



Does socialism make sense in the 21st century? A discussion

Does socialism make sense?

By Sean Matgamna

A: Let me first outline the case for socialism as I see it. Then we will discuss it.

The world in which we live is wracked by terrible crises and now by protracted economic depression, by local wars, by famine and starvation in Africa and elsewhere, by ecological disasters now and the certainty of even worse ecological disasters to come, and by the “routine” death of about eight million children under the age of five, each year, from preventable or curable diseases.

In the richest country, and one of the most “democratic” countries, on Earth, the USA, sprawling “Third World” slums and ghettos for large parts of the working class are part of the most modern cities.

In such cities, and in the cities of poorer countries like Stalino-capitalist China of course, people live in varieties of want, and are cut off by poverty from modern medicine.

In an era of wonderful mass communications, they live educationally in a world of ignorance, pseudo-knowledge, intellectual and spiritual barbarism. Commerce, and its needs and conveniences, are the givers of morality.

The decline of old Christian churches gives place not to enlightenment, but to regression to more primitive forms of ridiculous religion, tarotry, “horoscopolatry”, half-baked nature-worship. Reason and respect for reason in discourse are at an immense disadvantage.

In the USA, a politician cannot get elected unless he or she professes and practises a religion, or pretends to.

In the Muslim world, the pressures and contradictions of modern life have led to the rise of a dark-ages jihadist tidal wave of petrified and fetishised superstition.

Ecological catastrophe is looming, for lack of rational planning of economic and social development.

On such issues, the direct involvement of international corporations and their tame pre-paid scientists poisons public discourse. The profit-driven corporations must go on driving for profit, even though their system now threatens ecological ruin.

It is like ignorant and primitive farmers who do not know enough not to work the soil to exhaustion — except that here the problem is not lack of knowledge, but its suppression, and the inability of knowledge to control the profit-mongers, themselves caught in the grip of the profit-god. The profit drive puts out the social, historical, and forward-looking vision of modern humankind.

Exploitative capitalism, which dominates the world, and Stalinism, which used to dominate a large part of it and still controls China in alliance with a most vicious form of red-in-tooth-and-claw capitalism, are the causes of those horrors.

To both capitalism and Stalinism, the people are essentially what farm beasts are to the farmer — creatures to be exploited or banished to the margin of society.

Socialism is the plain and obvious answer to the problems our world faces. By socialism I mean rational, democratic planning of our social and economic affairs, which here means also of our ecological affairs. I mean the application of consistent democracy instead of war to the solution of the economic, national, and religious conflicts of our world.

Socialism is solidarity raised from a principle of resistance to the guiding principle of society. The community will own and democratically control the bulk of productive wealth. Every major industry will be reorganised on the lines of the Health Service at its best — social provision for need. It will be democratically controlled by workers and the community.

The privileges of managers and officials will be abolished. The government will be democratic self-rule that will be far more flexible, responsive and accountable than any government of today. Each electorate will control its representatives and be able to use a right of recall at any time. The whole industrial structure can thus be planned, in broad outline, to meet human need.

That means no rich and no poor, no profits and no wage-slavery, no palaces and no homeless, no jobless and no overworked. The working week will be cut to a level which enables everyone to have ample free time to develop as an individual — by study, sport, art, handicrafts, friendship, travel, or whatever they wish. Social-

This feature follows on from, and refers to, the “Socialism in disarray” series in previous issues of Solidarity:
www.workersliberty.org/disarray

Capitalism creates vast inequalities

ism means liberty as well as economic planning.

B: So why do your socialist views have so little support?

A: Yes; socialism is less of a political force now than it has been for over a hundred years. Stalinism, which Trotsky called “the syphilis of the labour movement”, undermined, sapped, butchered, and discredited the old socialist movement.

The unfaltering socialists must live amidst the ideological ruins, the discouragement, and the poisonous vapours produced by Stalinism.

We live under — and respond to — an incessant bombardment of propaganda from the capitalists and their agents and collaborators in the labour movement, the burden of whose message is this: socialism has failed.

They take over, turn around, and use for their own purposes the great syphilitic lie of the old Stalinists. Stalinism, they say, was socialism; Stalinism was Bolshevism; the Stalinist states were Marxism come to life — and therefore socialism, Bolshevism, and Marxism are now deservedly dead and rotten. This is the United Front of the Liars Against Socialism!

B: No, it’s the United Front to establish the truth about socialism, and burn it into human self-awareness in the 21st century!

A: Oh yes? So Stalinism was not, as someone aptly said, “the dictatorship of the lie”, but of the truth? No — the old lies of Stalinism are helpful to the enemies of socialism. In fact the leaders of the Stalinist counter-revolution in the USSR rewrote history to suit themselves, threading and weaving a mass of totalitarian lies into its very fabric, and centrally the grotesque lie that Stalinism was the natural and necessary outcome of the Russian workers’ revolution of 1917.

We socialists know better. We know that the Stalinists killed more communists and workers than any reactionary regime in history, not excluding Hitler’s. We know that Stalinism had nothing in common with either the aims or the methods of real communism.

The triumph of the lie that Stalinism and socialism were identical played an enormous part for decades in hypnotising would-be communist workers throughout the world into accepting Stalinism.

But today socialism, real socialism, offers the only rational answers to the urgent needs of society for economic and political democracy, for rational planning of the economy, and for responsible ecological politics. It is the precondition of continued human progress.

B: You admit yourself that it’s a pretty terrible story,

the story of 20th century socialism. You’ve just spent 40,000 words trawling over the disastrous history of Marxist socialism — and you end up advocating “socialism”?

Socialism? Why on earth should I be a socialist? Why should anyone in the 21st century be a socialist?

Socialists are people incapable of learning from history — either fond and fixated sentimentalists, fantasists and masochists, or political air—wits, or both.

The much-used quotation puts it neatly: those who do not learn from history are likely to repeat it. That’s you, mate, and the count-them-on-one-hand little tribe of your co-thinkers.

What socialism? There is no viable, clean, uncontaminated socialism left. Jumping out of the capitalist frying pan into the raging Stalinist fire, or risking we will end up in the Stalinist fire, makes no sense. Learn from history!

The “Trotskyist tradition”? The Bolshevik anti-Stalinists? Like the good intentions of Lenin and Trotsky, and poor old Rosa Luxemburg, that counts for nothing. It is the Cheshire Cat’s hologram-smile after it has vanished and been replaced by a snarling, raging wild beast.

Their good intentions are confined to the margins of the story! Your retrospective good intentions count for even less.

The 20th century history of socialism is one of almost unmitigated horrors and disasters. The 20th century story of capitalism is dreadful too, of course. But the capitalists have learned a few things. As you have just shown — most of the socialists have learned nothing.

That is just what I’d expect of socialists. Socialism is

WHAT TO LEARN FROM STALINISM

In an article in 1963, the anti-Stalinist revolutionary socialist Hal Draper summed it up succinctly in five points:

- (1) There is a reactionary social alternative to the system of capitalism in the world today.
- (2) Nationalisation of industry is not equivalent to socialism.
- (3) Democracy is an economic essential for socialism, not merely a desirable “moral value”.
- (4) Under Stalinism, the fight for democracy is the fight for socialism.
- (5) Democracy means a social programme or it means nothing.

Does socialism make sense?

the eternal virgin in its own head but — excuse my old-fashioned, politically-incorrect language — a “scabby whore” in reality. Yours is Blanche Du Bois socialism! Good works, not good intentions!

