
Does Capitalism Exploit Workers?

Videos:

“Why Capitalism is Rigged against Workers and What We Can Do About It | Richard Wolff”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=grnqTG0fcTM> (6:48 minutes)

“Does Capitalism Exploit Workers? - Learn Liberty”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Ttbj6LAu0A> (6:07 minutes)

Guide:

The questions below will help students achieve a better understanding of the arguments made on either side of a contentious topic. Because these questions often touch upon statements made briefly in the videos, we recommend reading the questions before watching each video.

Students are encouraged to take notes during the videos, and it may be helpful for students to break into groups, each taking responsibility for only a few questions, before coming together for discussion.

Analysis Questions:

1. What are the opposing ideas in these two videos?
2. What is capitalism? Is there one clear definition? Do people use the word to describe different things?
3. What is exploitation? Is there one clear definition? Do people use the word to describe different things?
4. Richard Wolff described feudalism. What is feudalism?
5. Mark Zwolinski described how most contemporary philosophers define “exploitation.” What was that definition?
6. According to Richard Wolff, what sets capitalism apart from slavery and feudalism?
7. Mark Zwolinski said: “[I]t’s absolutely correct that many capitalists want to exploit workers. They want to pay as low a wage as possible and get as much work out of workers as possible in order to maximize profits.” What did he say makes it difficult for capitalists to achieve this goal?
8. Richard Wolff said that the relationship between employer and employee contains “a fundamental conflict, tension, anger, resentment.” Do you think this is true? Are all employer-employee relationships like this? Are anger and resentment intrinsic to the relationship?
9. Mark Zwolinski described an auction in which multiple people are bidding on a dollar. How does this analogy apply to employers and employees?

10. Richard Wolff said that under capitalism, “the worker has to produce more—a surplus—than he gets.” Are workers the only ones who produce value, or do employers also produce value? If employers do produce value, what are some examples of the value they produce?
11. Matt Zwolinski said: “Even when exploitative or unfair exchanges do take place, the institutions of a free market ensure that they will at least usually be mutually beneficial, because the exchanges are voluntary.” What did he mean by this? What does it mean for an exchange to be mutually beneficial? Can an exchange be both exploitative and mutually beneficial? Why/Why not?
12. Richard Wolff said: “If all the workers together make a cooperative, then they aren’t split between the employers and the employees, because both positions are occupied by every person in the operation—there’s no split.” Do you think a system like this could work? Why/Why not?
13. Matt Zwolinski said: “Mutually beneficial exchanges is how wealth is created in society.” How do mutually beneficial exchanges create wealth?
14. Richard Wolff said that in a workers cooperative, the workers would make “all the decisions that used to be made by the capitalist.” Do you think all workers would prefer this system to capitalism? Do you think their jobs would be easier or more difficult? Would they have more or less responsibility?
15. What did Mark Zwolinski say makes politics different from markets?
16. Richard Wolff said that if workers were in charge, companies would pollute less. What was his argument for this? Do you think it’s a good argument? Why/Why not?
17. Mark Zwolinski said: “Just hoping that the state will use its power on behalf of the vulnerable isn’t enough.” What did he mean by this?
18. When talking about technology’s impact on employment, Richard Wolff said: “The problem was never with technology, the problem was with the system that decides how to use that technology.” What did he mean by this?
19. Could Richard Wolff’s proposal of worker cooperatives work in our current system? Would it require big government, which Mark Zwolinski warned against? Why/Why not?
20. Should one of the arguments we heard carry more weight than the other? If so, which one? Why?
21. Did you have an opinion on this topic before watching these videos? If so, what was it? Has your opinion changed? If so, how? What did you learn from either video that affects your views of this topic?
22. What could you learn about this topic that might affect your view of this debate?
23. What else would you like to learn about this topic?