

As We See It
and As We Don't See It

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As We See It

1. Throughout the world the vast majority of people have no control whatsoever over the decisions that most deeply and directly affect their lives. They sell their labour power while others who own or control the means of production accumulate wealth, make the laws and use the whole machinery of the State to perpetuate and reinforce their privileged positions.
2. During the past century the living standards of working people have improved. But neither these improved living standards, nor the nationalization of the means of production, nor the coming to power of parties claiming to represent the working class have basically altered the status of the worker. Nor have they given the bulk of mankind much freedom outside of production. East and West, capitalism remains an inhuman type of society where the vast majority are bossed at work and manipulated in consumption and leisure. Propaganda and policemen, prisons and schools, traditional values and traditional morality all serve to reinforce the power of the few and to convince or coerce the many into acceptance of a brutal, degrading and irrational system. The “Communist” world is not communist and the “Free” world is not free.
3. The trade unions and the traditional parties of the left started in business to change all this. But they have come to terms with the existing patterns of exploitation. In fact they are now essential if exploiting society is to continue working smoothly. The unions act as middlemen in the labour market. The political parties use the struggles and aspirations of the working class for their own ends. The degeneration of working class organizations, itself the result of the failure of the revolutionary movement, has been a major factor in creating working class apathy, which in turn has led to further degeneration of both parties and unions.
4. The trade unions and political parties cannot be reformed, “captured”, or converted into instruments of working class emancipation. We don’t call however for the proclamation of new unions, which in the conditions of today would suffer a similar fate to the old ones. Nor do we call for militants to tear up their union cards. Our aims are simply that the workers themselves should decide on the objectives of their struggles and that the control and organization of these struggles should remain firmly in their own hands. The *forms* which this self-activity of the working class may take will vary considerably from country to country and from industry to industry. Its basic *content* will not.
5. Socialism is not just the common ownership and control of the means of production and distribution. It means equality, real freedom, reciprocal recognition and a radical transformation in all human relations. It is man’s understanding of his environment and of himself, his domination over his work and over such social institutions as he may need to create. These are not secondary aspects, which will automatically follow the expropriation of the ruling class. On the contrary they are essential parts of the whole process of social transformation, for without them no genuine social transformation will have taken place.
6. A socialist society can therefore only be built from below. Decisions concerning production and work will be taken by Workers’ Councils composed of elected and revocable delegates. Decisions in other areas will be taken on the basis of the widest possible discussion and

consultation among the people as a whole. This democratization of society down to its very roots is what we mean by “workers’ power”.

7. *Meaningful action*, for revolutionaries, is whatever increases the confidence the autonomy, the initiative, the participation, the solidarity, the equalitarian tendencies and the self-activity of the masses and whatever assists in their demystification. *Sterile and harmful action* is whatever reinforces the passivity of the masses, their apathy, their cynicism, their differentiation through hierarchy, their alienation, their reliance on others to do things for them and the degree to which they can therefore be manipulated by others — even by those allegedly acting on their behalf.
8. No ruling class in history has ever relinquished its power without a struggle and our present rulers are unlikely to be an exception. Power will only be taken from them through the conscious, autonomous action of the vast majority of the people themselves. The building of socialism will require mass understanding and mass participation. By their rigid hierarchical structure, by their ideas and by their activities, both social-democratic and Bolshevik types of organizations discourage this kind of understanding and prevent this kind of participation. The idea that socialism can somehow be achieved by an elite party (however “revolutionary”) acting “on behalf of the working class is both absurd and reactionary.
9. We do not accept the view that by itself the working class can only achieve a trade union consciousness. On the contrary we believe that its conditions of life and its experiences in production constantly drive the working class to adopt priorities and values and to find methods of organization which challenge the established social order and established pattern of thought. These responses are implicitly socialist. On the other hand, the working class is fragmented, dispossessed of the means of communication, and its various sections are at different levels of awareness and consciousness. The task of the revolutionary organization is to help give proletarian consciousness an explicitly socialist content, to give practical assistance to workers in struggle, and to help those in different areas to exchange experiences and link up with one another.
10. We do not see ourselves as yet another leadership, but merely as an instrument of working class action. The function of *Solidarity* is to help all those who are in conflict with the present authoritarian social structure, both in industry and in society at large, to generalize their experience, to make a total critique of their condition and of its causes, and to develop the mass revolutionary consciousness necessary if society is to be totally transformed.

