potential of human ingenuity and the possibilities that would entail an adequate use of them in a socialist society.

The possibility of telematic meetings is another huge advance to overcome the limitations of the physical distance between people and the old telephone system. It is a devastating blow to particularism and individualism in social and economic relations, and will play a decisive role in human cooperation, and in the establishment and implementation of a global economic planning plan, in forms of participation, debates and direct democracy at all levels, etc.

All this is clear, and although all this is a budget for teleworking, it has nothing to do with the debate we propose.

By definition, teleworking consists of developing a productive work from the worker's home, through telematic tools connected to the company for which you work. In reality, it is the outsourcing of a task, usually administrative, to the worker's house. It is a renewed form of home work, so widespread at the dawn of capitalism, normally governed by piecework. And it is no coincidence that more women (10%) than men (8.9%) telework in Spain. It largely involves old jobs with more flexible working hours and conditions, less qualified and therefore with lower wage costs for the company, which fall mostly on women.

We can distinguish two types of work in this modality. On the one hand, there are the routine, administrative tasks of low or medium qualification, mentioned in the previous paragraph, which represent the bulk of teleworking (administrative tasks, database work, customer service services and "Call Center" work, etc.) and highly qualified tasks, especially in the area of engineering, architecture, management, etc. that in general are characterized by isolated work or in small groups, and whose working conditions at home do not differ much from those that could be carried out in an office or engineering department of a company, with a staff that already enjoyed flexible working conditions in advance.

Teleworking is not a working method of universal application, it only affects processes that include computer equipment, especially computers, so that its impact is limited in the whole of production and in the working class. That is, it could never become the majority or dominant modality in the work processes.

Teleworking can be very useful for exceptional situations, such as the current pandemic, natural disasters, emergency situations of various kinds, etc. That is undeniable. We cannot be against teleworking under these conditions.

However, teleworking is a very powerful weapon in the hands of entrepreneurs to increase exploitation; that is, to extract surplus value above the average level, compared to the traditional working method in the office. We can identify the most regressive aspects of teleworking:

- 1.- Self-exploitation. Since the objective measure of the work process measured by time (6 hours, 8 hours, etc.) disappears, it is easy to impose piecework (work by production

objectives in a working day) and that we have always rejected as a matter of principle. We are in favour of measuring the wage for the necessary working time and with an average intensity. Piecework forces the worker to a greater intensity of work or to extend the normal working day to meet the objectives set for each day. This brings teleworking closer to the old home work studied by Marx in *Capital*, and which we mentioned earlier.



2.- Worsening of working conditions. Such would be the non-provision of adequate equipment at home guaranteed (ergonomic chairs, quality of the internet connection), or the saving of such equipment by the company so that the worker is forced to use and wear out his own equipment obtained with his salary; that is, the expense (wear) of the equipment that the company should assume is deducted from the salary. This is a decrease in real terms of the worker's wage and an increase in the extraction of surplus value.

It could be argued that the current law recently passed protects the worker for cases a) and b) but that is the theory, and in any case it could only be guaranteed, in principle, in large companies with strong union sections, not in others. In general, when the worker faces the company in isolation from his home, to make constant claims in the breaches that there were, he is more unguarded. It would be a permanent source of disputes and emotional exhaustion for the worker.

3.- The "voluntariness" of teleworking – as required, in principle, by law – is also in question. There are subtle ways to impose telework on the worker, whether he wants it or not; even if the law says it must be voluntary.

4.- Teleworking, reaching a point of extension, inevitably leads to salary reductions and the elimination of some of the company's social benefits. This is a logical conclusion in application of Marx's Law of Value-Labor. There have already been cases or proposals for salary reductions in cases where the old salary included a plus of travel to the workplace or dining aid, for example in Google,[1] and others. By not needing to travel or eat in the company's facilities, capital will necessarily try to adapt the salary to the new conditions, eliminating the bonuses that it considers superfluous. As Marx's law of labour-value explains, if the consumption of the worker's livelihood decreases in order to perform his work, that will inevitably be reflected in a decrease in the real wage, for this is nothing more than the sum of livelihoods necessary to keep the worker alive and in the conditions required to perform his task. We know that many workers save on travel and food expenses to get an extra return with the company's bonuses (carpooling, taking the sandwich from home, etc.). Now the case of the decrease or disappearance of these bonuses and, with it, the *extra* salary that the worker previously received is beginning to spread.

5.- We must bear in mind that teleworking does not arise spontaneously as a demand from below, but is driven by the employer with the sole purpose of saving costs: salaries, office rental, security service, etc. In itself, teleworking does not represent a greater productivity of the work that is done, except in what cost savings it means for the employer and in the increase in the exploitation of the labor that can be associated, as we explained before.

