

# Upheavals in Socialism and the U.S. Left

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I want to begin by expressing my appreciation to the conveners of this conference and acknowledging the important political contributions of my fellow panelists. Each of us this evening has a difficult but necessary job to do. The dramatic and fast-paced events taking place in the Socialist world, in one country after another, leaves little time for calm reflection and realistic and objective analysis – much less for reasoned conclusions about the implications for the left in our country.

Yet what has been so clearly and painfully shown in the last year is that the mass democratic upsurge of the peoples of this world will not wait.

Either we seize this moment and develop strategic goals and tactical approaches that place us in the center of the democratic upsurge in our country, or we will find ourselves sidelined and marginalized with little influence and few troops.

Therefore, this conference and tonight's panel discussion offer a unique opportunity for an exchange of views and experiences on the basis of equality, mutual respect, objectivity, cooperation and optimism. The moment is conducive for removing past practices of mutual recrimination and infighting, scoring points and allegations of who is phony and who is not.

This exchange does not require the abandoning of principles, mainly because the assumptions underlying many long-held views are being tested by life, new information and greater maturity. We on the left can all benefit from this process. But most importantly, our ability to forge united common action together with and in the interest of the exploited and oppressed in our country can lay the basis for building a much larger, stronger and more radical left which is so urgently needed in the period ahead.

Comrade Joe Slovo, General Secretary of the South African Communist Party, had the political courage to ask the question, "Has Socialism Failed?" His penetrating analysis is contained in a pamphlet now being debated in the S.A C.P. His conclusion is that: "The fault lie with us, not with Socialism." I share this perspective.

Looking back, it is crystal clear that Socialism and the Communist and workers' movement have come a long, long way in just 70 years. There were truly historic sacrifices and historic achievement.

The birth of the first Socialist state in 1917 took place under conditions of extreme backwardness and a lack of democratic political traditions, isolation from the rest of the world, economic siege and the constant threat and actuality of armed intervention. The defeat of fascism during World War II, the victories of the peoples of Cuba and Vietnam, and the development of national liberation movements throughout Africa, Asia and Latin America, were contributed to immensely by the rendering of material, political and moral aid from the Socialist community of nations.

Socialism for the most part has provided for its peoples full employment universal and free health care, child care, and education – gains that are now under tremendous assault as some Socialist countries move from Socialist to capitalist economies, leaving millions unemployed in countries like Poland, Hungary and the GDR. And without question, Socialism, especially in the Soviet Union, has provided the main impetus for ending the nuclear arms race, and the cold war. Socialism has provided a vision of a world at peace, and without hunger, racism, national oppression and exploitation. This is still a vision worth fighting for.

Looking back, it is just as clear that neither Socialism nor the world Communist movement has progressed as far as once thought, and that Socialists and Communists are fallible, capable of serious mistakes, and tended toward dogmatism and sectarianism and a near-fatal underestimation of democracy.

The process of perestroika and democratization begun five years ago in the Soviet Union has unleashed powerful political forces which have at times pulled in opposite directions. It is undeniable, however, that these two processes represent a major turning point in world history. The draft program of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union now being discussed at their Party Congress characterizes the essence of perestroika in the following way. I quote in part:

“First of all, we are breaking with the authoritarian bureaucratic system which is incompatible with Socialist principles. Our ideal is a human, democratic Socialism.

“Having embarked on the road of revolutionary changes it is necessary to discard completely the fetters of the past that hinder our movement towards this objective.

“While reaffirming faithfulness to the creative spirit of the materialist world outlook and the dialectic methodology of Marx, Engels and Lenin, and being guided by it, we resolutely reject ideological blinders, dogmatism and intolerance towards different views and ideas.”

For all the complications and upheavals, perestroika has had a liberating effect on Soviet society, on the world Communist movement, on the world as a whole. Socialism’s image is changing as the Soviet Union struggles to transform its reality and humanize its character, content, and mission.

