

Right to Repair Movement of the People against the Designed to Die Strategy of the Capitalists

Over production and crises are inherent characteristics of capitalist mode of production. Lack of centralised planning and the urge to monopolise profits are two of the many reasons for these crises. To escape these crises capitalism is always in a continuous search for either newer markets or for methods to remove commodities from the existing markets and replace with fresh ones. But by the 1970s colonization in its true sense almost stabilized among the imperialists and searching for new markets became a tedious job; the capitalists have to forgo some of their profits to create a middle class in the developing countries and turn them into markets for their commodities. This is also the period of electronics boom and capitalist relied more on replacing commodities in their existing markets, relied on the 'planned obsolescence' along with their many other methods of profit extraction.

Planned Obsolescence

As early as 1920s Germany's Osram, the United Kingdom's Associated Electrical Industries, US's General Electric (GE) and Netherlands's Philips colluded to expand the electric market for all, for the benefit of capitalism as a whole instead of fighting among themselves. They formed the 'Phoebus Cartel', and replaced carbon filament in bulbs with tungsten filament. Thereby they reduced the life of the bulb to 1000 hours. For a comparison, the carbon bulb in California still continues to glow even after more than 115 years. The details of this cartel's scam came to light only decades later.

During the same time competition between US's General Motors and Ford resulted in GM arriving at a new method of manipulating customers for increasing sales. This is linking the car model to the year of manu-facturing. From that day till today that strategy and marketing became so influential over the people that with the arrival of a New Year people started thinking that their product became old. Soon this became the model strategy for all commodities of capitalist production.

Strategies of 'Planned Obsolescence

- 1. Ideological/Cultural:** This marketing strategy creates a culture that perpetuates consumerism. It manipulates people to discard their products even if there is absolutely no reason to discard. It can be in the name of 'new'- new year, new fashion, new features, new specs, new version, new upgrade; or in the opposite 'old'- retro fit, retro design, retro looks; or by manipulating egos in the name of -brand, beauty, pride, prestige, etc; new jargon is constantly reinvented to perpetuate this culture of capitalism.
- 2. Contrived Durability:** Manu-facturers intentionally design products or subparts to die soon. This strategy is used mostly in products that customers replace frequently such as fashion industry and electronics. The 'laddering' of nylon stockings forces consumers to

replace them often. It is not difficult for the highly evolved industry to develop long lasting materials. But they do not do so because it hampers their profits. In a capitalist society innovation happens only for profits and not for people and sustainability.

3. Prevent Repairs: This method is predominant in electronics industry. This strategy is the 'gold standard' in capitalist countries and fast expanded in emerging markets like India. Big Corporates won't provide spares to independent repairers. They patent each and every minute part of the product to make it difficult for third party manufacturers elsewhere to legally supply the part in those countries. Thus Big Corporates use all legal means – judiciary, customs etc to prevent import of spares to independent repairers. They keep the cost of spares in their service centres close to the entire product that consumers prefer to buy new ones. Also they use the below methods to prevent the possibility of any repair or reuse.

Fraudulent Practises of Big Corporate to Increase Sales

Big Tech like iPhone and Amazon use non-standard screws in iPhone, Amazon Kindle etc to prevent even minor repairs. In devices like Tabs and mobiles the manufacturers glue batteries to motherboards so that any attempt to replace the battery damages the entire board. This means even if just the batteries are gone, the entire device has to be replaced. Similarly, a chip installed in printers prevents printers from printing beyond a set number even if there is ink in the cartridge, also it does not allow the use of cartridges of other companies. The prices of the 'original' cartridge ensures customers buy a new one. New versions of proprietary computer operating systems like windows stops supporting older hardware just by not providing a simple driver software. Thus new version of OS meant buying new hardware. This is not the case with community driven open source software like Linux.

Thus from headphones to mosquito bats we have to replace every item just because their batteries are gone.

'Right to Repair' Movement

The Motor Vehicles Owners' Right to Repair Act passed in 2012 required automobile manufacturers to provide necessary documents to allow third-party technicians to repair their vehicles. Despite this act, The John Deer Tractor Company didn't allow farmers to modify their tractors through its D.R.M (Digital Rights Management), E.U.L.A (End User Licence Agreement) few years ago. When farmers realized that they don't have complete rights over their own tractors, they protested and rose for their 'right-to-repair'. As these tactics of capitalism are rampant in their own countries, general public joined the protests and expanded it to all states. The emergence of Covid showed the nature of capitalism more clearly to the entire masses. In the midst of the Covid crisis while people lost jobs, saw salary cuts, lost livelihoods with no saving- the culture of capitalism seriously discouraged future savings, corporates reaped unprecedented profits. Never did people saw the true nature of capitalism as did during the pandemic. Never before is the need for repair felt more but only to find that the entire repair mechanisms are completely wiped out. But more and more people realized that capitalism had undermined it and became part of the concerns. The Right to Repair protests forced 32 states in the USA to

propose right to repair laws while Massachusetts has enacted the law before everyone else. The protest also forced U.S. President Joe Biden to pass an order calling on the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) to prevent companies from restricting customers from repairing their own products – including laptops, smartphones, cars, washing machines, and heavy manufacturing equipment.