As We Don’t See It

When, in 1967, we first published *As We See It* we felt it would be both accurate and a fairly concise summary of our views. Alternatives had been discussed and every possible effort had been made to avoid ambiguities. We thought we had produced a fairly explicit text, acceptance of which should be the basis of adherence to a *Solidarity* group.

Over the years we have come to realize that we were wrong. There was either something the matter with the document — or with some of those who read it. Or perhaps there was something

the matter with us — for having thought the text was self-explanatory. Radicals repeatedly told us that they agreed with every word of the statement ... and in the next breath asked us why we were not doing faction work in the Labour Party, or living in communes, or campaigning for the trade union “lefts”, or eulogizing the Black Panthers or Karume’s anti-imperialist regime in Zanzibar, or participating in the anti-Common-Market agitation. Some even asked why we were not advocating the launching of a “real revolutionary, Leninist party”.

We now feel it necessary to dot some i’s and cross some t’s. What follows is an attempt to state explicitly thoughts that were only hinted at, and to formulate in writing propositions that were only implied. As *We Don’t See It* would convey the general tenor of what follows. In an attempt to avoid further ambiguity we will also discuss some matters that were not dealt with in the original text.

1. “Throughout the world” means exactly what it says. It does not mean everywhere except Social-Democratic Sweden, Castro’s Cuba, Tito’s Yugoslavia, Israel’s kibbutzim or Sékou Touré’s Guinea. “Throughout the world” includes pre-Stalinist, Stalinist and post-Stalinist Russia, Ben Bella’s and Boumedienne’s Algeria and the People’s Republics of Uzbekistan and North Vietnam. Everywhere also includes Albania (and China).

Our comments about contemporary society apply to all these countries just as much as to the USA or to Britain (under either Labour or Conservative governments). When we talk of privileged minorities who “control the means of production” and who “use the whole machinery of the state” to maintain themselves in power we are making a universal critique to which, at the moment, we can see no exceptions.

It follows that we don’t regard any of these countries as socialist and that we don’t act as if we had lurking suspicions that they might be something other than what they are: hierarchically-structured class societies based on wage slavery and exploitation. Their identification with socialism — even as deformed variants — is a slander against the very concept of socialism (abortions, after all, share some of the attributes of their parents). It is moreover a source of endless mystification and confusion. It also follows from this basic assessment that we do not support China against Russia, or Russia against China (or alternatively the one and then other), that we do not carry NLF flags on demonstrations (the enemies of our enemies are not necessarily our friends), and that we refrain from joining sundry choruses demanding more East-West trade, more Summit Conferences or more ping-pong diplomacy.

In every country of the world the rulers oppress the ruled and persecute genuine revolutionaries. In every country the main enemy of the people is their own ruling class. This alone can provide the basis of genuine internationalism of the oppressed.

2. Socialism cannot be equated with the “coming of power of parties claiming to represent the working class”. Political power is a fraud if working people do not take over and retain power *in production*. If they achieve such power, the organs exerting it (Workers’ Councils) will take and implement all the necessary political decisions. It follows that we don’t advocate the formation of “better” or “more revolutionary political parties whose objective would remain the “capture of

state power". The *Party's* power may grow out of the barrel of a gun. The power of the *working class* grows out of its management of the economy and of society as a whole.

Socialism cannot be equated with such measures as the "nationalization of the means of production". These may help the rulers of various class societies to rationalize *their* system of exploitation and solve *their own* problems. We refuse to choose between options defined by our class enemies. *It follows* that we don't urge nationalization (or anything else for that matter) on governments of either "right" or "left".

Section 2 implies that modern capitalism *can* further develop the means of production. At a cost, it can improve living standards. But neither of these has any socialist content. Anyone who wants three square meals a day and the prospect of endless employment can find them in any well-run gaol. *It follows* that we don't denounce capitalism primarily on the basis of its inadequacies in these fields. Socialism, for us, is not about transistors for the prisoners. It is about the destruction of the industrial prison itself. It is not only about more bread, but about who runs the bakery.