You are like the Labour Party minister-in-waiting — all fine words and intentions, and, once in power, something else entirely. Give it up, mate!

A: I'm glad to see that you have read the earlier articles in this series so attentively. Now you need to think about things a little! Socialism is the anticipatory shadow that capitalism casts ahead of itself, and can't ever hope to get rid of.

B: Socialism is the bogeyman my mother threatened me with — except that socialism was real. Real only in history now, thank God, though Chinese capitalism has the Chinese Stalinist state on its side and serving it.

The idea that socialism can revive, or even survive, among sensible people is preposterous. It is a bit like the Trinity (three persons in one god), or the Real Presence (the little bit of communion bread really is the body and blood of Christ). You will get believers still, but not among severely rational people.

To believe in the revival of socialism, you need to have a very low opinion of people's intelligence. You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all the people some of the time — as Abraham Lincoln said — but not with “socialism”, any more, thank God! People learn, albeit painfully.

A: Yes! People learn, and will go on learning. And nothing is more obvious now, in this still unresolved crisis, than that capitalism, which was the dominant system even in the 20th century world that included Stalinism (Stalinism, not socialism!), has contradictions which it cannot quell.

B: But it is not dead. And the capitalists learn. You refuse to learn.

A: What the capitalists learn is mainly to improve techniques of bamboozlement — on people like you! Capitalism supposedly learned from the great slump after the stock-market crash of 1929. Governments imposed restrictions on bankers and devised new state-spending and credit policies designed to avoid similar things in the future. It didn't work.

B: It worked for a long time. Like democracy, capitalism may be riddled with faults — but all the alternatives are worse. That is what history tells us. You refuse to listen.

A: Your argument is essentially that because some people calling themselves socialists and communists acted in ways that contradicted all the promises of something better than capitalism which old socialism seemed to offer, and created Stalinism — something in most respects worse than capitalism — so socialism is discredited.

The underlying assumption is that capitalism is thereby rendered acceptable and the socialist critique of capitalism brushed aside. But it can't be. We live in the grip of capitalism. Right now, for a lot of people, it is turning into a strangulation-grip. Will you help them free themselves, or help tighten the grip?

B: I think most people would say my conclusion about socialism being discredited is common sense. Your “socialism” is a picture of the Virgin Mary on the walls of a brothel — or of Gandhi or Tolstoy on the walls of a torture and homicide chamber!

The pictures would not affect what went on in those places — and only fools would define the places by the pictures on the wall.

On the actual history of actual socialism as the 20th century knew it, you offer evasion, special pleading, and bad faith. Socialism? Socialism is what *you* say it is, and therefore you reject responsibility for any other socialism, and for the real, historical socialism.

As the fond mother said when she saw her son marching in a platoon of soldiers: “Oh look — they're all out of step except my Johnny!”

A: Go on, froth at the mouth a little more — the release of tension is probably good for your health! You are the one being arbitrary, not me. You damn socialism by accepting every claim to be socialist by those whose behaviour you dislike. It is sleight of mind, evasion, and, essentially, political cowardice.

In the 20th century, Hitler, Stalin, David Ben Gurion,

Clement Attlee, Castro, Leon Blum, Gamal Abdul Nasser, Saddam Hussein, Mao Zedong, Leon Trotsky, Rosa Luxemburg, Buenaventura Durruti — they all called themselves “socialists” — socialists, or Arab socialists, national socialists, Ba'th socialists, Zionist socialists, anarchist socialists, etc.

They did mean *something* in common by the title “socialism”, namely social or state action. But, if defined either by *what they did*, or by *the doctrine* they proclaimed and under whose banner they claimed to act, or by the social classes in which they acted, they can't all have been equally socialist.

Say they were all socialists because they all said they were, and you reduce socialism to a meaningless word. Which, I suppose, is pretty much what the 20th century did to the word “socialism”.

The Stalinists in power insisted they were socialists. Their anti-socialist opponents agreed wholeheartedly that yes, the Stalinists were socialists. That settles it, eh?

You are repeating the old Stalinist lies! In the earlier articles in this series we have seen how, why, and with what result Stalinism subverted, perverted, and negated the old socialism.

I'll tell you why your glib abuse of socialism is foolish. It functions as special pleading to support capitalism, and on the level of argument it is a frame-up.

Marxist socialism, communism, cannot be sunk into the vague word “socialism”. It was never just a matter of general aspirations and wishes, such as many “socialisms” had been back across the centuries as far as classical Greece and Plato.

It was never a “utopia”, an ideal arbitrary blueprint worked out in someone's head to be imposed on reality.

It was a thoroughly worked-out account of social history and an analysis of capitalism, of its tendencies and necessary evolution.

According to Marx, socialism was to be, the culmination, or next stage, of the evolution of capitalism and on from capitalism. It was a by-product of such things as the socialisation of production and distribution which is a basic part of capitalism itself.

The idea of the working class as the protagonist of that socialist evolution was no mystical elevation of the poor and the downtrodden and exploited in someone's well-meaning head.

Working class

The proletariat was a product of capitalism. And is! There are greatly more of us now than there ever were. The proletariat is the bearer of socialism because it can resolve the contradiction within capitalism between private ownership and socialised production, by establishing collective social control over production processes that knit together vast social networks.

Collectively-controlled economy without democracy is a contradiction in terms: either the people own collectively, and that means democracy, or it is a sham collectivism, Stalinist state ownership. The working class, in aspiring to own the great enterprises produced by capitalism, can only aspire to own them collectively and thus democratically (unlike, say, peasants, who could divided up the land from the big landlords).

Marx's view was right or wrong as a picture of the social and economic reality of capitalism, and an expectation and advocacy about where it could go. There was nothing vague and undefined about it, no arbitrary project-mongering of the utopian sort.

From that point of view, Stalinism, Maoism, Ba'th socialism, national socialism, could not be seen as socialism, whatever the leaders called themselves.

If they were “the socialists”, then the socialism and communism of Marx needed another name. The eruption of those alien formations who took on the name socialist because it was popular did not mean that Marxist socialism sank into being just one of the variants of “socialism” or prefix-socialism.

The social realities, the stage of evolution of capitalism, what the “socialists” took over and how — those factors had to be taken into account in deciding whether or not a socio-economic or socio-political formation was socialist in the Marxist sense. In the only serious sense.

There is nothing evasive or in-bad-faith about taking those things into account. There is evasion, special pleading, self-blinding, and viciously thoughtless know-nothing bad faith in doing what you do. You damn Marxist socialism, working-class socialism, on the basis of the history of everything that called itself socialist or communist in the 20th century, and thus mainly of formations that did not meet the preconditions to be described even as attempts at or approaches to working-class socialism. Of formations which were denounced in advance by the Marxist, Bolshevik, socialists, and which massacred

those Marxist socialists.

If you like, leave words like socialism and communism to describe the horrors of the 20th century, and choose another name for what I'm calling socialism — “democratic collectivism”, or a less clumsy term, if you can think of one. But stop fooling yourself with the pretence that Stalinism and its like were what Marx and Lenin talked about and acted for. Stop blinding yourself! Stop using the horrors of Stalinism to excuse the horrors of capitalism, or pretend that the fundamental and explosive contradictions generated by the very development of capitalism have gone away.

To do that is a form of ideological terrorism. It has inhibited god knows how many people from drawing socialist conclusions from the crisis of world capitalism since 2007. Socialism? they think. No, that is that Stalinist horror story we all know so well.

