

## THE FAILURE OF SO-CALLED SOCIALISM - and THE IMPLICATIONS FOR OUR THEORY & PRACTICE

It is essential that we realise that today for the vast majority of working class people in capitalist countries, socialism is not an inspiring vision. Most of us on the revolutionary left are able to explain away for ourselves the problems of so-called socialist regimes and retain the belief in a socialist and ultimately communist vision as laid down in the writings of the founders of the communist movement. Not surprisingly, we are in a hurry to dismiss the threat so-called socialist societies pose to our ideas by making the (correct) point that these societies are not socialist - not even moving towards socialism. But, even if it is true that the bourgeois media make what happens in so-called socialist societies seem even worse than it in fact is, we cannot get away with arguing that calling these regimes socialist is purely a dirty trick of the West. After all, these regimes call themselves socialist and adopt 'Marxism-Leninism' as their official ideology. And events like the 'Boat People' and the war between Vietnam and Cambodia affect popular consciousness. So, Western ideologues of anti-communism like the 'new philosophers' in France are able to give a certain plausibility to their claim of a historical continuity existing between Marxism, totalitarianism (the Gulag) and so-called socialist societies.

### Internal and External Factors

Faced with this situation, revolutionaries in the West have stressed that so-called socialist societies bear no relation to real socialism. And we argue that countries like the Soviet Union were diverted from the building of socialism because of external constraints - for instance, the Civil War from 1917-21, the failure of the revolution in Western Europe. Indeed, these external factors are important, but there also existed internal factors that determined the failure to build socialism in the USSR (or at the very least move towards it). And, we must analyse these internal factors and develop a critique of them if we are to rebuild confidence in the desirability of socialism. In the 1920's and the 1930's, many working class vanguards in the West identified with the Soviet Union. In the 1960s and 1970s, it was with China. Today, they are just as aware of the pervasive rottenness of capitalism but no longer see the possibility of an alternative. So, to provide them with such an alternative is a matter of great urgency.

### The Dictatorship of the Proletariat

A fundamental internal factor lies in the contradictory nature of the period after the revolution - the period that has been described by Marx onwards as the dictatorship of the proletariat. The key problem is that whereas the dictatorship of the proletariat is seen as a transitional state that 'withers away' - the steps taken during it (to strengthen working class rule) make this process of 'withering away' more and more unlikely.

At a political level, the centralisation of power into one party that is both ruling party and state apparatus works against a destruction of the state that is seen by Marxists as an essential characteristic of communism. And the turbulent nature of the relationship between the state/party and the organs of popular power (e.g. the Soviets in the USSR, Poder Popular in Angola etc) reflects a conflict between state priorities at a national level and the autonomy of local decision making.

At the economic level, the centralisation of economic decision making in the state plan works against the economic decentralisation that is essential for effective workers' control. This fundamental contradiction was clear in the 1920-1 debate on the trade unions in the USSR in which the main protagonists were Lenin, Trotsky and the Workers Opposition. The Workers Opposition argued for workers' control of production at plant level. Against this, Lenin counterposed the need for a perspective which started from the interests of the class/nation as a whole - which managers of industry appointed by the state to carry out the economic plan were said to

to represent.\* Though Lenin (unlike Trotsky who argued the most extreme position of the 'militarisation of labour') did concede that in the prevailing situation in the Soviet Union, the interests of the state did not totally coincide with the interests of individual groups of workers and that therefore trade unions were still necessary to workers as defensive bodies.

### The Banning of Dissent

There can be no once and for all correct solution to these extremely difficult problems. They can only be resolved where political debate and discussion flourishes - and this is not the case in a one-party state. In fact, after 1917, the Bolsheviks began by allowing other political parties (and factions inside their party) but they were quick to use the Civil War as a pretext for the silencing of political opposition and debate. At his speech to the Tenth party congress in March 1921, Lenin told the Workers Opposition;

'You have come to the Party Congress with Comrade Kollontai's pamphlet which is entitled The Workers Opposition. When you sent in the final proofs, you knew about the Kronstadt events and the rising petty-bourgeois counter-revolution. You don't seem to realise the responsibility you are undertaking, and the way you are disrupting our unity.' At that congress, the Bolsheviks banned the Workers Opposition and all future factions. And this decision was to have severe consequences for political debate and opposition in the Soviet Union and in all societies that took it for a model. Obviously, you can't separate banning factions and banning other parties. As Deutscher puts it in the Prophet Armed; 'They did not realise that they could not ban all controversies outside their ranks and keep it alive within their ranks; they could not abolish democratic rights for society at large and preserve those rights for themselves alone.'\*\*