We on the left should applaud these developments while at the same time recognizing that the upheaval of the past period has laid to rest once and for all the idea that there is one model for the construction and development of Socialism.

This recognition for us in the United States, in fact necessitates the full mastery of our own country’s history, traditions, cultural and contemporary political processes.

We must pay far more attention to the national specifics and peculiarities of the United States. Historically, most of the left, including my party, has sought to artificially apply some other model or experience or method, from Bolshevism to Maoism to Western European Social Democracy. There are valuable lessons to be learned from all this experience – but we have not yet fully developed a concrete theory of revolution for the United States. That is the awesome task that lies before us.

Stalinism imposed an administrative, command style of leadership on the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, which was duplicated by most Socialist countries and Communist Parties throughout the world. While it is true that these methods and this style of leadership grew out of conditions of extreme isolation and the constant threat of military intervention against the newly born Soviet Socialist state, Lenin himself in 1923 warned the Soviet Party about three things: One, the need to combat nationalism, two, the importance of fighting oppressive bureaucracy in the Party and three, the recommendation to remove Stalin as General Secretary.

Lenin’s warnings went unheeded and Stalinism’s command style sunk deep roots into the Party and the fabric of Soviet life, thus resulting in an increasing underestimation of democracy as a method of leadership, of rule and of struggle.

We, the left, the Communist Party of the United States and indeed the Communist and Socialist movements of the world must restore democracy to its rightful place. The days of the omnipotent, all-knowing leader are gone. We must learn anew that only through democratic discussion and debate, drawing on the widest possible experiences can we hope to develop strategies and tactics that correspond to the level of consciousness of the people of the United States and help propel their consciousness further and further.

The struggle for democracy in our own country, in my opinion, has long been underestimated. There has been drawn a rigid dividing line between bourgeois democracy and Socialist democracy. The classical description of bourgeois democracy was an oversimplification and tended to underestimate the historic achievements of the working class and peoples’ struggles in imposing and defending aspects of a real democratic culture on the capitalist state. This democratic culture must not disappear but rather needs to be expanded under true socialism.

The peoples of our country, workers, African Americans, and other racial and nationally oppressed, women and youth, students, civil libertarians, and intellectuals have constantly struggled to expand the democratic terrain in which we live, work and fight. At times these struggles have been of a truly revolutionary character. This extends from the Abolitionist Movement of the 1850s to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, to the fight for the 1990 Civil Rights Restoration Act now before Congress. It stretches from the Women’s Suffragist Movement to the fight for the Equal Rights Amend-

ment to the present struggle for child care and equal pay for comparable work now being waged by women across our country.

This encompasses the early struggles of organizing unorganized workers, and ending racist hiring patterns the fight for the right to strike and to bargain collectively, to the present day struggles against union busting, speed-up, overtime and renewed efforts to organize low-paid non-union workers.

Just as surely as these democratic struggles continuously unfold, so too does the opposition of the ruling class mount. We often find ourselves fighting again battles once won. But there is a strong democratic current in the U.S. people and as each democratic battle is fought and won or lost, new struggles and new forces emerge. In its essence, this was the impulse which gave rise to the Rainbow Coalition and the unprecedented presidential campaigns of 1984 and 1988 of Jesse Jackson. Seven million voters, including 3 million whites, cast their ballots for a Black man advocating a platform calling for the empowerment of the people, and the expansion of the democratic rights of workers, African-Americans, Latinos, Asians, Native Americans, women and youth.

Many on the left, including my Party, were slow to recognize the immense importance of this development. Many were critical of Jackson and the Rainbow Coalition for their involvement in the Democratic Party. And some missed the point altogether.

It is my estimate that the democratic upsurge which I have attempted to describe cannot be contained in a preordained direction. It has and it will continue to break out in many forms affecting governmental bodies, corporations, churches, unions, mass organizations and political parties. Already this impulse has given rise to a struggle within the Democratic Party over direction and constituencies. It has simultaneously impelled mass forces to take a new look at political independence from the two-party system, as witness the recent NOW convention resolution calling for a study of the feasibility of the development of a third party. Jack Henning, head of the California State AFL-CIO, has repeatedly raised the question of the need for a Labor Party.