The situation is no different in the capitalist world of Europe. There Apple does not sell its spares to independent repairers and uses customs officers and courts to prevent them from receiving spares in any way. Hence it too saw protests for such legislations. The UK enacted the Right to Repair Act in July, it requires appliance manufactures to provide consumers access to spare parts and make complicated parts available in professional repair shops.

This shows that in the Capitalist system it takes years of fighting, decades of waiting, enactment of laws to bring a small change beneficial to all of its people. But even after all these efforts are made, it is still questionable whether the fruits of change reaches the people, because in capitalist countries, ‘representatives of the people’ are sponsored by capitalists and sent to senates to serve their interests.

Another fact has emerged about the dark side of Big Tech like iPhone and Samsung in around 2017–2018. Companies like the iPhone sends updates on their old phones (6, 6s, 7, 7s) and intentionally slows down the phones without users’ knowledge. Apple has lost cases in this regard and was fined in the US, France and Israel. The case against Samsung is going on in Italy. The fine on Apple in France is less than its 3-hour earnings. This speaks volumes about the capacity of judiciary and the integrity of governments in capitalist countries. The only good that happened with these ‘fines’ is that capitalism was exposed and more and more people joined protests for their right to repair.

While people are protesting for their right to repair, Apple, Microsoft, Sony, John Deere, Tesla, Verizon, etc., have intensified their reactionary measures. They tried to make believe that laws are not necessary, that they themselves will take voluntary action, this all the while spending billions in lobbying senators and fighting in courts.

Over Production and Environmental Degradation

Over production for the profits of these capitalists will not only put holes to the people’s purses but also cause irreparable damage to the environment. To make a single cell phone consumes at least 12,700 litres of water; the waste generated and the pollution caused to extract its raw materials such as rare earth lithium is enormous. In 2019 alone, 50 metric tons of e-waste was produced. Most of this is contributed by capitalist countries which could have been avoided by going for repairs. But repairs are a hindrance to their sales, to their profits.

In developing Countries the repair systems are still surviving because capitalism needs them for their dump. From CT scanners to cell phones to clothes, everything dumped by the capitalist countries is refurbished, recalibrated and reused in the developing world. Also in these countries the products that are legally obsoleted leaves the cities, reaches the country side and continues their useful life. Thus sustainability of man and machine is ensured. Capitalist countries instead of adopting to these

sustainable methods of the developing world are gradually dumping their 'planned obsolescence' and consumerism on them.

How were the occupations that used to perform repairs of day to day items like umbrellas and torchlights, disappeared? The capitalists understood that if these occupations are allowed they make usable products out of the scrap of these Big Corporates at affordable rates and so they were systematically destroyed. MNCs not only exploited independent repairers by appropriating their occupations in the name of 'authorised service centres' but also their labour by employing them. They are enticing the poor with 'exchange offers' and by offering refurbished 'branded' products at cheaper rates.

Conclusion

It is not enough to look at the evils of the capitalists from the point of view of the environment or in the exploitative nature of blocking repairs. We must understand it in its constant search for new ways to get out of its crises. We must understand its machinations in further appropriating the collective wealth of the society –technology, research outcomes and our labour. There are already legal systems to make products obsolete after some years in the name of environment. Still they are preventing repairs because the profits obtained by exploiting the labour of workers during production, and the profits appropriated by selling in the markets were not enough to withstand cut-throat competition and escape their crisis. Further the consumer should be held captive for a lifetime as a commodity that generates profits by consuming their products. So this commodity in the consumer must be made to feel at ease in buying new ones rather than repairing existing ones; and must be made a market slave. The necessary funds for research and innovation have to be allocated from the coffers of the government by the ruling classes. And for the vast majority who still want to hang on to old products, ensure repairs are not possible. All these are the new methods of capitalist profit extraction. Like the 'Right to Repair' agitation any struggle against capitalism, against its cultural hegemony is a struggle for sustainability, for preserving the environment and for the benefit of entire mankind. Hence all such movements have to be expanded to expose the exploitative nature of capitalism to the entire masses.