B: Of course I want to resist you drawing socialistic conclusions from the faults and crimes of capitalism! Suicide is not a solution to the problems that go with being alive. Socialist suicide is not a solution to the problem of life under capitalism.

The only possible economic basis for social liberty is market capitalism. “Liberticide” is too self-murdering a price for eliminating the faults and difficulties of capitalism.

A: What about democracy? Pluto-democracy is the shallowest, emptiest version of democracy, and that is all we have now, under capitalism.

B: A damn sight better than any form of authoritarianism or absolutism!

A: Yes indeed. And yes, the proper economic basis for liberty and democracy is a central part of what divides us, rather than the issue of liberty and democracy as such.

The socialist who is not for democratic self-rule and liberty in relation to the state and society is not a socialist — is a contradiction in terms.

But you tend to conflate democracy and liberty. They are not the same thing at all.

Very often when people praise “democracy”, they have in mind liberty; and by liberty they mean only the mere absence of direct state repression, or of the direct exercise of arbitrary state power.

B: That is of no consequence for what we are discussing.

A. Is it? What strikes me most is how unambitious you and your sort are for the democracy and liberty you claim as your guiding principles, which are in fact your fetish.

It is a miserably reduced, diminished, docked, stultified, dwarf, and often mere token version of liberty and democracy you settle for and glorify.

How far these things have declined from the versions of them put forward 100, 150 or 200 years ago by the pioneer fighters for liberty and democracy!

The zealots of the great French revolution, or even the less radical leaders of the American Revolution after 1776, or the mid-19th century Chartist labour-movement pioneers in Britain, or the leaders of the 1916 Rising in Dublin — Connolly, Pearse, and all the others fighting for liberty and democracy — none of them would recog-

HOW THE OTHER HALF LIVES

For decades from the 1950s to the 70s, the strength of the labour movement counteracted capital's drive for inequality, and even pushed it back a bit.

Now inequality is spiralling. In the USA, the wealthiest *one per cent* accounts for 20% of all consumer spending, and the wealthiest 10% for half of all consumer spending. India has more and more millionaires: but half of all children in that huge country are under-nourished.

Alongside growing poverty has come the rise of a huge world “luxury goods industry”.

Since 1994 the *Financial Times* has published a regular thick and glossy supplement, entitled “How To Spend It”, devoted to that industry. A recent issue featured a wristwatch — a commercially-produced thing, not some unique antique — costing £1.4 million, and, to complement it, watch-winding machines at prices varying from £150,000 to £2,000.

That's where the billions go.

Does socialism make sense?

nise the extant version of liberty and democracy (pluto-democracy!) as the realisation of what they advocated under the same names. None of them would accept what you in your militant-capitalist and fear-ridden Stalinophobic political idiocy champion and defend!

B: The socialists don't champion liberty and democracy!

A: Some would-be socialists don't. We do. And we have for many decades. Trotsky did: see for example his Action Programme for France, in 1934.

Today in Britain a Tory/Lib-Dem coalition government is engaged in undisguised war against the working class and other working people. They have no democratic mandate for what they are doing. There is an electoral mandate against what they are doing.

The Tories' Lib-Dem junior partners campaigned in the election against the cuts they are now helping the Tories push through. The Tories did not in the May 2010 election spell out any of the austerity measures they planned and now push through.

A majority of voters (52%) voted for Labour, whose leaders campaigned against the Tory cuts, or the Lib Dems — that is, against the measures the Lib-Dems and Tories are now pushing through. It counts for nothing. This is democracy?

The truth is that the left, in the very broad historical sense in which the Liberals can claim to be of the left, failed first and last as democrats — that is, failed to secure a system that functioned democratically in Abraham Lincoln's apt definition: "government of the people, by the people, for the people".

Today's pluto-democracy is government by the rich, for the rich.

The issue here is that of the economic basis needed for democracy to exist in reality as well as in name.

A society in which the means of production, exchange, and communication are monopolised by a small class of vastly rich people, and administered for their benefit not that of society or of the workers, one in which economic decisions of vast and shaping importance are taken by that small class — look at the bankers, for god's sake! — that system cannot honestly be called democratic. Saying it is preferable to outright dictatorship — which is true — doesn't get you off the hook.

In such a system democratic political structures cannot but be a facade for the autocrats who own industry and make the fundamental social decisions. The government, in the fundamental things, is their "executive committee". This "pluto-democracy" is not what the great pioneer fighters for democracy and liberty would recognise as democracy.

In the long-ago days of small enterprises and farm homesteads, in revolutionary 18th century America, democracy could in principle assume a society of more or less equal citizens who would exercise the democratic franchise. In our world, all in theory are equal, but some, in George Orwell's words satirising Stalinism, "are more equal than others". A lot more!

And they have more "liberty", too. The freedom of the press that in practice means freedom for newspaper owners like Rupert Murdoch or Richard Desmond is liberty not of but against the people — the companion to a democracy that is a withered, mocking parody of real democratic self-rule.

Whatever about the past, and however you define the many and varied 20th century entities that called themselves socialist, we need to look at our own society and its problems — problems that are now crowding in on the workers and working people.

If the memory of the horrors that went under variants of the name "socialism" in the past stop us doing that, and inhibit us in drawing the necessary conclusions from what capitalism is, then we are disarmed, ideologically and politically.

The truth is that the demonisation of "socialism", the insistence that the Stalinist liars were correct when they presented their system as the realisation of Marxist socialism — that is part of the bourgeoisie's "class struggle on the ideological front".

It functions to prevent us drawing the right conclusions from Stalinism.

B: It's still a case of "they're all out of step except me"! What lessons have the existing left learned from Stalinism? As you have argued in the earlier articles in this series, what you called the "would-be left" is still in the grip of Stalinism or "Stalinoid-ism".

Look, for instance, at that filthy Stalinist rag the *Morning Star*. It has lied wholesale for 80 years, but it is not lying when it claims to be the "paper of the left".

The Con-Dem government have no democratic mandate

MPs, trade-union leaders, erstwhile Trotskyist sectarians like poor clueless, backboneless John Lister, write for it.

A: You can't honestly accuse *Solidarity* and Workers' Liberty of ignoring that, can you? Even so, the main enemy is capitalism and its defenders.

For us, the would-be left are enemies because in their political pixilation they hinder the education of the working class. They are your mirror-inverse, as you are theirs!

B: Say what you like, it doesn't make the case for socialism!

A: You'll listen if I do?

B: I'll try to...

A. All right, I'll make the case. It comes under five main headings.

One: what's wrong with capitalism.

Two: The "objective" case for socialism in terms of the existing development of capitalism.

Three: why the working class is and must be the protagonist of socialism.

Four: the "subjective" case, why socialism is positively desirable.

Five: the personal case — why you should devote yourself to the fight for socialism.

What's wrong with capitalism?

Look around you. First, look at the crisis we are in. Vast numbers of people are without work already. People are having their mortgages foreclosed — that is, the banks are taking possession of their homes. Governments are going bankrupt.

We don't know yet if there will be a "double dip" — an escalation and deepening of the crisis into something like the great slump of the first half of the 1930s. It is a serious possibility.

And why? Because the bankers, everywhere, lent money, and borrowed money from each other, wildly and recklessly. The story of the banks here is not only about the banks. It is the summing-up, the epitome, of the whole capitalist system, of which the banks are part. The people fall victim to the ruthless, reckless, competitive drive for profit by a small minority which dominates economic life.