### Withering Away of the State

Underlying this under-estimation of the necessity for political discussion and debate in the transition to socialism is the notion held by Marx, Lenin, Engels etc. of the 'withering away of the state'. For according to the theory, as the state 'withers away' so does the need and rationale for political differences (that are articulated by political parties). A contemporary version of this argument is put forward by Bertell Ollman in an article in Critique (issue 8) - he writes; 'We should not be surprised to learn that in these conditions (of communism) there is no place for a state. Simply put, the state withers away because there is nothing further for it to do. The main work of the dictatorship of the proletariat was to destroy all remnants of capitalism and to construct the foundations for full communism. Laws, organisation, discipline, coercion etc, were all necessary to accomplish these ends. But now communism is the reality, and capitalism is history. Marx says, "When, in the course of development, class distinctions have disappeared, and all production has been concentrated in the hands of associated individuals, the public power will lose its political character. Political power, properly so called, is merely the organised power of one class for oppressing another.".....The people of communism are agreed on all subjects which could possibly come before a parliament. When interests merge and decisions are unanimous, it is no necessary to go through the

\*It is quite clear that the relationship between local and national interests continues to be a key problem for so-called socialist societies. For instance, in China, there is the problem of the different yields of the different agricultural communes. Should the communes with the richer earth be allowed to keep all their produce and distribute it to their members (who would then have a higher standard of living than workers in poorer communes) or should the state take some of their produce and redistribute it to those communes whose land is less fertile?

\*\* See also section 2 of the Big Flame pamphlet The Revolution Unfinished

formality of counting hands. Furthermore all really major decisions, those bearing on the structure of communism itself, have already been taken by this time, People have what they want, that is communism, and there is nothing for a legislature, whose main function is to make changes, to change.....'

For some totally unexplained reason, it seems that in the transition to communism, everybody is agreed on all major issues! Myths must be very strong to enable someone to write so glibly - given the events in so-called socialist countries over the last 60 years. That Ollman (and others) can be so absurdly optimistic comes from the Marxist belief that politics is essentially about classes and since under communism there are not classes, it follows that there is no politics. But even if we accept that under communism everyone is of the same class, why should that imply the disappearance of fundamental political differences? For example, differences about how to best use scarce resources, of how to punish wrong-doers, of what policies to have in trade with other countries etc. Under capitalism, the bourgeoisie is represented by a plurality - why should not this be the case for the working class under communism? Historically, this idea that the proletariat can have only one voice has been used systematically to stifle any political opposition to the dominant party in so-called socialist societies. Maybe, in time, the miracle will happen and all political differences will under communism disappear but this is not something that can be forced. On the contrary, political discussion and debate should be encouraged and the structures that promote it institutionalised.

After the overthrow of capitalism, the state does not wither away. For even if the long-term aim of the revolutionary leadership is to run down the state apparatus, what happens in the short term is that the state/party expands into all aspects of everyday life at the expense of civil society. Since many of the problems discussed above are associated with the concept of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat', in the next section, I want to look briefly at the arguments of those Marxists who are critical of the term and would prefer to do without the ideas that lie behind it.

#### NO CHINESE WALL

Within Marxism, there is a tradition (that of Second Internationalism from Kautsky onwards) which is very antagonistic to the dictatorship of the proletariat - their solution has been to argue that proletarian democracy is simply a quantitative extension of bourgeois democracy - a transition that need not include the smashing of the bourgeois state. Today, this position is argued for by Euro-Communists, left social-democrats and 'third-roaders' like Geoff Hodgson. Hodgson's interesting book Socialism and Parliamentary Democracy is an argument in favour of 13 propositions - four of which are;