The section finally emphasizes the multiple methods whereby the system perpetuates itself. By mentioning *propaganda* as well as policemen, *schools* as well as prisons, *traditional values* and *traditional morality* as well as traditional methods of physical coercion, the section stresses an important obstacle to the achievement of a free society, namely the fact that the vast majority of the exploited and the manipulated have internalized and largely accepted the system's norms and values (for example such concepts as hierarchy, the division of society into order-givers and order-takers, wage labour, and the polarity of sexual roles) and consider them intrinsically rational. Because of all this *it follows* that we reject as incomplete (and hence inadequate) notions which attribute the perpetuation of the system solely to police repression or to the "betrayals" of various political or trade union leaders.

A crisis of values and an increased questioning of authority relations are, however, developing features of contemporary society. The growth of these crises is one of the preconditions for socialist revolution. Socialism will only be possible when the majority of people understand the need for social change, become aware of their ability to transform society, decide to exert their collective power to this end, and know with what they want to replace the present system. *It follows* that we reject analyses (such as those of every variety of Leninist or Trotskyist) who define the main crisis of modern society as "a crisis of leadership". They are all generals in search of an army, for whom recruitment figures are the main yardstick of success. For us revolutionary change is a question of consciousness: the consciousness that would make generals redundant.

3. When we refer to the "traditional parties of the left" we don't only have in mind the social-democratic and "communist" parties. Parties of this type have administered, administer and will continue to administer exploitative class societies. Under the title of "traditional parties of the left" we also include the trad revs [traditional revolutionaries], i.e. the various Leninist, Trotskyist and Maoist sects who are the carriers of state capitalist ideology and the embryonic nuclei of repressive, state-capitalist power.

These groups are prefigurations of alternative types of exploitation. Their critiques of the social-democratic and "Stalinist" or "revisionist" left appear virulent enough, but they never deal with fundamentals (such as the structure of decision-making, the locus of power, the primacy

of the Party, the existence of hierarchy, the maximization of surplus value, the perpetuation of wage labour, and inequality). This is no accident and flows from the fact that they themselves accept these fundamentals. Bourgeois ideology is far more widespread than many revolutionaries believe and has in fact deeply permeated their thinking. In this sense Marx's statement about "the dominant ideas of each epoch being the ideas of its ruling class" is far more true than Marx could ever have anticipated.

As far as authoritarian class society (and the libertarian-socialist alternative) is concerned *the trad revs are part of the problem, not part of the solution*. Those who subscribe to social-democratic or Bolshevik ideology are themselves either victims of the prevailing mystification (and attempts should be made to demystify them), or they are the conscious exponents and future beneficiaries of a new form of class rule (and should be ruthlessly exposed). In either case *it follows* that there is nothing "sectarian" in systematically proclaiming opposition to what they stand for. Not to do so would be tantamount to suppressing our critique of half of the prevailing social order. It would mean to participate in the general mystification of traditional politics (where one thinks one thing and says another) and to deny the very basis of our *independent* political existence.

4. Because the traditional parties cannot be "reformed", "captured", or converted into instruments of working class emancipation — and because we are reluctant to indulge in double-talk and double-think — *it follows* that we do not indulge in such activities as "critically supporting" the Labour Party at election time, calling for "Labour to Power" between elections, and generally participating in sowing illusions, the better at a later date to "take people through the experience" of seeing through them. The Labour and Communist Parties may be marginally superior to the Conservative Party in driving private capitalism along the road to state capitalism. The trad revs would certainly prove superior to them both. But we are not called upon to make any choice of the kind: it is not the role of revolutionaries to be the midwives of new forms of exploitation. *It follows* that we would rather fight for what we want (even if we don't immediately get it) than fight for what we don't want ... and get it.

The trade union bureaucracy is an essential component of developing state capitalist societies. The trade union leaders neither "betray" nor "sell out" when they manipulate working class struggles and seek to use them for their own ends. They are not "traitors" when they seek to increase their material rewards or to lessen the frequency with which they have to submit to election — they are acting logically and according to their own interests, which just happen to be different from those of working people. *It follows* that we do not urge people to elect "better" leaders, to "democratize" the unions or to create new ones, which under the circumstances of today would suffer exactly the same fate as the old ones. All these are "non-issues" about which only those who have failed to grasp the real root of the problem can get worked up.