B: Many "ordinary" people benefited. They were able to buy their homes because the banks were generous.

A: An awful lot of them now find their homes are owned by the banks, impatient for their loot. What they have already paid is being confiscated — by the "generous" bank! — because they can't meet the monthly mortgage-money repayments.

The bankers were driven to make reckless loans not by

ALBERT EINSTEIN EXPLAINS WHY HE IS A SOCIALIST

The economic anarchy of capitalist society as it exists today is, in my opinion, the real source of the evil. We see before us a huge community of producers the members of which are unceasingly striving to deprive each other of the fruits of their collective labour... not by force, but on the whole in faithful compliance with legally established rules...

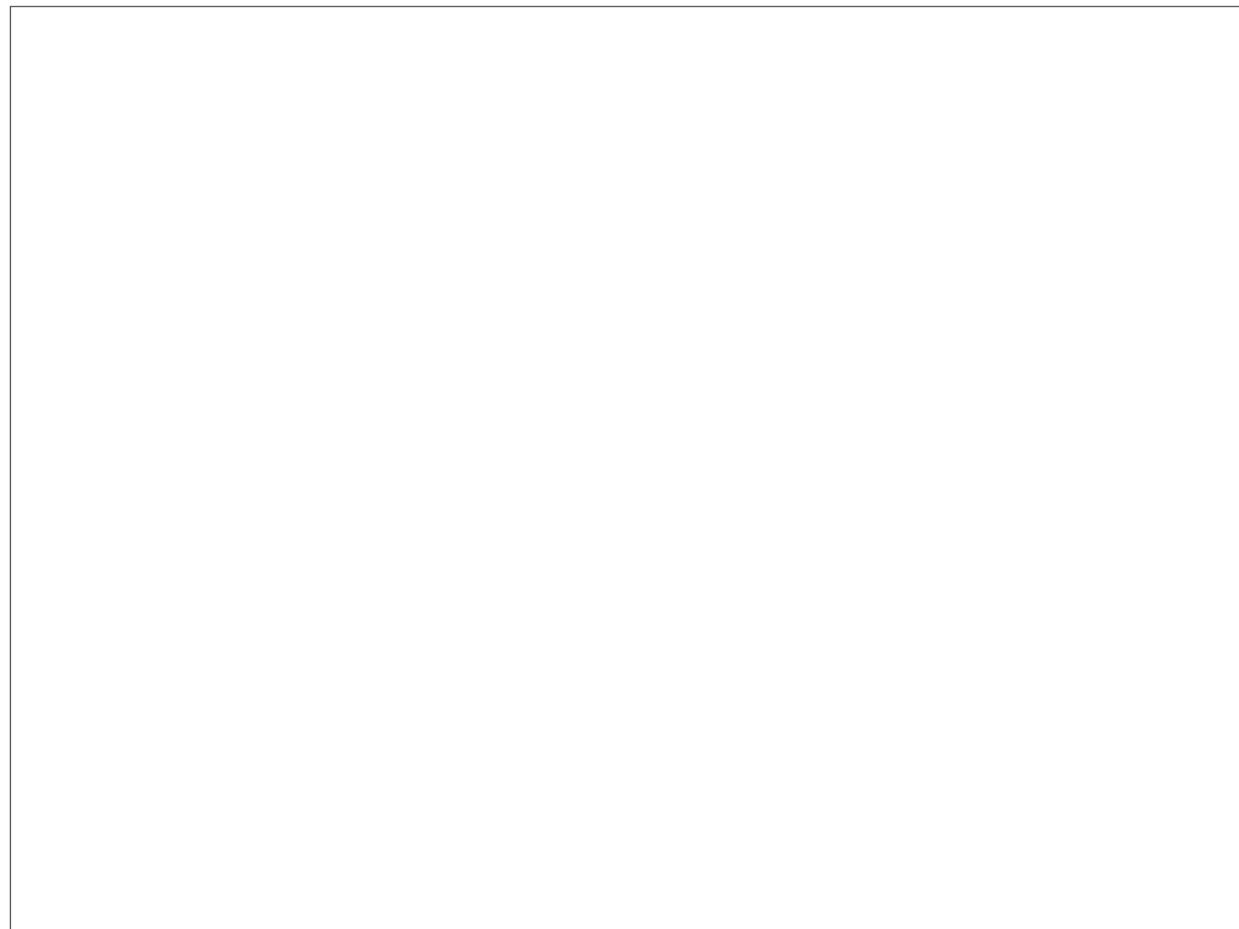
The profit motive, in conjunction with competition among capitalists, is responsible for an instability in the accumulation and utilisation of capital which leads to a huge waste of labour, and to the crippling of the social consciousness of individuals...

I am convinced there is only one way to eliminate these grave evils, namely through the establishment of a socialist economy, accompanied by an educational system which would be oriented toward social goals.

In such an economy, the means of production are owned by society itself and are utilised in a planned fashion. A planned economy, which adjusts production to the needs of the community, would distribute the work to be done among all those able to work and would guarantee a livelihood to every man, woman and child...

Nevertheless, it is necessary to remember that a planned economy is not yet socialism. A planned economy as such may be accompanied by the complete enslavement of the individual. (1949)

Does socialism make sense?



Bankers run the credit system for their own benefit

generosity but greed. They went mad for money.

Without the services the bankers operate, this society would seize up. But they run the banks as their private property. They ran the credit system essential to the whole of society for their own benefit, to make the maximum profit for themselves. They came not to care about anything else.

Then in 2007-8 some American bankers — like a man who suddenly realises that he is walking on the edge of an abyss — panicked at the realisation that vast numbers of mortgages would never be paid off, and as a consequence reams and reams of financial paper issued by banks and indirectly based on those mortgages might be valueless. The panic spread. Lehman Brothers failed. The whole system was convulsed.

The governments had to step in to the role that the banks had played and prop them up. The alternative was to let the whole system seize up, even have High Street cashpoints closing.

The social role of the banks was tied to and merged with private ownership and operation of the banks to make profits for private owners. It brought society across the world to a convulsive crisis.

That in a nutshell sums up what is wrong with capitalism. Vast social complexes of production, exchange, communication, without which this society could not function, and on which the livelihoods of untold millions depend, are run as private property for the benefit of private owners, no matter what it means for the others in society,

It would be hard to invent a cleverer parable to illustrate what is wrong with capitalism than this true story, which affects all our lives and which may yet pitch us into the worst slump for nearly a century.

I put it to you that such a system is insane!

The ways the governments responded — the right-wing Bush administration in the USA as well as the New Labour government in Britain — proves how nonsensical it is. The governments took over and guaranteed the functions of the banks — “temporarily”.

The Irish government went furthest of all in issuing a government guarantee to the creditors of Irish banks — putting the whole credit of Irish society at the service of the banks. That may yet lead to the bankruptcy of the government.

Governments “nationalised” the losses of the banks, made “society” responsible for them. They took over the banks, but only temporarily. They will be returned to private owners once the storm is weathered. As someone put it, this was the privatisation of gains and the socialisation of losses. A crazy way to run society — running it for the rich by the rich in the service of the rich!

B: Oh, I agree that the bankers’ vast bonuses should not be allowed.

A: Yes, they are obscene. But the bigger obscenity is the power we give them over us. And it is not confined to the bankers.

All through society it’s the same. Vast institutions on which all our lives depend are run not in the interests of society, but of private owners.

What is the “objective” case for socialism?