- Socialists should not aim at a destruction of parliament nor at a smashing of parliamentary institutions.
- A national congress of delegates from soviet-type bodies should not be the supreme decision-making body in a socialist regime in Britain, even if soviets and a congress of soviet representatives are desirable. (By a soviet, Hodgson means, of course, a council of worker representatives elected from workplaces in a particular district).
- The supreme decision-making body in a socialist regime in Britain should be some sort of parliament, based, essentially, on universal adult suffrage.
- All socialists, Marxist or otherwise, do not aid the cause of socialism in Britain by continuing to use the term 'dictatorship of the proletariat' whatever the users of that term may take it to mean.\*

\*It's not at all clear whether it is the term that Hodgson is objecting to or the concept behind it - from my reading of the book, I suspect that it's the latter. True to Second Internationalism, Hodgson also believes that there may be a special 'British' way to socialism. He quotes Marx's remark that to smash the bureaucratic-military machine 'is the pre-condition for every real people's revolution on the Continent' to suggest that Marx did not mean this generalisation to apply to Britain!

Hodgson's argument that 'there is no Chinese wall between bourgeois and proletarian democracy' rests on a fundamental misunderstanding about the nature of rights in a bourgeois democracy. Hodgson begins his argument with the correct perception that rights in a bourgeois democracy (e.g. freedom of speech, freedom to organise collectively, the right to hold meetings etc) are an important gain for the working class and certainly not something to be abandoned in a post-revolutionary situation. At the same time, we must not forget the limited nature of these freedoms. There is freedom of the press but you need to have a lot of capital to make use of it. In Britain, most publications of the revolutionary (and reformist) left have a hard time getting distribution. And if one of our papers began to have a mass sales - you can be sure that obstacles would be put in its way (e.g. the law of libel). In a situation of social unrest, when the left and the far left can expect to find an ever-increasing hearing; there is little doubt that ways will be found (e.g. the declaration of a state of emergency) of making inoperative the freedom of the press and the other freedoms of bourgeois democracy. A current example of this process of restriction can be seen in the North of Ireland where the right of a trial by jury has been suspended and replaced by the notorious Diplock courts which make a mockery of any notion of bourgeois justice. To argue that freedoms and rights are limited within bourgeois democracy is not the same as to say (as the ultra-left does) that they are a sham and not worth defending. On the contrary, they are worth defending because they are intrinsically worthwhile and also because they provide the socialist movement with space to be active in. But in defending these freedoms, we must not forget (as Euro-communists and left social-democrats do) that ruling class rule in a bourgeois democracy is a mixture of consent and coercion; in an attempt to distance themselves from the revolutionary left, they seem to only be aware of the consent side of the mixture.\*

#### SOCIALISM AS STATE PLANNING

For writers like Hodgson, the transition to socialism centers around political and economic centralisation. At an economic level, left social democracy and euro-communism argue that the transition to socialism involves more and more state intervention in the economy. In Socialism and Parliamentary Democracy, Hodgson writes;

'It is in recent years that the beginnings of this 'unlocking' (of the power structure) strategy have emerged within the Labour Party, with the proposals of Planning Agreements and a National Enterprise Board'. \*\* Behind Hodgson's analysis is that what we have in 'advanced' capitalist countries today is a social formation containing elements from both the capitalist and the socialist mode of production. The socialist elements are things like state intervention in the economy, the nationalised industries and institutions like the National Health Service (NHS). And their strategy for the transition to socialism is to fight for more state planning and more democracy in these institutions until the capitalist elements in the mode of production are in such a minority as to be insignificant. Such a strategy is gradual and explains why they see proletarian democracy as a quantitative extension of bourgeois

\*It can be pointed out that the freedom of the press in a post-revolutionary situation will be a qualitative extension. It will mean newspapers and television to which everyone has access. With the development of systems like ~~television~~ cable television - the potential for mass involvement is there.

\*\*Not that the Labour government ever did anything to unlock the power structure.

democracy.

This 'socialism as state planning' perspective is incorrect in that;  
 - firstly, it misunderstands the role of the state sector in a 'mixed' capitalist economy. Whilst it may be true that institutions like the NHS are in some ways a working class victory, they are not a political threat to ruling class hegemony. And when capital decides (as in the current recession) that expenses on the NHS must be cut back, this gets done even if it is the 'party of the working class' (Labour) that controls the government. It is quite true that under monopoly capitalism there is an ever increasing state sector of the economy but this must be seen as a collective charge on capital and not as some autonomous force for socialism. Nor is it the case that there are the seeds of socialism within the state sector of the economy. For example, in the National Coal Board (NCB), relations between workers and management are on traditional capitalist lines and the NCB is run with all the features you would expect of a capitalist enterprise (e.g. redundancies, speed-ups, increased productivity etc.) In the health service, nationalisation has not affected the hierarchical relations that exist between doctors, domestics, nurses and patients - nor has it led to a greater emphasis on preventative as opposed to curative medicine. And there remain very great differences between the health services of non-capitalist countries like Cuba and China\* and those of countries like Britain which remain dominated by the capitalist concept of health.

