

NewSocialist.org is no longer active/updated. You can continue to use it as a resource.



(<https://newsocialist.org/>)



ACTUALLY EXISTING 'SOCIALISM' — A CRITIQUE OF STALINISM

February 16, 2018



Since the global capitalist economic crisis began in 2008, there has been a profound political radicalization and polarization. Neoliberalism — the capitalist state 'deregulation' of capital ("free trade" agreements, removal of environmental and other regulations, etc.) and labour (de-unionization, dismantling of social welfare protections, etc.) — has been

broadly repudiated by both the left and the right. On the right, we have seen the rise of a nationalist-populism (e.g. Trump in the US, the National Front in France, and Alternative for Germany), targeting *both* “globalizing elites” and immigrants and racialized segments of the working class. On the left, we have seen a revival of left social-democracy (e.g. Corbynism in Britain, Podemos in Spain, Syriza in Greece), calling for the restoration of the postwar welfare state and state regulation of the economy.

Among a minority of activists on the left, revulsion with neoliberalism has led to an open rejection of capitalism as a social and political system. Some on the anti-capitalist left have been drawn to the politics of “socialism from below” — a revolutionary politics that looks to the self-organization and self-activity of working people, which requires the highest level of democratic organization, as the basis for both the struggle against capitalism and a democratic, collectivist, socialist order. This, I believe, was Marx’s original vision of the struggle for socialism and the socialist future.

However, others have been drawn to a variant of “socialism from above” — an admiration for the recently extinct (Soviet Union, China) and surviving (Cuba, North Vietnam) “socialist” regimes and the anti-capitalist movements they inspired in the twentieth century. Few anti-capitalist radicals today hold up the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe as models — these regimes are generally reviled as stale (alienating), pale (European) and male (dominated). Most instead are drawn to China under the rule of Mao. For these comrades, China surpassed the Soviet Union in building a new, revolutionary society that avoided some of the worst excesses of the Stalinist ruling class that came to power after the isolation and defeat of the Bolshevik Revolution. They claim that China achieved more egalitarian and consistent economic growth through the application of the “mass line,” in which the creative energy of workers and peasants became the driving force in society. These comrades also point to the supposed absence of mass coercion — claiming there was no forced collectivization of agriculture (forcing peasants to give up individual plots and work on collective-communal farms) or repression of working-class struggles. China under Mao is also held up as a consistent ally of revolutionary movements, in particular in the Global South. Whatever “excesses” that may have occurred in the construction of Chinese “socialism” were the result of either the errors of Mao’s opponents in the Chinese Communist Party (the “capitalist roaders”) or the necessary prices of freeing China from imperialism, developing a modern economy capable of abolishing poverty and guaranteeing health care, housing, education and other basic social provisions for working people.

Mao's China was, in its most fundamental relations and processes, the same sort of society as the Soviet Union under Stalin.[1] Neither China nor Russia was socialist in Marx's sense – they did not embody the rule of working people. Rather state bureaucracies, masquerading as “Communist Parties”, ruled over the working class. The bureaucracy's class rule undermined the actual gains working people made in these societies and prepared the way for the restoration of free-market capitalism in these countries. All of these regimes transformed anti-capitalist movements in the rest of the world from organizations promoting independent workers' struggles against imperialism and domestic capitalism into instruments of the diplomatic maneuverings of these ruling classes. The results were the defeat of revolutionary possibilities in the Global North and South, and the weakening of working-class movements across the world.

Bureaucratic Authoritarianism vs. Working-Class Emancipation

There is no question that bureaucratic rule in both Russia and China brought significant material benefits for working people – free universal health care, public education, inexpensive public housing, access to cultural activities, etc. However, the existence and *improvement* (housing, for example, remained below the standards enjoyed by workers in the West) of these social provisions required continued increases in labour productivity, to both finance these programs and provide workers more free time. The relationship between the ruling elite and the working class in all of these societies was a fundamental *obstacle* to the growth of labour productivity. Under capitalism, *market coercion* compels every unit of production to cut costs through the introduction of labour-saving methods and techniques – always at the cost of workers' skills and control over production. Those that fail go bankrupt – something that could not occur in the bureaucratic societies. Under democratic, worker-run socialism, the workers' own interest in reducing labour-time and increasing time for social participation and enrichment would lead them to find ways of both increasing labour productivity *and* make work a more meaningful experience. The absence of any workers' control – whether at the level of the individual enterprise or, more importantly, setting the priorities for economic planning – deprived workers of any interest in improving the productivity of labour.

The rulers of both the Soviet Union and China, after initially appropriating tools and methods from domestic capitalists they expropriated, had only two ways of increasing labour productivity. On the one hand, they could rely on voluntarist exhortations and brutal repression to mobilize labour to build new industries. The first five year plan and forced collectivization of agriculture in the Soviet Union (1928-1933) was the classic example. However, the “Great Leap Forward” (1958-1962), which brought the forced

collectivization of agriculture in China, and the “Cultural Revolution” (1966-1976) with the forced exile of urban dwellers to the countryside were similar failed attempts to overcome the stagnation of the bureaucratic economy.