The real need is to concentrate on the *positive* task of building the alternative (both in people's minds and in reality), namely *autonomous job organizations*, linked to others in the same industry and elsewhere, and controlled from below. Sooner or later such organizations will either enter into conflict with the existing outfits claiming to "represent" the working class (and it would be premature at this stage to define the possible forms of this conflict), or they will bypass the old organizations altogether.

5. This section differentiates our concept of socialism from most of those prevailing today. Socialism, for us, is not just a question of economic reorganization from which other benefits will “inevitably” follow, without *consciously* being fought for. It is a *total* vision of a *completely* different society. Such a vision is linked to the *total critique* of capitalism we have previously referred to.

Social-democrats and Bolsheviks denounce equality as “utopian”, “petty-bourgeois”, or “anarchist”. They dismiss the advocacy of freedom as “abstract”, and reciprocal recognition as “liberal humanism”. They will concede that the radical transformation of all social relations is a valid ultimate objective, but cannot see it as an essential, immediate ingredient of the very process of meaningful change.

When we talk of “man’s positive self-consciousness” and of “his understanding of his environment and of himself we mean the gradual discarding of myths and of all types of false consciousness (religion, nationalism, patriarchal attitudes, the belief in the rationality of hierarchy, etc.). The precondition of human freedom is the understanding of all that limits it. Positive self-consciousness implies the gradual breakdown of that state of chronic schizophrenia in which — through conditioning and other mechanisms — most people succeed in carrying mutually incompatible ideas in their heads. It means accepting coherence, and perceiving the relation of means and ends. It means exposing those who organize conferences about “workers’ control” ... addressed by union officials elected for life. It means patiently explaining the incompatibilities of “people’s capitalism”, “parliamentary socialism”, “Christian communism”, “anarcho-Zionism”, “Party-led ‘workers’ councils’”, and other such rubbish. It means understanding that a non-manipulative society cannot be achieved by manipulative means or a classless society through hierarchical structures. This attempt at both gaining insight and at imparting it will be difficult and prolonged. It will doubtless be dismissed as “intellectual theorizing” by every “voluntarist” or “activist” tendency, eager for short cuts to the promised land and more concerned with movement than with direction.

Because we think people can and should understand what they are doing, *it follows* that we reject many of the approaches so common in the movement today. In practice this means avoiding the use of revolutionary myths and the resort to manipulated confrontations, intended to raise consciousness. Underlying both of these is the usually unformulated assumption that people cannot understand social reality and act rationally on their own.

Linked to our rejection of revolutionary myths is our rejection of ready-made political labels. We want no gods, not even those of the Marxist or anarchist pantheons. We live in neither the Petrograd of 1917 nor the Barcelona of 1936. We are *ourselves*: the product of the disintegration of traditional politics, in an advanced industrial country, in the second half of the twentieth century. It is to the problems and conflicts of *that* society that we must apply ourselves.

Although we consider ourselves part of the “libertarian left” we differ from most strands of the “cultural” or “political” underground. We have nothing in common, for instance, with those petty entrepreneurs, now thriving on the general confusion, who simultaneously promote such commodities as oriental mysticism, black magic, the drug cult, sexual exploitation (masquerading as sexual liberation) — seasoning it all with big chunks of populist mythology. Their dissemination of myths and their advocacy of “non-sectarian politics” do not prevent them from taking up, in practice, many reactionary stances. In fact, they ensure it. Under the mindless slogan of “Sup-

port for people in struggle”, these tendencies advocate support for various nationalisms (today always reactionary) such as those of both IRAs and of all the NLFs.

Other strands, calling themselves “libertarian Marxist”, suffer from middle class feelings of guilt which make them prone to workeritis. Despite this, their practice is both reformist and substitutionalist. For instance, when they (correctly) support struggles for limited objectives, such as those of squatters or Claimants’ Unions, they often fail to stress the revolutionary implications of such collective direct action. Historically, direct action has often clashed with the reformist nature of the objectives pursued. Again, such tendencies support the IRAs and NLFs and refrain from criticizing the Cuban, North Vietnamese or Chinese regimes. Having rejected the Party, they nevertheless share with Leninism a bourgeois concept of consciousness.

