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Socialism and the future

(July 1992)

From **International Viewpoint**. [1]

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Since the mid-1970s a deterioration of the balance of forces between the classes has taken place on a worldwide scale. The main reason has been the onset of a long-lasting depressive wave in the capitalist economy with a continuing increase in unemployment. In the imperialist countries, unemployment has increased from 10 to 50 million people; in the Third World it has reached 500 million. In many of the latter countries, this means that 50% or more of the population find themselves without work.

This massive rise in unemployment, and in the fear of unemployment among those who have jobs, has weakened the working class and facilitated the worldwide capitalist offensive aimed at increasing the rate of profit through pushing down real wages and cutting social and

infrastructural costs. The neo-conservative offensive is only the ideological expression of this social and economic offensive.

The large majority of the leaderships of the mass parties who claim to be socialist have capitulated before this capitalist offensive, and have accepted austerity policies; this has been seen in countries as diverse as France, Spain, the Netherlands, Sweden, Venezuela and Peru. This has disoriented the working class and, during a whole period, has made it more difficult for the masses to undertake defensive struggles.

This capitulation of the Social Democracy has been coupled with the ideological and political impact of the crisis of the systems in eastern Europe, the ex-Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China and Indochina, which is fomenting a profound and near universal crisis of the credibility of socialism.

In the eyes of the great majority of the population of the planet, the two principal historical experiences in constructing a classes society – the Stalinist/post-Stalinist/Maoist and the Social Democratic – have failed.

Of course, the masses understand very well that this is the failure of an overall radical social objective. But that does not imply a negative assessment of the important concrete changes in social reality in favour of the exploited that have taken place. In this latter sense, the balance sheet of more than 150 years of the activity of the international workers' movement and all its tendencies, remains positive.

But this is not the same as a belief by millions of workers that all immediate struggles will increasingly lead to the struggle for the overthrow of capitalism and the advent of a classless society without exploitation, oppression, injustice or mass violence. In the absence of such a conviction,

immediate struggles are fragmented and discontinuous, without overall political objectives.

The political initiative is in the hands of imperialism, the bourgeoisie and its agents. This is clear from what is happening in eastern Europe where the fall of the bureaucratic dictatorships under the impact of broad mass struggles has led not to a political initiative in the direction of socialism but rather, towards the restoration of capitalism. The same thing is beginning to happen in the ex-Soviet Union.

The masses in Eastern Europe and the ex-Soviet Union, not to mention countries like Cambodia, identify the Stalinist and post-Stalinist dictatorship with Marxism and socialism, and they reject all of these equally. Stalin murdered a million Communists and repressed millions of workers and peasants.

This was not the product of Marxism, socialism or of the revolution; it was the result of a bloody counter-revolution. But that the masses still see these things differently is an objective fact that bears heavily on international political and social realities.

This crisis of the credibility of socialism explains the principal contradiction of the world situation at a time when the masses are fighting in many countries, often on a larger scale than ever before.

On the one hand, imperialism and the international bourgeoisie are not capable of crushing the workers movement as they did in the 1930s and the beginning of the 1940s in the big cities of Europe and Japan and in many other countries. But, on the other, the working masses are not yet prepared to fight for a global anti-capitalist solution. For this reason we are in a period of worldwide crisis and

disorder in which neither one of the principal social classes is capable of assuring its historical victory.

The principal task of socialists and communists is to try to restore the credibility of socialism in the consciousness of millions of men and women. This will be possible only if our starting point is the immediate needs and concerns of these masses. Any alternative model of political economy must include these proposals. Such proposals must give the most concrete and efficient aid to the masses to fight successfully for their needs.

We can formulate these in near biblical terms: eliminate hunger, clothe the naked, give a dignified life to everyone, save the lives of those who die for lack of proper medical attention, generalise free access to culture including the elimination of illiteracy, universalise democratic freedoms, human rights, and eliminate repressive violence in all its forms.

None of this is dogmatic or utopian. Although the masses are not ready to fight for socialist revolution, they can wholly accept these objectives if they are formulated in the most concrete way possible. They can unleash broader struggles in the most diverse forms and combinations. For this we must try to be as concrete as possible in our propositions. What type of food production is possible? With what agrarian techniques? In which places? Which materials can be produced? In which localities or nations on the largest international scale?

But when we examine the conditions needed to achieve these goals, we arrive at the conclusion that such a program implies a radical redistribution of existing resources and a radical change in the social forces that hold the decision making power over their use. We should be convinced that the masses who are struggling for these objectives will not

abandon the struggle when reality demonstrates these implications.

Herein lies one of the historical challenges facing the socialist movement: to be capable, without prior conditions, of leading the broadest mass struggles to achieve humanity's most pressing current needs.

