

# **What's "Left"?**

**Is there an alternative to capitalism today?**

Workers' Solidarity Federation

22 August 1996

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Comrades, the starting point of this talk today is that we need an alternative to capitalism. We need an alternative to capitalism.

## **CAPITALISM: A DISASTER FOR THE MAJORITY OF THE WORLD'S POPULATION**

Capitalism has repeatedly failed the majority of the world's population. According to recent reports:

- 358 billionaires have more assets than the combined incomes of countries home to 45% of the world's people.
- the richest 20% of the world's population gets 85% of the world's income. 30 years ago, the richest 20% only got 70% of the world's income,

Capitalism has failed the majority of our people too:

- 50,000 mainly White commercial farmers own nearly 99% of all private farming land in South Africa
- 5% of the population owns 88% of all personal wealth.
- 70% of the population lives below the breadline

This is what capitalism is all about- a profit system in which the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer. And capitalism is also the major cause of problems like racism. Capitalism in South Africa was and is built on the super- exploitation of the African working-class. As if this isn't bad enough, the bosses' greed is causing environmental problems on such a scale that the Earth's very ability to sustain life is threatened.

## **THE CRISIS OF THE LEFT**

We need an alternative to capitalism, now more than ever. We need a But today we find a major crisis in the broad socialist movement. Since World War One. there have been two dominant ideas on how we should fight to get to socialism. Both of these have now collapsed.

## **SOCIAL-DEMOCRACY**

The first model was social-democracy. A good example was the Labour Party in England.

The basic idea of these guys was that you get to socialism by slowly reforming the capitalist system. How do you do this? By voting for social- democratic and Labour Parties in elections. By making small reforms such as giving workers a small bit of income when they are unemployed. By getting the trade unions to work with the bosses to develop the economy.

Many of these policies were put in place after 1945- the end of World War 2.

One thing is definite, and that is that social-democrat policies did nothing to stop capitalism. Even if they brought about some welfare benefits, they never ended inequality and poverty in

society. They weakened the trade unions by trying to get them to work with the bosses. The unions were held back from a consistent struggle against the bosses, and developed a undemocratic leadership of paid leaders and so-called “experts”.

These social-democratic policies were only possible while capitalism was going through an economic boom. Once the boom ended in the 1970s, the bosses tried to keep up profits by lowering taxes and by pushing down wages.

The governments led by social-democrats, such as the Labour Party in England, led this attack. How can this be so? What the social-democrats did not realise was that the State apparatus-parliament, the police, the government bureaucracy- is not the friend of the workers and the poor. It is the tool of the bosses. Real power does not lie in parliament, but in the big companies, the army and the top officials.

Since this time, the social-democrats have been in retreat. They have lost hope; today their politics does not even pretend to be socialist. And many workers won't vote for them because of all their broken promises,

## **REVOLUTIONARY MARXISM**

The second model of socialism was that of revolutionary Marxism. The main example here is obviously the Communist Parties. There were also a number of small Trotskyite groups, but these have never had the mass base of the Communist Parties,

The basic idea here was that a militant “vanguard party”, a revolutionary socialist party of “advanced militants”, should lead the workers to forcefully seize State power. Socialism could then be introduced by the State. How? By nationalising the economy. By introducing central planning, By suppressing forces seen as anti-revolutionary.

The model for this strategy was the Russian Revolution of 1917, where the Communist Party of Lenin and Trotsky took State power and introduced what they saw as socialism. This model of fighting for socialism was also successful in other countries such as East Europe, China and Cuba.

But in the late 1980s, most of these regimes collapsed. There were two main causes for this collapse.

The one reason was an economic crisis. The centrally planned economies were badly coordinated, resulting in many shortages. While they were good at developing heavy industry like steel, they proved unable to develop high technology goods like computers. They proved unable to provide basic consumer goods like sanitary towels for women.

The other reason was mass discontent. Millions of workers and students mobilised to overthrow these governments. Why? The reason was partly that people were sick of regular shortages and economic problems. People were also fighting for democracy. They were tired of living under governments that banned trade unions, used forced labour, suppressed freedom of speech and political association, and conquered nearby countries such as Afghanistan and Tibet.