Because we think our politics should be coherent we also reject the approach of others in the libertarian movement who place their whole emphasis on personal liberation or who seek individual solutions to what are social problems. We dissociate ourselves from those who equate the violence of the oppressor with the violence of the oppressed (in condemnation of “all violence”), and from those who place the rights of strikers on the picket line on the same footing as the right of scabs to blackleg (in an abstract defence of “freedom as such”). Similarly, anarcho-Catholicism and anarcho-Maoism are internally incoherent outlooks, incompatible with revolutionary self-activity.

We feel that there should be some relation between our vision of socialism and what we do here and now. *It follows* that we seek as from now, and starting with those closest to us, to puncture some of the more widely held political myths. These are not confined to the “right” — with its belief that hierarchy and inequality are of the essence of the human condition. We consider irrational (and/or dishonest) that those who talk most of the masses (and of the capacity of the working class to create a new society) should have the least confidence in people’s ability to dispense with leaders. We also consider it irrational that most radical advocates of “genuine social change” should incorporate in their own ideas, programmes and organizational prescriptions so many of the values, priorities and models they claim to oppose.

6. When we say that socialist society will be “built from below”, we mean just that. We do *not* mean “initiated from above and then endorsed from below”. Nor do we mean “planned from above and later checked from below”. We mean there should be no separation between organs of decision and organs of execution. This is why we advocate workers’ “management” of production, and avoid the ambiguous demand for workers’ “control”. (The differences — both theoretical and historical — between the two are outlined in the introduction to our book on *The Bolsheviks and Workers’ Control, 1917–1921*.)

We deny the revolutionary organization any specific prerogative in the post-revolutionary period, or in the building of the new society. Its main function in this period will be to stress the primacy of the Workers’ Councils (and of bodies based on them) as instruments of decisional authority, and to struggle against all those who would seek to lessen or to bypass this authority — or to vest power elsewhere. Unlike others on the left who dismiss thinking about the new society as “preoccupation with the cookshops of the future” we have outlined our ideas about a possible structure of such a society in some detail in our pamphlet on *Workers’ Councils and the Economics of a Self-Managed Society*.

7. This section is perhaps the most important and least understood of the whole statement. It is the key to how we view our *practical work*. It defines yardsticks with which we can approach everyday political life and rationally use our mental and physical resources. It explains why we consider certain questions significant while others are dismissed as non-issues. Within the limits of our own coherence, it explains the content of our paper.

Because we do not consider them of particular relevance to the attitudes and aptitudes we seek to develop, we do not get worked up about such matters as parliamentary or trade union elections (getting others to do things for one), the Common Market or the convertibility crisis (partisan involvement in the problems of the rulers is of no help to the ruled), or about the struggle in Ireland or various putsches in Africa ("taking sides" in struggles waged under the domination of a totally reactionary false consciousness). We cannot ignore these events without ignoring a portion of reality but we can at least avoid endowing them with a relevance to socialism they do not possess. Conversely we think the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and the French events of May 1968 *were* deeply significant (for they were struggles against bureaucracy, and attempts at self-management in both Eastern and Western contexts).

These yardsticks also help clarify our attitude to various industrial disputes. While most are a challenge to the employer, some have a deeper socialist content than others. Why for instance are "unofficial" actions on conditions of work, waged under the close control of the rank and file, usually of deeper significance than "official" actions on questions of wages, run from afar by the union bureaucrats? In terms of the development of socialist consciousness *how* a struggle is waged and what it is *about* are of fundamental importance. *Socialism*, after all, *is about who takes the decisions*. We believe this needs stressing, *in practice, from now*.

In our accounts of disputes our guide line is that one cannot tidy up reality, and that more is gained by honestly analyzing real difficulties than by living in a mythical world, where one takes one's wishes for reality. *It follows* that we seek to avoid the "triumphalist" (in reality manipulatory) tone that mars so much of the "interventions" of the trad revs.

Finally the emphasis on self-activity, and its warning about the harmful effects of manipulation, substitutionism or reliance on others to do things for one have deeper implications, or relevance to our own organization.

8. We are not pacifists. We have no illusions about what we are up against. In all class societies, institutional violence weighs heavily and constantly on the oppressed. Moreover the rulers of such societies have always resorted to more explicit physical repression when their power and privileges were really threatened. Against repression by the ruling class we endorse the people's right to self-defence, by whatever means be appropriate.