Is such an alternative model possible in today's society without a short or medium term goal of taking or participating in concrete power, in the short or medium term? I believe that this is the wrong way to put the question. It is clear that there is no way of avoiding the problem of political power. But the concrete form of the struggle for power and, above all, the concrete forms of state power, must not be decided beforehand. Above all, the formulation of concrete objectives and concrete forms of struggles for definite needs must not be subordinate to objectives realisable on the political plane in the short term.

On the contrary, the objectives and forms of struggle must be determined without any political prejudices whatsoever. The formula must be that of the great tactician Napoleon Bonaparte which was repeated many times by Lenin: "*on s'engage et puis on voit*" (we join the battle and then we'll see).

This is how the international workers' movement in the period of its most impressive mass activity conducted its campaigns for two central objective: the eight-hour working day and universal suffrage.

Cannot imperialism today or, more accurately, imperialism allied with big capital, impede the realisation of these same objectives in the countries of Latin America? Cannot imperialism block the influx of capital and the transference of technology even more than is already being done through the pressures of the IMF and World Bank?

Again, I believe that posing the question in these terms can lead us into a trap. The truth is that nobody can give an answer to this beforehand. In the final analysis, all depends on the balance of forces. But these are not predetermined and are constantly changing.

Furthermore, the struggle for realisable, precise objectives by mass action is precisely one way to change the balance of forces in favour of the workers and all the exploited and oppressed.

It must not be forgotten that imperialism is undergoing a profound crisis of leadership. While consolidating its military dominance, Yankee imperialism has lost its technological and financial dominance. It is no longer capable of imposing its will on its principal competitors, Japanese and German imperialism. Neither can it control the possible reactions of the masses in the United States nor on an international scale.

Under these conditions there are many possible forms for a successful struggle for the immediate cancellation of payments on the foreign debt. It is highly unlikely that the Latin American governments and those of the Third World will take any such step. But if a country like Brazil in the event of a PT [Workers Party] victory were to do so, we cannot beforehand predict the reaction of imperialism. They could impose an economic blockade, but it is far more difficult to blockade Brazil, the most developed country in Latin America, than smaller countries like Cuba, not to mention Nicaragua.

And Brazil has the capacity to respond with a political offensive, with a politico-economic Brest-Litovsk and to lead many countries and masses of all countries by saying: Do you agree that our people are being punished for wanting to eliminate hunger, sickness and violations of human rights?

The answer of the working masses of the world is not a foregone conclusion; it could be insufficient, it could be positive. But it is a great battle that could change the world political situation. It could allow a further change in the balance of forces; it could help restore faith in a better world.

These themes are the fundamental methodological approach of Karl Marx: the struggle for socialism is not the dogmatic and sectarian imposition of some pre-established objective on the real movement of the masses. It is only the conscious expression of this movement out of which the constituent elements of a new society can grow out of the seeds of the old.

We can illustrate these themes in relation to the central problems of today. Multinational companies exercise a greater and greater domination over ever larger sectors of the world market. They represent a qualitatively superior form of the international centralisation of capital. This leads to a greater internationalisation of the class struggle.

Unfortunately, the international bourgeoisie is much more prepared and coherent in this sense than the working class. In a fundamental sense there are only two possible answers for the working class to the actions of the multinationals: either it retreats into protectionism and defence of so-called national competitiveness, that is, class collaboration with the bosses and the government of each country against “the Japanese”, “the Germans” or “the Mexicans”; or solidarity with the workers of all countries and against all national and international exploiters.

In the first case, an inevitable downward spiral of cuts in wages, social protection and labour conditions in all countries would occur, because the multinationals could always exploit a country with lower wages, transfer

production there or blackmail the worker's movement into giving concessions beforehand.

In the second case, there is at least the possibility of a rising spiral that can steadily raise wages, increase social protection of the less developed countries and reduce differences in living standards in a positive direction.

This second possible response is not at all opposed to economic development or the creation of jobs in the Third World. It implies, rather, another model of development which is not based on the exporting of low wages, but rather, on the growth of the national market and the satisfaction of the basic needs of the people.

The struggle for this internationalist response to the offensive of the multinational companies requires immediate common concrete initiatives on the union level, especially between delegates; and independent and militant rank-and-file initiatives in all the factories of the world that work for the same multinational or in the same industrial branch. This has already begun in a small but real way; the North American Free Trade Agreement, the attempt to transform Mexico into a vast *maquiladora* [low-wage "free economic"] zone, opens the road to this response and can be extended to all of Latin America in opposition to the so-called Initiative for the Americas.