Karl Marx once defined his socialism as a consciousness of the unconscious social processes. It is a good description of it.

Socialism — political, social, and economic communalism — is of course a good idea. It was a good idea hundreds of years and millennia before Karl Marx. It was found in the writings of the 4th century BC Athenian Plato, for example.

Marxists called themselves “scientific socialists” because their advocacy of socialism was more than a mere good idea about how things might be or should be. It was an idea of how the economy, society, and human thinking about how to organise social life, were tending to go — were compelled by their own logic to go. An idea of how the contradictions in capitalist society would propel society forward — like the contradiction we see in the case of the modern bankers, between the private ownership and owner-serving operation of the means of production and exchange, and the gigantically social nature of production.

That, for Marxists, is the “objective” basis of our socialism. It operates, and goes on operating, no matter how weak or confused the forces conscious of the logic and needs of this process — the socialists — are.

Only with the help of the conscious activity of socialists can we win a solution and organise the harmonious outcome of these social contradictions and dynamics. But the dynamic which creates conditions for socialism goes on working even amidst the massacre of the socialists, and even if administered by those who massacre socialists. All they achieve, all they can achieve, is to confine the solution of the social contradictions, for a time, to stop-gap, pro-tem expedients.

Frederick Engels described this as the “the socialist society” of the future “invading” present-day capitalism. In recent times it has been the driving force behind globalisation, the concentration of the means of production, distribution, and communication into gigantic, and ever yet more gigantic, enterprises, bigger than many nation states.

Today, across the world, there are enormous conglomerations of means of production, exchange, and communication, in corporations that relate to the existing states something like the smaller Duke-ruled sub-states of the Dark Ages and the Middle Ages to the monarchies to which they nominally owed allegiance. These modern “commercial kingdoms” operate as lawless tyrannies to

those who work within them, and as looting brigands to the societies around them.

All this is rooted in the spontaneous movement of the productive forces into ever bigger concentrations. To change the image, it is like a pool of piranha fish who over time eat each other up until there are far fewer, but bigger and fatter, piranha fish left.

The contradictions that have grown in the two centuries since the Industrial Revolution from the continued private ownership and operation of the social means of production, and its conflict with the bulk of the people, do not lessen but become acute.

B: If socialism is inevitable, and processed, so to speak, into the “genes” of capitalist society, then why didn’t it break through the barriers in the 20th century?

A: Because the dynamic works itself out through the class struggle between the exploited, the have-nots, and the owners of the means of production, who dispose of great wealth and the services of many people tied to them by privileges and pay-outs.

The “haves” are tied to the system that gives them wealth and the power of shaping and reshaping society now. They defend it. An individual here and there among them may come over to socialism, but this powerful class stands like a gigantic series of rocks across the highway, across the logical and necessary development of society along the road capitalism itself has already developed.

This ruling class has inflicted defeat, again and again, on those who tried to resolve the contradiction between society and the private ownership of the social means of production, exchange, and communications.

Societies do not only go forward. The class struggle can lead, and in history has led, to stagnation and regression and a lesser society — to what Marx and Engels as long ago as the Communist Manifesto of 1848 called “the mutual ruination of the contending classes”. Much of the history of the 20th century is the history of the partial ruination of the contending classes: the ruination of Germany and other parts of Europe in the 1940s, for instance.

A progressive solution to the inner conflict of capitalism requires the victory over the ruling class of the opposite pole — the non-owners of the means of production.

B: The working class, you mean? The proletariat! Ha! That is the best example of the falseness and foolishness running through your pretended “objectivity” and the allegedly “scientific” character of your Marxist socialism! Your view of the working class is absurd.

I think it was John Maynard Keynes who asked why he should look to the social equivalent of mud, the working class, as saviour against the educated ruling classes. Why should he look to the most ignorant, the least accomplished, the demonstrably least able class in the society — to its human beasts of burden? Why indeed?

You want a solution to what you call the economic and social contradictions of capitalism — and you make it a precondition of that solution that the beasts of burden, the “vocal tools” of that society, should first, within this society, rise above it, above the best educated in the society. It is absurd. It is like proposing to play tennis not with a net between the players, but an insurpassable 20 foot high brick wall.

This is rank sentimentality — or transmuted Christianity, with its cult of the humble — on the part of middle-class socialists, and ridiculous narcissism on the part of working-class socialists!

Why the working class?

A: Yes, the unreadiness of the working class to do in history what it alone can do is part of the contradictions in advanced — not to say senile! — capitalism that have to be overcome if we are to go forward. Other solutions, reactionary, regressive, ruinous solutions, are possible too.

B: Looking to the working class is arbitrary. In a way, that in itself shows up the hopelessness of the socialism you espouse. It is deeply senseless and scarcely believable foolishness. Look at the history of the 20th century, for Christ’s sake!

A: You, like the snob Keynes, would look to the ruling class? To those who as a social group are tied to the existing system?

Those who have in the 20th century resorted to Hitler, Mussolini, Peron, Chiang Kai Shek, Pinochet, and all their similars, against letting the working class reorgan-

Does socialism make sense?

ise society?

That strikes me as the ultimate foolishness. It would be the equivalent of the so-named utopian romantic socialists of the early 19th century, like the immensely great Robert Owen in Britain, appealing to the upper classes and the rich to rescue the wage slaves of capitalist society by benignly creating a fair society — that is, by expropriating their class and themselves, collectively cutting their own throats. Or of the post-Trotsky Trotskyists who in “open letters” appealed at various times to Stalinist dictators like Mao and Tito to abolish Stalinist rule, or to “democratise” it, which would mean the same thing.

Against the ruling class as a class — or its majority, or even a sizeable minority of it — wanting an egalitarian reorganisation of society, there is an impassable barrier: deep-rooted self-interest. There is no such barrier to the working class wanting it.

History at least shows that. Not only is there no objective barrier. There is a strong incentive to working-class people wanting socialism. Leaving aside the homeless and other elements of an “underclass”, the working class finds no class in society lower than itself. It can only own the means of production collectively — and, therefore, only democratically, because there is no other adequate way to own and administer collectively.

The barriers to the working class achieving this are many. It must understand the need for it — that is, it must break through the domination in its minds of the ideas of the ruling class and of the habit of seeing capitalist society as normal and the only possible system. It must organise and educate itself, and defeat the ruling class — a ruling class armed as it always is with every sort of weapon, from propaganda and brainwashing to the regular armies of the bourgeois state and its auxiliary irregular shock troops such as fascist bands.

B: A tall order!

A: A tall order indeed! But it is not impossible, as the idea of the capitalist class transforming capitalism into a system without its chronic contradictions is. It can be done. We know that because it has been done, mostly important in Russia in 1917 and after.

The fundamental fact of capitalism is that it exploits the workers. The workers, in the process of working for a wage, create new value greater than the cost of their wage. The so-named “surplus value” becomes the property of the capitalist who controls the enterprise.

In turn, the capitalists are forced to compete with each other to squeeze and grind as much surplus as possible out of the workers. The most successful can grow, re-equip, and make themselves more profitable. Those who fall behind in competition are gobbled up by their competitors.

No matter how good-willed or good-intentioned a given capitalist may be, he or she is locked into this competitive system. The rule is: exploit, accumulate wealth, expand — or die.

The profit drive is therefore the all-controlling mainspring, regulator, and determinant in the system. It will remain so until conscious overall planning replaces profit as the mainspring, and until the workers who are now the exploited class take collective ownership and substitute free cooperation for what Marx called “wage slavery”.