6.- And what about a work accident at home, without immediate medical equipment?

7.- Above all, teleworking has the worst effects on working women, who will suffer a double shift (salaried work and domestic work) without a solution of continuity, aggravated by simultaneous work with the so-called household chores, without disconnecting from each other, locked 24 hours in the walls of the home, increasing anxiety and physical and mental fatigue.

8.- A main aspect of the negative effects of teleworking is that it separates the worker from the production center and his colleagues; it atomizes the class, helps dilute their class consciousness. It breaks the labor and affective bond of the worker with his workplace, dilutes and cushions the worker-boss class conflict. The communist notion of the collective ownership of the enterprise is diminished in the consciousness of the worker by being physically separated from the collective center of production.

9.- It is true that, initially, teleworking had a majority support in all layers. It appeared as a novelty, broke with the suffocating routine of long hours and long travel times to the workplace, took place in a pleasant family environment, etc. Only through experience did it become clear to many workers, and especially to the women affected, the slavery and psychic exhaustion that this new way of working was beginning to represent. Above all, isolation and the loss of physical and social contact with their co-workers, a need that expresses the intrinsic need of the human being to interact physically with his peers.

10.- Even some companies began to notice a lower performance, the fatigue of telematic meetings, and the lack of what Marx called the emulation and stimulation of animal energies at work, through cooperative work. And what we are seeing is a gradual reversal in teleworking, although obviously this system will be established for a greater layer of workers than in the pre-pandemic past. A part of the companies will continue to use it to reduce costs and there are many workers, and particularly workers, who have no choice but to accept these new working conditions.

A study by Actiu, a labor relations company, published in *elcorreo.com*, revealed "that 56% of workers missed a greater relationship with colleagues and that 73% preferred to return to their office." Only 7% wanted to work solely from home. [2]



11.- It is true that teleworking finds greater support, in general, in the upper layer of technical and qualified workers; computer scientists, engineers, area managers,

accountants. But the "comfort" for this upper layer, with higher wages, better working conditions, and more flexible working times, which they already enjoyed in their previous mode of work, cannot be the gauge of our position.

12.- It is also true that many ordinary administrative workers find it more comfortable, personally, to work from home than to "lose" hours of life on trips and even to save gas. But make no mistake. Sooner or later, this will tend to be reflected in a decrease in salary, particularly in new hires with this type of work, where the company will set the new conditions to get around the law.

13.- It is always reactionary to break ties between workers, in particular their dispersion in different workplaces, this laminates workers' solidarity, the perception of common interests, and creates better conditions for the division of the workforce when fighting for joint demands. The general interest must prevail, and that is that the workers feel their company and thus the idea of collective ownership is facilitated, instead of favoring the petty-bourgeois mentality of the worker of feeling like "a service provider" to an "alien" company, working from home.

It is for all the above that we can only agree on the establishment of telework in very exceptional situations (it is true that the pandemic is clearly so) and on the basis that the will of the worker must prevail and that, in any case, it must have the approval of the works council.

Our alternative to the alienating character of work under capitalism: long hours of work, loss of time on the move, etc. must be not to work at home, but to reduce the working day without wage reduction, fast and efficient public transport, nurseries in the workplace, workplaces close to home, etc.

There is one last aspect to contemplate, what would this question look like in socialism? Socialism is collective life by definition, it is the unity of the creative time of work and leisure, there would be no separation between the two (at an already developed stage). To think that everyone would be mainly at home, working, eating in isolation, in family life, etc. would be alien to the socialist way of life. We are not going to utopian what socialism would look like in detail, but we can say that the individualistic aspects of today's daily life (and teleworking is) would be weakened first, and extinguished later.

Of course, socialism would mean a total revolution at work. There would be neither strenuous days nor useless loss of time in the displacement; Precisely, an important part of

the work of society will be to imagine, test and innovate a healthy way of life also in the relationship of the human being with work.

That is why our position on teleworking must be, in general, *negative*. That is, except for exceptional situations that may justify it temporarily, and that must be evaluated in each context, we must oppose its introduction.

Regardless of all the above, the truth is that teleworking is a reality that cannot be suppressed by our simple will or by closing our eyes. To the extent that it is an imposed reality we must complete our position of principles with a table of demands, a program, which includes demands that establish the best possible working and wage conditions for the affected workers.

#### *Notes*

[1] <https://www.eleconomista.es/economia/noticias/11356040/08/21/Teletrabajar-bajara-el-sueldo-de-los-empleados-de-Google-asi-funciona-su-calculadora-que-pueden-aplicar-otras-empresas.html>

[2] <https://www.elcorreo.com/vivir/teletrabajo-desventajas-20210608182512-ntrc.html>

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