The power of the rulers feeds on the indecision and confusion of the ruled. Their power will only be overcome if confronted with ours: the power of a conscious and self-reliant majority, knowing what it wants and determined to get it. In modern industrial societies the power of such a majority will lie where thousands congregate daily, to sell their labour power in the production of goods and services.

Socialism cannot be the result of a putsch, of the capture of some Palace, or of the blowing up of some Party or Police Headquarters, carried out “on behalf of the people” or “to galvanize the masses”. If unsuccessful, all that such actions do is to create martyrs and myths — and to provoke intensified repression. If “successful”, they would only substitute one ruling minority for another, i.e. bring about a new form of exploitative society. Nor can socialism be introduced by organizations themselves structured according to authoritarian, hierarchical, bureaucratic or semi-military patterns. All that such organizations have instituted (and, if “successful”, are likely to continue instituting) are societies in their own image.

The social revolution is no Party matter. It will be the action of the immense majority, acting in the interests of the immense majority. The failures of social-democracy and of Bolshevism are the failure of a whole concept of politics, a concept according to which the oppressed could entrust their liberation to others than themselves. This lesson is gradually entering mass consciousness and preparing the ground for a genuinely libertarian revolution.

9. Because we reject Lenin’s concept that the working class can only develop a trade union (or reformist) consciousness *it follows* that we reject the Leninist prescription that socialist consciousness has to be brought to the people from outside, or injected into the movement by political specialists: the professional revolutionaries. It further follows that we cannot behave as if we held such beliefs.

Mass consciousness, however, is never a theoretical consciousness, derived individually through the study of books. In modern industrial societies socialist consciousness springs from the real conditions of social life. These societies generate the conditions for an adequate consciousness. On the other hand, because they are class societies, they usually inhibit accession to that consciousness. Here lies both the dilemma and the challenge confronting modern revolutionaries.

There *is* a role for conscious revolutionaries. *Firstly*, through personal involvement, in one’s own life and where possible at one’s own place of work. (Here the main danger lies in “prolier than thou” attitudes, which lead people either to believe that there is little they can do if they are not industrial workers, or to pretend to be what they are not, in the false belief that the only relevant areas of struggle are in relation to industry.) *Secondly*, by assisting others in struggle, by providing them with help or information they are denied. (Here the main danger lies in the offering of “interested help”, where recruitment of the militant to the “revolutionary” organization is as much an objective of the “help” as is his victory in the struggle in which he is involved.) *Finally*, by pointing out and explaining the deep (but often hidden) relations between the socialist objective and what people are driven to do, through their own experiences and needs. (This is what we mean when we say revolutionaries should help make “explicit” the “implicitly” socialist content of many modern struggles.)

10. This section should differentiate *Solidarity* from the traditional type of political organization. We are not a leadership and do not aspire to be one. Because we do not want to lead or manipulate others, we have no use for hierarchy or for manipulatory mechanisms within our

own ranks. Because we believe in the autonomy — ideological and organizational — of the working class, we cannot deny groups such autonomy within the Solidarity movement itself. On the contrary, we should seek to encourage it.

On the other hand we certainly wish to influence others and to disseminate Solidarity ideas (not just any ideas) as widely as possible. This requires the co-ordinated activity of people or groups, individually capable of self-activity and of finding their own level of involvement and their own areas of work. The instruments of such co-ordination should be flexible and vary according to the purpose for which co-ordination is required.

We do not reject organizations as necessarily implying bureaucracy. If we held such views there would be no socialist perspective whatsoever. On the contrary, we hold that organizations whose mechanisms (and their implications) are understood by all can alone provide the framework for democratic decision-making. There are no institutional guarantees against the bureaucratization of revolutionary groups. The only guarantee is the perpetual awareness and self-mobilization of their members. We are aware, however, of the danger of revolutionary groups becoming “ends in themselves”. In the past, loyalties to groups have often superseded loyalties to ideas. Our prime commitment is to the social revolution — not to any particular political group, not even to Solidarity. Our organizational structure should certainly reflect the need for mutual assistance and support. But we have *no* other ulterior objectives, aspirations or ambitions. We therefore do not structure ourselves as if we had.

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