The fundamental relation of capitalist exploitation also, by its very nature, generates the integration of workers into large collective workforces, and constant conflicts between workers and capitalists over working hours, pay, and conditions. It pushes workers towards organising for those conflicts, and educating themselves in the process.

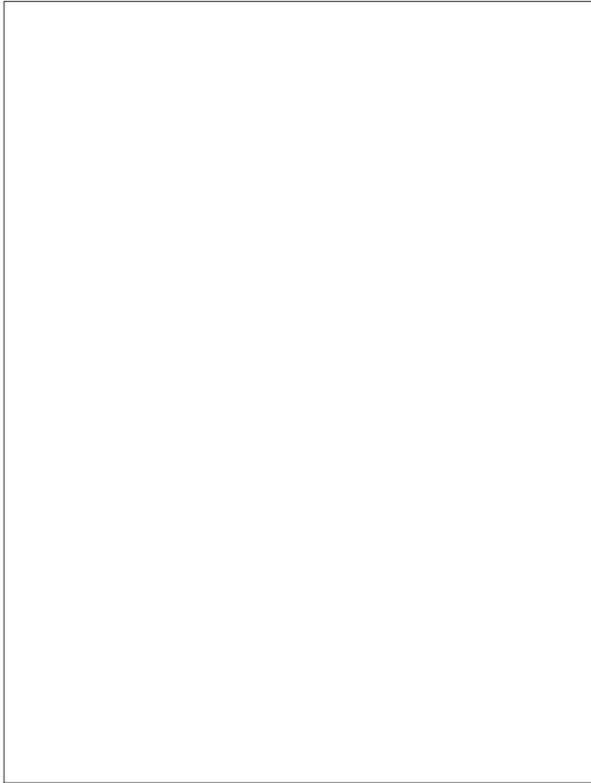
B: “Planning” is your answer? But you can’t “plan” a complex modern economy in every detail. The attempt to do that creates an enormous and inevitably incompetent bureaucracy, not a usable plan.

A: That is a curious case of a myth erected upon a myth. Here too, the bourgeoisie and its apologists batten on the lies of Stalinism.

It is reductio-ad-absurdum misrepresentation. It is also an example of slyly substituting something else for what is supposedly being discussed.

Planning of every detail is impossible? Yes. Therefore? Therefore the exploitation that is central to capitalism as to all class society cannot be done away with? Therefore the market must be treated as a god that can be overruled only at risk of catastrophe?

It is a bit like the idea that socialists are against private property, and would therefore seize your house and



Stalinist propaganda from the USSR: “Let us fulfil the Five Year Plan”. This is not what socialism is about!

your CD collection, when in fact socialists are against private property *in the means of production*.

You suggest that because it would be impossible to pre-plan all the complex details of a modern economy, therefore planning is entirely impossible. You evade the question: what is to be planned? what needs to be planned? how much needs to be planned if we are to escape the tyranny of the market and the capitalist class exploitation that goes with it?

Socialism does not need or presuppose a Stalinist-like “planning” or attempted planning of everything. It doesn’t need the nationalisation of everything, either.

What need to be planned and harmoniously integrated into coherence are the great basic decisions of production and distribution. There is no reason why in such planning there cannot also be free choice of what individuals consume, and production that is responsive to what people like or want.

The Stalinists nationalised everything down to the proverbial corner shop because the bureaucratic class demanded for itself every possible scrap of wealth, and viewed small enterprises as class competition from “the petty bourgeoisie”. Trotsky and his comrades such as Christian Rakovsky severely criticised the socially cauterising “nationalisation” of everything in the USSR, as they also criticised the blindly-bureaucratic, over-detailed, handed-down-from-above Stalinist attempts at planning. Such measures were never part of a Marxist programme.

You know what most expresses the spurious nature of the objection that you can’t plan a modern economy? The great international and national conglomerates already plan now, for their own multifarious industries and networks. Except that they plan for maximising markets and profits in competition with each other.

Integrating and adapting the existing plans into human — as distinct from capitalist — coherence would not be all that difficult. The power, range, and sophistication of computers is constantly improving, and can be expected to make easy things difficult now.

The subjective case for socialism

B: But why should I want socialism? Capitalism has, despite the terrible events of the 20th century, and not denying them either, learned a great deal.

We have been through a tremendous cycle of capitalist boom and expansion. Things have been getting better, progressively, for a lot of people, for a sizeable portion of humankind, over decades. And why should I want a social levelling-down, to a grey social uniformity and conformity?

Why should I pretend that people as people are equal, when they are not equal in capacity, propensity, and achievement?

The faults of capitalism, which I don’t deny, and in honesty could not deny, are a necessary and therefore worthwhile price to pay for a society that creates wealth, unleashes and encourages personal initiative in all fields. It encourages social mobility, and allows easy entry into its elite ruling class. It promotes a thriving market in ideas, it offers choices, it fosters and rewards a free press. It nurtures rationality and realistic thinking and even, most of the time now, rational, democratic, and peaceful relations between states. At its best it promotes political democracy.

The bird in my hand is worth a lot more than the birds out of my reach in the bush, no matter how pretty their plumage seems, looked at from a distance.

The ideal here is the enemy of the possible and improvable. The imagined perfection is the enemy of incrementally achievable improvement.

And the result of sacrificing that incremental improvement in pursuit of some ideal big-bang replacement that doesn’t exist, that at best is yet to be won, and that may never be won, may be ruin.

That you can think something up, and vividly envisage it in your head, doesn’t necessarily mean that you can achieve it in reality.

A: Your picture of capitalist reality is, to understate it, a little one-sided.

You attribute to “capitalism” and to the bourgeoisie things won by the working class and the plebeians in history against the bourgeoisie — the existing democracy is one example. It was won by plebeian struggle, but, along the way, progressively emptied of much of its old meaning by the entrenched ruling class and their servants and tools.

You assume that the desirable things and traits you list are inseparable from capitalism and cannot exist without the present arrangements of society.

Socialists believe that those things can not only survive capitalism, but develop much more fully once the limits imposed on them by capitalism and bourgeois rule are broken.

Above all, what strikes me is your incredible complacency.

There were people making the same sort of conservative defence of the then status quo back to the old Stone Age! “If we get too reliant on this new-fangled craze for flint tools, may we lose what we have had for tens of thousands of years?” “Iron? Ugly and foul-coloured stuff. Think of the beauties of bronze, and the artistry with which its forgers lift up society!” “Produce with steam power? Dirt, pollution, ruin lies that way — better stick to the handicraft manufactures we have!”

“Democracy? How can the many-headed ignorant mass match the wisdom and learning and concentrated enlightenment passed on from father to son through ages, of a good king enhanced in his personal rule by ab-

OSCAR WILDE: “THE SOUL OF MAN UNDER SOCIALISM”

I cannot help saying that a great deal of nonsense is being written and talked nowadays about the dignity of manual labour. There is nothing necessary dignified about manual labour at all, and most of it is absolutely degrading. It is mentally and morally injurious to man to do anything in which he does not find pleasure, and many forms of labour are quite pleasureless activities, and should be regarded as such.

To sweep a slushy crossing for eight hours on a day when the east wind is blowing is a disgusting occupation. To sweep it with mental, moral, or physical dignity seems to me to be impossible. To sweep it with joy would be appalling. Man is made for something better than disturbing dirt. All work of that kind should be done by a machine.