- secondly, left social-democracy and Euro-communism have at their very centres a conception of socialism as government by the state for the people which is very far from the vision of Marx in his libertarian writings (e.g. on the Paris Commune) and of Lenin in State and Revolution - though it is fair comment to say that post-revolutionary USSR did not realise this vision in practice. The left social-democratic model of socialism as state planning has its roots in Fabian paternalism and allows no place in the building of socialism on the self-activity of working people - which is central to our idea of the transition. And, at the economic level, it bears a not accidental resemblance to the centrally planned economies of state collectivist societies.

#### The Crisis of Socialism

As I argued at the beginning, there is no longer a widespread belief amongst militants that socialism is the solution to our problems. Events over the last 60 years, have made it the case that the desirability of socialism is something that has to be argued for - it cannot be taken for granted. So, we can no longer hold a stageist model of revolution whereby first there is the seizure of power and it is only after this seizure that we can begin to talk about what life will be like under socialism, what social relations will be like etc. To respond to the ideological crisis of socialism, we must begin to discuss in considerable detail what socialist society will be like and in what ways it will be different from life under capitalism. This is already being done at a sectoral level (i.e. in discussions on what a socialist health service would be like) and it must be extended to cover all the institutions of society.

We can begin the discussion by remembering that;

- in the 'advanced' capitalist countries that we live in, the forces of production are much more developed than in those societies where

\*See the article by Sheila Hillier in Revolutionary Socialism(4)

capitalism has already been overthrown. Even if it is not impossible to introduce socialism in a general situation of scarcity - it is much more difficult. Today in capitalist countries, there is little doubt that the relations of production are holding back the forces of production. For example, there is the need to build thousands of new houses, there are thousands of unemployed building workers ready to do the job - but because production is regulated by the market (and not need), the houses are not built.

- socialism was seen by early Marxists as a transitional stage on the way to communism. The problem is that socialism is a contradictory stage - in that the more measures that have to be taken to protect socialism, the more difficult is the transition to communism.

- It is also the case that much that is central to our struggle against capitalism will still be very necessary after the revolution - for instance, the self-activity of the masses and the autonomy of the social movements. We do not support the self-activity of the masses because we see it as a useful tactic against the capitalist regime. We support it because it is fundamental to our conception of communism - a society where people exercise total control over all aspects of their lives. We are not making the revolution for power to be handed from one elite to another. For people to exercise control, a society's, political, economic, cultural and social organisation must be both decentralised and linked at a national level. And institutions that exercise this control must be developed at local, regional and national/state level. For instance, in China the failure to extend mass democracy beyond the local level of the commune led to a failure to institutionalise democracy in the post 1948 period. As a consequence it was impossible to make permanent the gains of the cultural revolution and prevent the triumph of revisionism in the period after the death of Mao. The same goes for the autonomy of social movements. Our support for women to organise autonomously is not tactical, it is absolute. And this means that we recognise that women will want to organise autonomously after the seizure of power - and the same goes for the other social movements. We recognise the right of social movements to organise autonomously for as long as they think fit.

- We must recognise the tremendous limitations of the one-party/state model. It represents the limitation of political debate and disagreement which can only be an obstacle to the building of socialism. We should see the existence of a plurality of parties after the revolution as a pre-condition for the nurturing of political life. At the same time, it is vital to decentralise as much as possible political and economic decision-making and to build from the base up a network of local, regional and national councils (soviets) that are the building blocks of proletarian democracy.

There is a part of the Marxist tradition that thinks that we should be silent about what will happen in a post-revolutionary situation. This silence has allowed right-wing forces to monopolise the debate about what socialism is. The argument in this paper is that unless we challenge the right-wing and provide our own detailed and concrete model of socialism, our chances of mobilising mass involvement in the struggle for socialism will be slight.

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