Are these two approaches mutually exclusive? At this juncture, I don't think so. Tactical or even strategic differences on this question, at this stage of development, do not preclude common united action on a host of economic, political and social issues confronting the people of our country and the world.

Another lesson to be learned in this period is that the main prerequisite for organized struggle is unity in action, not uniformity of thought.

Perhaps the greatest recent example of the power of this kind of common united action was the U.S. reception accorded Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress. In part, this reception was in response to the magnificence of Mandela himself – his steadfast commitment, dedication, and principle in opposition to apartheid that 27 years in prison could not daunt. But in large measure the response was built on the ground right here in the USA. Through long years of marches, demonstrations, sit-ins, petitions, lobbying, boycotting, and voting, the movement reached all segments of our

society. The left played a crucial role in this development. We should be proud of our contribution and draw the necessary lessons for the struggles ahead.

Has Marxism-Leninism outlived its usefulness? Is there now the need for the development of a new methodology of struggle?

Karl Marx wrote in the first volume of *Capital*: "The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in the mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and the looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of Black skins, signalled the rosy dawn of the era of Capitalist production."

V.I. Lenin, when asked what he would add to Marx's call "Workers of the world, unite," said he would say "Workers and oppressed peoples of the world, unite."

Marxism-Leninism seeks an end to exploitation and oppression. It is a particular way of thinking about humanity and the universe. It sees only change as permanent, contradiction as fundamental and the negation of antagonisms as the driving force in existence. These observations remain valid today. Marxism is a social science, but unlike the physical sciences, one and one do not always add up to two. Marxism is a methodology, a way of looking at the objective laws of social development and designing methods of struggle that correspond to the reality of conditions that give rise to struggle.

The point is, Marx insisted, not simply to understand the world, but also to change it.

There have been serious distortions of Marxism. Stalinism violated the very essence of the creative methodology of Marxism by the codification and ossification of certain basic principles, ruling out flexibility and creative thought based on changing conditions in a constantly changing world. Remember, Marx himself said only change is permanent.

Just as Lenin added oppressed peoples to the Marxist body of thought during the age of the dawning of world imperialism, we Marxists today must courageously and creatively seek new ways to solve new and old problems.

With all its past distortions, Marxism remains a liberating science for the exploited and the oppressed. As Nelson Mandela said in responding to the question of the character of the post-apartheid economy, to paraphrase: Call it what you will, the responsibility is to redistribute the wealth. Right now they have it all and we have none.

In looking ahead to the future configuration of the world revolutionary process, the left in our country must say bluntly and frankly that we are too small. We must examine honestly why the organized left has failed to grow while, at the same time, broad and loosely defined left and progressive movements have burst forth on the U.S. scene in huge numbers with real influence.

For my Party's part, some of the answers can be gleaned from problems I have discussed earlier: dogmatism and sectarianism have affected us as well. For example, in the 1960s and early 1970s we correctly foresaw the entry of large numbers of women into the working class. Our analysis was correctly based on new levels of exploitation of women at the point of production. But

we elevated this truth to the status of dogma. Therefore we were slow to see that the oppression of women was many-sided and that male supremacy was deeply embedded in the fabric of our lives. This restricted view kept us from fully supporting the Equal Rights Amendment for too many years. It constricted our participation in what is today a powerful movement for the emancipation of women in all spheres of economic, social and political life. It left us marginalized, with a few notable exceptions – Angela Davis is the most well-known – at a time when we should be completely involved, contributing our analysis and championing the special interest of nationally and racially oppressed and working women.

A dogmatic view of the relationship of social movements to exploitation also clouded our view of the moral imperative to support and defend the rights of gays and Lesbians against intolerance and bigotry and discrimination, a clouded view that many of us are determined to change.