The failure of the Communist parties was that they thought socialism must come from above through a powerful State dominated by one party. They thought the State must run the economy from above. In 1918, Lenin advised to “study the State-capitalism of the Germans, to adopt it with all possible strength, not to spare dictatorial methods to hasten its adoption” (On Left Infantilism and the Petty Bourgeois Spirit, cited in EH Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution*, vol. 2, p99). He sneered at calls for a congress of workers to plan the economy (1921, 10<sup>th</sup> Congress of

the Bolshevik Party) (cited in D. Cohn-Bendit, *Obsolete Communism: the left-wing alternative*, p232):

“A producers’ Congress! What precisely does that mean? It is difficult to find words to describe this folly. I keep asking myself, can they be joking? Can one really take these people seriously? While production is always necessary, democracy is not. Democracy of production generates a series of radically false ideas.”

Similarly, Trotsky denounced those who were critical of the Communist Party’s practice of suppressing political opponents on the grounds that they “placed the workers right to elect representatives above the party. As if the party were not entitled to assert its dictatorship even if that dictatorship temporarily clashed with the passing moods of the workers democracy” (L.Trotsky, *Sochineya*, Moscow 1925, p89, 236. Also cited in Nove, *Studies in Economics and Russia*, 1990, 181 et seq).

## **THE ANARCHIST-SYNDICALIST ALTERNATIVE**

As a result of the twin collapse of social-democracy and Communism, the left is in a crisis. Many organisations have collapsed; those who survive hold no clear vision of a future non-capitalist society.

In trying to chart a way forward, we need to take a hard look at past experiences. We need to recognise that much of what passed for socialism in the last 70 years was nothing of the sort. Rather than see capitalism as triumphant, we need to see these versions of socialism as flawed.

There is an alternative to capitalism. It is represented by Anarchist-Syndicalism, that is to say, by the mass-based tradition of revolutionary anti-authoritarian socialism. As socialists, we need to identify with the history and ideas of Anarchist-Syndicalism,

Anarchist-Syndicalism has always rejected the reformist ideas of the social democrats and the dictatorial methods of the Communists. Rather than see socialism as something handed out from on high by a small minority using State power, Anarchist- Syndicalists argue that socialism must come from the ground up.

Socialism can only be created by the mass organisations of the working-class and the poor and these are the democratic civics and trade unions, The trade unions must organise the workers to take-over and democratically manage the land, mines, offices and factories.

Capitalism must go. So too must the State. The State is an undemocratic structure which that concentrates power in the hands of a small elite, The State defends the interests of an exploiting ruling class of bosses, professional politicians, military leaders and State managers.

Socialism will never be created by the State. The State must be replaced by workers democracy organised from the ground up through the trade unions and democratic civics. The revolution must be defended by a democratic workers army controlled by the unions and civics.

Anarchist-Syndicalism has historically had a huge influence on working-class and peasants struggles. May Day itself began as a commemoration of 5 Anarchist militants executed by the American government in 1887 on false charges. The executions followed after the Anarchist movement played a leading role in organising a general strike of Black and White workers for the eight- hour day.

Today Anarchist-Syndicalism is again emerging as a powerful force on the left. It is perhaps the only revolutionary movement which is growing in the world today. In Nigeria, the Anarchist-Syndicalist organisation the Awareness League is playing a central role in the struggle against the military dictatorship,

## **WHAT DO WE NEED TO DO?**

The workers and the poor will continue to fight back against the bosses- with or without the help of Anarchist-Syndicalists and other socialists.

But a final victory for the mass of the people over the bosses and rulers requires that the workers and the poor

- are organised in mass structures like unions and civics capable of defeating the bosses and rulers
- have a clear vision of a future society without bosses and rulers of any kind. A vision of Stateless socialism (Anarchism)

In order to reach this situation, we need to build an Anarchist-Syndicalist organisation that will have clear politics and a democratic structure. An organisation that will

- defend and support all struggles against exploitation and oppression
- win the workers and the poor to the Anarchist-Syndicalist idea
- work within the trade unions to transform them into revolutionary fighting units, This requires winning the rank-and-file over to revolutionary ideas, and it requires a fight to remove the power of the trade union bureaucracy (the conservative paid leadership)
- fight for free and democratic education for all, and work towards the building of a student union that can champion student struggles
- consistently fight against capitalism and its State

If you agree with what we have said here, you should think of joining us!

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