

On the Crisis of Socialism

Freedom Road Socialist Organization

With the collapse of Soviet-style "socialism" throughout Eastern Europe, the crushing of the 1989 democracy movement in China, and the general disarray of the Marxist left internationally, a phase of socialist experimentation has drawn to a close.

The experience of socialism has been a multifaceted one, with very different history and results in Africa, Central America, the Caribbean, Europe, and Asia. Events in China, Europe, and the Soviet Union have highlighted the crisis of socialism. Serious analysis of these events – as well as the elaboration of a popular socialist vision which takes account of them – are protracted tasks. With these events the crisis of socialism has become a mass issue, one that communist activists ignore at their peril.

The Soviet revolution of 1917 opened the door to a new world. Yet despite the many amazing achievements of that revolution, overall the experience of building socialism in the Soviet Union must be summed up as a failure. All subsequent socialist revolutions have drawn to a great extent from the Soviet model, and the crisis of socialism is not confined to the Soviet Union.

The class struggles in the Soviet Union led to the defeat of socialism and produced a class dictatorship over the Soviet people, a dictatorship which has subjected them for decades to oppression and exploitation at the hands of a new ruling class. Those struggles also produced a Soviet state which subjugated whole nations both within and outside the borders of the USSR.

The Cultural Revolution in China, which was a diverse, complicated, and often misguided mass movement, attempted to address in a number of ways the defeat of socialism in the Soviet bloc. It broke new ground in the socialist experiment, opening up for the first time issues such as the continuation of classes and class struggle throughout the socialist transition, the possibility of capitalist restoration, the sources of a new ruling class (including in the ruling communist party itself), the

exercise of working-class dictatorship through mass participatory democracy, the need to break down divisions between mental and manual labor, the possibilities for genuine workers' control over the production process, and so on. Clearly the Cultural Revolution ended in failure; the sources of that failure remain to be determined.

Everywhere socialism has been tried, it has faced constant intervention by the imperialist powers, who since 1917 have worked ceaselessly to destroy it where they could and render its example impotent where they could not. Nevertheless the failures of socialism cannot be chalked up to external factors alone; the primary reasons for socialism's defeat in the USSR and Eastern Europe have been internal.

While economic shortcomings have been important in the masses' revulsion toward their rulers in once-socialist societies, the most telling symptoms of socialist degeneration have been political: the erection of a massive repressive state apparatus over and above the people, and the complete absence of the socialist democracy envisioned by the revolutionaries who overthrew their old social orders.

There is throughout the world a widespread popular perception that socialism is a coercive system, and the experiences of communist parties in power have justified that perception. Generally speaking, while the world's peoples hate imperialism, they fear socialism. These issues are at the heart of socialism's crisis, and only as communists develop a movement, a strategy, and a vision which are at once revolutionary and democratic will they turn the corner of that crisis.

Socialism is embarked upon with the ultimate political act: the revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist state power. Certainly in the U.S., whose imperialist dominance rests more and more on military might alone, it is impossible to envision a road to socialism that does not involve revolution. Insofar as socialist society remains a class society rent by class contradictions, with the decisive struggles occurring at the political level, socialism is in essence a class dictatorship over the bourgeoisie. At the same time, we reject any notion of class dictatorship that implies a dictatorial form of government, that identifies the dictatorship of the proletariat with an ever-expanding state apparatus, that calls for proletarian dictatorship over, rather than alliance with, society's middle strata, or that implies a dictatorship of any ruling party over the people as a whole.

The dictatorship of the proletariat is at heart the ever-expanding organization, expression, and, when necessary, enforcement of the popular will at all levels of society, in order to gradually eliminate classes and exploitation. Strengthening this class dictatorship – and not the state apparatus itself – is the essence of the socialist transition, and mass socialist democracy – not state repression – must be its linchpin.

We identify socialism first and foremost not simply with public ownership of the means of production, but with the cultivation of mass participation in and control over economic, political, and social institutions and structures. An increase over time in the masses' standard of living is a crucial component of socialist development, but it is neither the only nor the most important criterion by which we judge progress in building socialism.

We judge that progress also by the extent to which working people progressively grasp direct control over all aspects of their lives; by the extent to which national oppression is being overcome; by the extent to which sexist and heterosexist oppression have been eliminated; by the extent to which workers are actually assuming control over production; by whether class differentiation is increasing or decreasing; by whether the people have true access to the levers of power; by the extent to which divisions in the labor process between tasks of administration and tasks of execution are being overcome; by whether the contradictions between city and countryside are being overcome; and by whether in general the masses are becoming the masters in every sphere of society.

A specific political element of the socialist transition which has been thrown into question by recent events is the model of the single-party socialist state. Although we have little or no experience with a multi-party socialist state, genuine socialist elections, and so on, we have a great deal of experience with the single-party state. World events have called into question the viability of the single-party state as a model in general, and there are at least two specific reasons why the single-party state may not be a viable option for socialists in the U.S.

First, the existence of several national questions within the U.S., and the centrality of the African American national question in particular, dictate against a single-party model. In order for socialist democracy to be truly consistent, political space for oppressed nationality parties of

varying class compositions must be guaranteed, and it must not be token space.

Second, the U.S. people have long experience in an extremely undemocratic yet still multi-party form of government. Through many years of both electoral and non-electoral struggle, led by revolutionary socialists, the U.S. people will learn from their own experience to distinguish between the democratic shell of bourgeois democracy and its undemocratic content. Having done that, they should not be expected to abandon the democratic shell, but rather to fight for a form of government which is truly democratic in both form and content.

Among other things, this will mean a multi-party state with regular popular elections. Dialectical and historical materialism remain powerful tools in our arsenal as revolutionaries. Socialists today must continually add to, test in practice, and deepen our theory, learning constantly with the masses, who are the makers of history.

Despite the problems encountered in building socialism to date, we recognize that the main revolutionary front in the world today is the struggle against imperialism. In general this revolutionary struggle takes place in the developing world. Many of these revolutionary movements have remained explicitly Marxist-Leninist. We also uphold the science of Marxism-Leninism as an important ideology that can guide successful socialist revolutions in the third world as well as in this country.

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