Sectarianism as well has affected our analysis and participation in the burgeoning democratic upsurge in our country. Over the last five to seven years, we have increasingly restricted our view of class and social forces only through the prism of the Communist Party. We began to see struggle as only that which we ourselves initiated. We have not adequately taken into account the ideas and activity of others. We have often acted on the belief that there is only one truth, when in reality many truths must be taken into account in developing strategy and tactics.

These have been difficult and painful lessons to confront. But the process of renewal and reinvigoration goes on. Many of the problems and concerns I have raised will continue to be debated in our leadership and in our ranks.

There are many basic strengths we draw on in our continuing search for new and better methods of struggle. We are proud of our unwavering commitment to the interest of the working class and the nationally and racially oppressed.

We consider our view of the interconnectedness of class and national oppression as a historic contribution to understanding the economic and political processes at work in our land. This basic understanding has led us, we believe, to the correct formulation of the Labor-African-American alliance as the cornerstone of all social and economic progress. We have been unrelenting in our efforts to build international working class solidarity from our struggle against fascism in Spain, where many of our members fought and died, to Cuba, Chile, Nicaragua, El Salvador and Panama. We fully support the struggle of Palestinians for self-determination and a national homeland.

We defended Patrice Lumumba in the Congo, Amilcar Cabral in Guinea Bissau, and Maurice Bishop in Grenada. We organized in support of Angola and Mozambique against Portuguese colonialism, and later South African and U.S. intervention after victory was won. We have been instrumental in the movement against apartheid in South Africa. We worked tirelessly to stop the U.S. war against the Vietnamese people. We are confident in our firm position that our job is to stay the hand of U.S. imperialism and build solidarity action in our country with the struggling peoples of the world.

We are firm believers in the Marxist notion that the working class is the motive force of history. Consequently, our activity is focused on bettering the condition of working people, ending the racist divisions among them, helping to organize the millions of unorganized, and expanding their political understanding and consciousness about their central role in the economy and society as a whole. We believe in the interdependence of the working class and human values, and see no contradiction between the two.

As I said in the beginning of my remarks, this exchange of views among the left can only benefit all of us. The left is challenged today, however, to not only discuss our politics and positions but to find new, non-sectarian forms of struggle that allow working people to expand their democratic aspirations, anti-monopoly sentiment, and fighting spirit.

The left is challenged to expand our base and influence. But this can only happen if we understand that the left does not arise out of ideas alone. The left arises out of conditions of capitalist oppression, exploitation and injustice. We must ask ourselves if these conditions have disappeared, have stayed the same, or are getting worse. I believe an objective examination will reveal that the conditions have gotten worse. Poverty, hunger, homelessness, lack of adequate health care and education, declining living standards, growing unemployment, anti-labor laws, and union-busting, combined with a vicious ideological ruling class assault which describes large segments of the African-American community as an underclass with inborn criminal tendencies should force us to recognize that we must close the widening gap between word and deed. It is not enough to chronicle the worsening conditions. We must roll up our sleeves and get to work.

The democratic upsurge needs the left. It needs our ideas, our analysis, organizational skills, commitment and principles. These movements and struggles need to better understand the relationship between the struggle to save the ecological balance in nature to the struggle to save Black children from poverty, hunger and hopelessness. These movements and struggles need to better understand the relationship between stopping the nuclear arms race and converting military production to peacetime production in order to maintain jobs for working people. These movements and struggles need to better understand the relationship between the struggle for the expansion of democratic rights, to the struggle to organize the millions of unorganized, low-paid, minority and women workers into unions.

The challenge to the left today is to understand that yes, Socialism is in crisis. But as Marx showed, a crisis is not only a crisis, it is the resolution of contradictions leading to a crisis.

Our challenge is to find the forms, methods of struggle and critical issues which will help resolve the crisis in favor of a vision of the future of peace and equality that ends exploitation, national oppression, racism, sexism, homophobia and in justice. A future of humane, democratic Socialism.