And I have no doubt that it will be so. Up to the present, man has been, to a certain extent, the slave of machinery... This, however, is, of course, the result of our property system and our system of competition. One man owns a machine which does the work of five hundred men. Five hundred men are, in consequence, thrown out of employment... The one man secures the produce of the machine and keeps it, and has five hundred times as much as he should have... Were that machine the property of all, every one would benefit by it. It would be an immense advantage to the community...

At present machinery competes against man. Under proper conditions machinery will serve man.

Does socialism make sense?

Floods in Bangladesh, a product of climate change. The prospect of ecological ruination faces us with stark urgency today.

solite power?"

The things you praise were in their time opposed by people like you with similar arguments. "Remake society according to reason, champion what is rational and scrap what isn't? Don't be ridiculous! Tradition! Age-old tradition, the way our parents and grandparents did things — that is the sure road to safety and to preventing society falling under a dictator like Cromwell".

No socialist who knows history, and certainly no Marxist, will deny the great achievements of capitalism: the very possibility of socialism is created by capitalism as it develops the social productivity and social intermeshing of labour. But capitalism blocks the further logical development even of the good things it created in history.

Take personal initiative, for instance. Most people are locked into economic and social situations that warp and mutilate them, stifle their development, and snuff our individuality.

The freedom of the press today in fact mostly means freedom to poison the wells of public information and informed debate for people like Rupert Murdoch.

"Choice" is double-talk. Mostly it means choice, and wide choice, for the well-off. It is a thin ideological garment for the freedom of the moneyed behind which hides the cutting-off for most people of choice in most things, including jobs, that is, in how they spend the main part of their entire lives. "For more choice you must have less choice", as Orwell or any other honest observer might have put it.

Above all, the system corrupts humankind and keeps us at the level of predatory animals looking for options to rob each other. The wise scientist Albert Einstein summed it up like this:

"This crippling of individuals I consider the worst evil of capitalism... An exaggerated competitive attitude is inculcated... [we are] trained to worship acquisitive success..."

"I am convinced there is only one way to eliminate these grave evils, namely through the establishment of a socialist economy, accompanied by an educational system which would be oriented toward social goals".

The fundamental argument, however, is that the whole capitalist system is crying out for change — for economic

democracy, if you want to put it like that. It is devouring what you say are its great positive achievements. The growth of the multinational corporations massively undermines the very possibility of the democratic elected governments of most individual states controlling and regulating them.

B: All through history there have been people like you — recklessly putting at risk what has been achieved, what is, in pursuit of untried and allegedly better alternatives. That some innovations have worked out well does not prove that all initiatives do! In fact, the experience is that they don't. Look at Stalinism!

A: Yes, look at Stalinism — and understand it, the whys and wherefores of it! Right now, in your head, it is a shadowy bogeyman.

B: Ah yes, nobody understands it but you. And socialism had nothing to do with it?

A: Marxists base their socialism on certain social achievements of capitalism — development of productive forces and so on. The Stalinist system emerged, proclaiming itself as building socialism in one country, by overthrowing working-class rule and in circumstances in which, according to Marx and according to the leaders of the Russian Revolution, the basic prerequisites of their socialism were not present. So what is wrong about refusing to accept Stalinism as "socialism" in the Marxist sense?

The perversity here is yours — to speak plainly, the post-Stalinist jitters. Get over Stalinism! Look around you at the foulness that immerses us all under capitalism.

The personal case for being a socialist

B: In any case, supposing I were to agree with you so far, what's in it for me? Why should I bother? Why spend even a small part of my life, waste even an instant of my too-short sentence, on advocating socialism?

If it is as socially and historically necessary as you say it is, it will inevitably come through without my help. And if it needs my help, then by implication I have no guarantee that we will succeed, so I'd most likely be wasting my life on something hopeless.

That is the lesson of the 20th century here — that socialism is hopeless, that your Marxist brand of socialism is doubly hopeless because of its absurd attachment to the daft idea that the working class and only the working class can bring it about.

A: If I offered you guarantees, I would be a charlatan! There are no guarantees. And socialism may not come about "anyway".

For decades it seemed that world war, and then nuclear war, would wreck civilisation and open a new regressive dark age. At his death Trotsky was oppressed by the idea that because of the defeats and betrayals of the working-class movement's attempts to replace capitalism in the previous quarter-century, humankind faced a series of world wars that would be "the grave of civilisation". Today the prospect of ecological ruination and social regression as a consequence faces us with stark urgency.

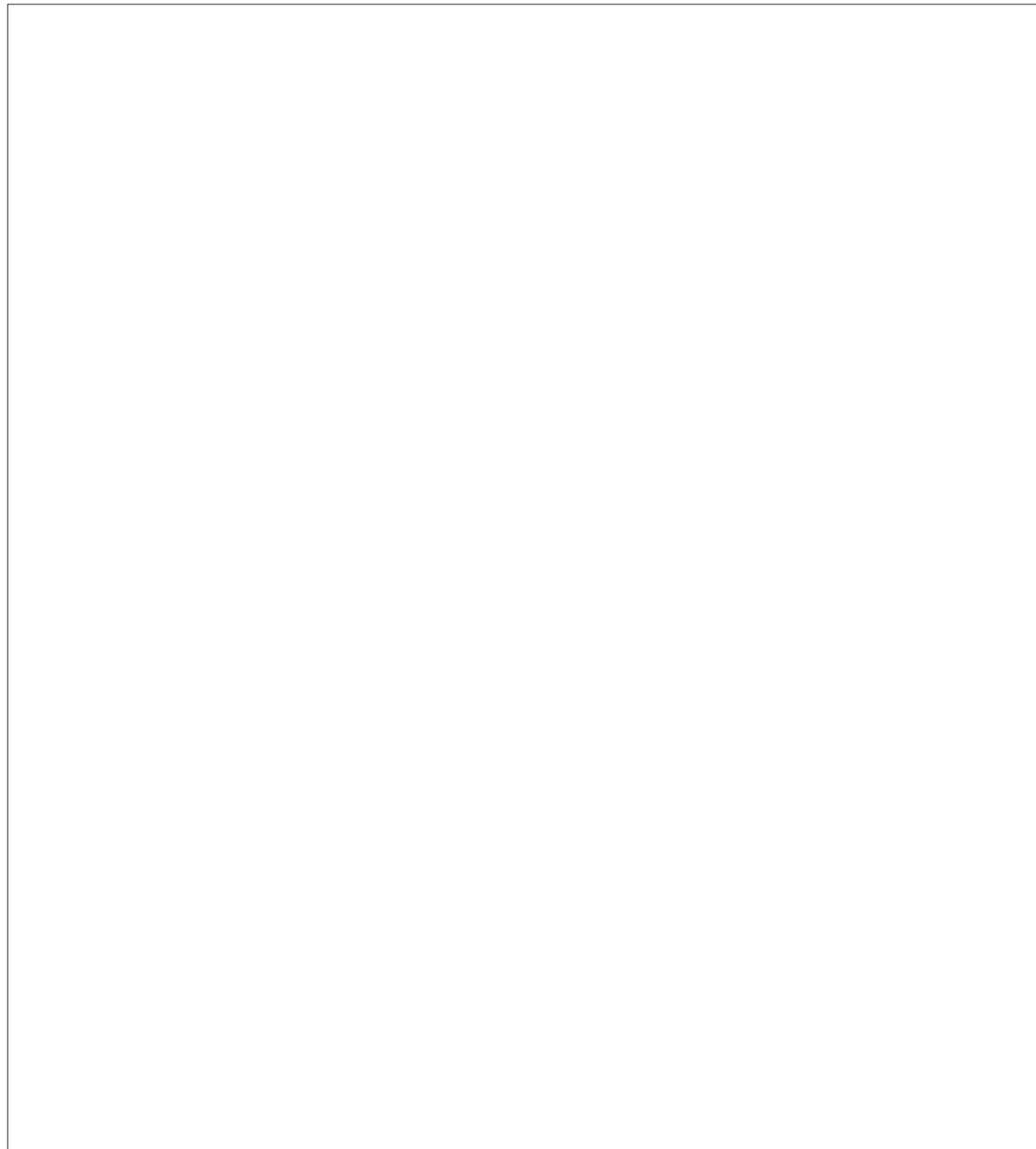
There may be limited time in which to mount a socialist society on the best achievements of capitalism. It may be an option that is foreclosing on us. We cannot afford to be smug. The reorganisation of the labour movement on a socialist basis is very urgent, because the task of confronting capitalism with a viable socialist alternative is very urgent, and getting more urgent.