At the same time, the so-called new social movements merely reflect the anguish of large social layers abandoned by the dynamics of late capitalism. This dynamic involves the danger that these layers will increasingly depoliticise and could constitute a social base for right-wing attacks, including neo-fascist ones, against democratic freedoms. Any policy of "social peace" or of pseudo-realistic consensus with the bourgeoisie produces the impression that there are basically no other political options, and thus makes the

danger worse. This is why it is vital for the workers' movement to establish structural alliances with the "underclass", the unorganised, and help them organise, defend themselves and achieve dignity and hope.

In all of these instances, this must be done in a non-dogmatic way, free of the attitude that one possesses all of the truth -the definitive answer. The building of socialism is a huge laboratory of new experiences which are still undefined. We must learn from practice, especially from these same masses. For this reason, we must be open to dialogue and fraternal discussion with the entire left, with all firmly defending the principles of their current and organisation.

In a larger sense, we must take into account the fact that the stakes in the world today are dramatic: it is literally a question of the physical survival of humanity. Hunger, epidemics, nuclear power, the deterioration of the natural environment: all of this is the fundamental reality of the new and old capitalist world disorder.

In the Third World, 16 million children die of hunger of curable diseases a year. This is equivalent to 25% of the deaths of the second world war, including Hiroshima and Auschwitz. In other words, every four years, there is a world war against children. This is the reality of imperialism and capitalism today.

This inhuman reality produces inhuman political and ideological effects. In north-east Brazil, the lack of vitamins in the diet of the poor has produced a new species of pygmies, of men and women who have undergone physical changes that make them 30 centimetres smaller than other people in the same country. There are millions of these unfortunates, called by the ruling class and its agents

“human rats”, with all the de-humanising implications of such terms, reminiscent of those developed by the Nazis.

With the gradual restoration of capitalism in eastern Europe and the ex- Soviet Union, everything that is barbaric and socially retrograde is beginning to be reproduced. The privatisation of the large enterprises could produce up to 35-40 million unemployed and a 40% fall in workers’ earnings. Socialism can regain its credibility and validity if it is ready to totally identify with the struggle against these threats. This supposes three conditions:

1. The first is that under no circumstances does it subordinate its support for the social struggles of the masses to any political project. We must be unconditionally on the side of the masses in all their struggles.

2. The second is that we carry out propaganda and education amongst the masses for an overall socialist model that takes into account the experiences and new forms of consciousness of recent decades.

We must defend a model of socialism that will be totally emancipatory in all areas of life. This socialism must be self-managing, feminist, ecological, radical-pacifist, pluralistic; it must qualitatively extend democracy, and be internationalist and pluralist – including in terms of multiparty system.

But it is essential that it emancipate the direct producers, which is impossible without the progressive disappearance of the social division of labour between those who produce and those who administer.

The producers must hold the real decision making power over what they produce and receive the best part of the social product. This power must be exercised in a completely democratic manner; that is, it must express the real aspirations of the masses. This is impossible without party pluralism and the possibility of the masses to choose

between various concrete variants of the central economic plan. It is also impossible without a radical reduction in the daily and weekly work load.

More or less everyone agrees about the rising level of corruption and criminalisation in bourgeois society and the disappearing post-capitalist societies. It is utopian and unrealistic to hope for the moralisation of civil society and of the state without a radical reduction in the importance of money and market economies.

A coherent vision of socialism cannot be defended without systematically opposing selfishness and the pursuit of individual gain in spite of their consequences for society as a whole. Priority must be given to solidarity and cooperation. And this presupposes precisely a decisive reduction in the importance of money in society.

3. The third condition is the total renunciation on the part of socialists and communists of all substitutionalist, paternalist and top-down practices. We must reflect upon and transmit Karl Marx's principal contribution to politics: the emancipation of the workers will be the work of the workers themselves. It cannot be done by states, governments, parties, supposedly infallible leaders or experts of any kind. All of these are useful, even indispensable, for the struggle of emancipation. But they can only help the masses to free themselves; they cannot be a substitute for them. It is not only immoral, but impractical, to try to secure the happiness of people against their own beliefs. This is one of the principal lessons that can be drawn from the collapse of the bureaucratic dictatorships in eastern Europe and the USSR.

The practice of socialists and communists must be totally consistent with their principles. We must not justify any alienating or oppressive practices whatsoever. We must, in

practice, realise what Karl Marx called the categorical imperative: to struggle against all conditions in which human beings are alienated and humiliated. If our practice is consistent with this imperative, socialism will once again become a political force that will be invincible.

Note

1. From **International Viewpoint**. This is the text of a speech delivered to the third meeting of the *Sao Paulo Forum of left parties*, held in Nicaragua in July 1992.