But let me focus on your question, "what's in it for me?" Here we need to go beyond mere political considerations into such questions as what life is all about — what should a life be about?

Are we nothing higher than a modern commercial rendition of animals, including primitive humankind, spending a lifetime browsing and grubbing for food? That is the "shop until you drop" ethos which this society offers up. Leavened maybe with a bit of religious uplift, a half-tongue-in-cheek consultation with a horoscope to see what "the stars" are going to do to you? A bacchanalia of a pop festival once a year or so?

If you are a student, what are you going to do when

Does socialism make sense?



Taking a stand (or in this case having a sit-down): the Wapping dispute against the sacking of printers by Murdoch's News International. The only way to be... a working-class militant!

leave college? If you are a one-time left-wing student, now working, what do you do?

Will you teach? In a "good" school, or an average school, or a school, for example, in working-class East London? You'll see the heart-breaking reality of kids going through school and emerging semi-literate.

Will you become a university teacher, retailing second and third hand opinion and received capitalist wisdom, with a bit of academic Marxist criticism, perhaps, for leaven and for the sake of your conscience? If you get an academic job with more scope, will you be a left-wing academic consumer of "revolutionary" anti-capitalist theory, but not do something about it in practice by spreading understanding to workers and the people at large, and helping them organise to fight for it?

Will you be a nurse? A doctor? You'll see the heart-break of a National Health Service in chaos, with des-

perately needed medical care "rationed" by way of waiting times and increasingly by markets, and enormous amounts of money paid out to the pharmaceutical companies.

Will you become a chemist working for a pharmaceutical company? You might help invent a great medical step forward — and see it used as an expensive commodity, available only to those who can pay, in order to make profit for the bosses and shareholders of the company.

Will you go to a poorer country and make life a little better for people who, in a rich and supposedly civilised world, are dying for lack of money to buy comparatively cheap medicine?

Will you be a social worker? You will be providing inadequate help to the victims of poverty, poor education, unemployment, and migration far from home. At best you help them organise their lives a bit better with

inadequate means.

Will you be an immigration official? Help regiment migrant workers and their families; sort out the "legals" from the "illegals"; be part of a system which hunts down, imprisons, and deports the "illegals"?

Be a journalist? You won't be a privileged columnist, with some right to express a personal opinion (within the limits regulated by the choice of the newspaper and TV owners of who can be granted that privilege). There are very few such jobs.

As a run-of-the-mill newspaper or TV journalist, you can't help but contribute in some degree to the selection, slanting, and "balancing" of the millionaire-owned opinion-forming machine in which you will be a cog. You can't help but participate in a selection of what is "newsworthy" which suppresses discussion of the socialist alternatives that the crisis of capitalism has given a relevance which they seemed not to have in the days of the long capitalist boom.

Will you become a professional politician? Go from school, perhaps through office in a student union, on to be a "researcher" and maybe then a parliamentary candidate?

That is, work to mould and shape yourself to fit into the political machinery that runs the system?

The modern mainstream politician is a rancid mix of actor, reciting given-to-you lines in the bourgeois "immorality play" discourse; and lawyer, arguing a brief from whichever side of the issue is indicated, without real conviction or real concern for what is true or best for society.

Will you become a trade-union official? You will be in the labour movement, but "professionally" barred from being able to tell workers openly what you think about the union leadership and its policies. Will you limit yourself to helping workers get a little more workers in the labour market — some of the time! — but also helping the union machinery and the top leaders regiment and limit working-class responses?

Will you become a civil servant and keep your head down? Become some other sort of official, functioning as a cog in a bureaucratic machine? Or aspire to be, although the crisis and the cuts drive may frustrate you, and condemn you to a period of unemployment?

Of course, you have to live, and live in this society, not the sort of society you might choose. But to put your best energies into any of those jobs, or similar ones — all those choices are self-serving in the narrow financial and consumerist sense.

They are self-submerging and self-destroying in the sense of destroying your critical overview of what is right and wrong. They are, I put it to you, deeply irresponsible.

Most students — most rebellious students too — go on as they get older to work an excising operation on themselves so that they can fit in to a career like those I've just surveyed.

Don't you think that we socialist militants have a better idea? You have to live in society as it is, but you don't have to fool yourself and, as you get older, mutilate and repudiate your better, younger self. You don't have to prostitute yourself. You can be better than that.

You can be an enemy of capitalism and of its political machine and its opinion industries. You can study the Marxist critique of capitalism and act to prepare the working class to make a better society, one free from the evils that make capitalism an abomination.

Individual life should not be clad in narrowly personal and familial asbestos-skinned egotism — "I'm all right, Jack — fuck the others" — leavened perhaps with a donation here and there to charitable institutions such as War on Want.

Anyway, "society" may not leave you alone. An awful lot of people hypnotised by the values of commercialism are waking up from that sleep to the fact that they have been camping on an ice floe in a warming sea.

I put it to you that a better philosophy of life that the prevailing one is to face the fact that we are, each of us, part of a broader social entity, and that we should concern ourselves with its well-being. We should concern ourselves with the moral climate around us, if only in the interests of our children and their children, and do something to counter the mind-rotting morality inculcated and reinforced by capitalism.

We should not fatalistically and self-\ settle into accepting that a large part of humanity live in hunger and needless disease. We should not live without doing something about the slaughter of millions of Third World children on the altar of capitalist necessity. We should not be passive consumers only, but also try to create something better, or contribute to its creation.

JAMES P CANNON: "WHAT A SOCIALIST AMERICA WILL LOOK LIKE" (1953)

The emancipation of women will begin in the very first days of the workers' government, and very probably will be fully completed before the socialist society emerges from the transition period. The first condition for the real emancipation of women is their economic emancipation. That must presuppose the scientific organisation of housework, like all other work, so that women can have time and leisure for cultural activity and the free choice of occupation. That will imperatively require the establishment of communal kitchens, housekeeping services, nurseries and kindergartens...

One thing I'm absolutely sure is going to happen early in the period of the workers' government... There will be a tremendous popular movement of women to bust up this medieval institution of 40 million separate kitchens and 40 million different housewives cooking, cleaning, scrubbing, and fighting dust...

The enlightened socialist women will knock the hell out of this inefficient, unjust and antiquated system. The mass emergence of the socialist women from the confining walls of their individual kitchens will be the greatest jail break in history and the most beneficent. Women, liberated from the prison of the kitchen, will become the free companions of free men.