When moral exhortations failed to move peasants out of agriculture or obtain greater output from workers, repression and violence filled the gap. While statistics are extremely fragmentary, conservative evidence indicates millions lost their lives during bureaucratic attempts to jump start industrialization. At least one million lost their lives in Stalin’s prison camps between 1929 and 1953 and another five million died as a result of the famine induced by forced collectivization of agriculture between 1929 and 1933. Mao’s regime was only marginally less brutal. Nearly one million peasants perished during the collectivization of agriculture in the early 1950s, another two million died of the famine caused by the Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s, and another one million in the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s.[2]

When mass mobilizations in these societies began to threaten bureaucratic rule, they were brutally repressed. Most of the left is well acquainted with the role of “Communist” parties in crushing working-class rebellions in Eastern Europe (Berlin in 1953, Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968, Poland in 1970 and 1980-1981). Less well known is the Shanghai Commune of 1967. At the height of the Cultural Revolution, workers in Shanghai acted on calls from Mao’s wing of the party to “take ownership of the factories.” Workers took over their factories, established worker committees that both administered production within the plant and linked up with other committees to become a new, democratic working-class power. Mao quickly found common ground with his “capitalist roader” opponents in unleashing the military repression against the Shanghai workers.

On the other hand, the Stalinist regimes attempted to introduce “market criteria” to increase productivity. The various experiments in “market socialism” (Khrushchev’s reforms in the Soviet Union in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Eastern Europe in the 1970s and 1980s, and in post-Mao China) were not the result of the victory of “capitalist roaders,” but of the failure of voluntarist attempts to overcome the stagnation of labour productivity in the bureaucratic economies. Bureaucratic “market socialism” made bonuses for workers and managers dependent upon cost-cutting in their enterprise. However, the absence of the ultimate sanction for not obeying ‘market signals’ – bankruptcy – meant that gains were limited and not continuous. The constant swinging back and forth between voluntarism/repression and market mechanisms ultimately led most of the rulers of both the Soviet Union and China to opt for the restoration of capitalism as the only means of both preserving their class dominance and promoting intensive economic development.[3]

Stalinism Beyond the Soviet Bloc and China

The contradiction of the bureaucratic command economies led the ruling classes in these societies to transform the revolutionary movement in the capitalist world into instruments of their diplomatic dealings with capitalist states. Rooted in their nation states, the ruling officialdoms proclaimed the doctrine of “socialism in one country” — the notion that isolated non-capitalist societies could not only survive, but could actually develop viable economies and societies, surrounded by the capitalist world. This notion, originally formulated by Stalin, was thoroughly non-Marxist and had been rejected by all revolutionary socialists — including the Bolsheviks — before 1924.

Revolutionary anti-capitalists around the world came to identify the changing diplomatic needs of the bureaucratic societies with the struggle for socialism. Depending upon the type of economic strategy they pursued at any point, the Stalinist ruling classes imposed different strategies on the anti-capitalist movement. During phases that the Stalinist bureaucracies relied on voluntarism and repression, they advised anti-capitalists in the West to adopt ultra-radical politics that eschewed any cooperation in struggle with other, non-revolutionary forces. During phases that they relied on market mechanisms, they encouraged anti-capitalists to enter into alliances with “progressive” capitalists (those amenable to diplomatic alliances with the Stalinists) and the forces of official reformism (trade union leaders, parliamentary politicians) to defend “democracy” in the west.

Both of these strategies have led to catastrophe for anti-capitalist movements in the West. [4] The ultra-radical politics of what became known as “Third-Period” politics (referring to the Communist International’s belief that with the 1928 depression capitalism was entering a third, terminal period since the end of World War I) isolated revolutionaries from workers who were not already revolutionaries. The result in Germany was disastrous — the seizure of power by the Nazis in January 1933 with no resistance from the oldest, largest and best-organized workers’ movement in the world. Similar politics informed many of the attempts to hot-house guerilla struggles in many parts of the Global South in the 1960s and 1970s.[5] The Maoist “Sendero Luminoso” guerilla movement in Peru, predisposed to the ultra-left politics of “peoples’ war” and unable to win support from either the peasantry and urban working class, launched a war that targeted both the Peruvian state and the leaders of independent peasant associations and workers’ unions.

The policy of alliances with liberal capitalists and reformist union leaders and politicians, known as the “popular front,” was equally disastrous. Potentially revolutionary upsurges in a number of societies (China in 1925-27, France and Spain in 1936-37, France, Greece, and Italy in 1945-47, and Portugal in 1974-75) were derailed as Communist Parties ended mass

strikes and factory occupations, and even disarmed workers' militias in order to preserve their alliances with the "progressives." Non-revolutionary workers' struggles were also derailed, like those in the US in the mid-1930s, short-circuiting the emergence of independent working-class parties and the development of a significant minority of socialist workers.[6] In the long run, the popular front strategy led to the integration of Communist Party members into the labour officialdom. This disorganization of the "militant minority" — the workers who had maintained traditions of political radicalism and working-class independence and militancy since the 1890s — effectively isolated revolutionaries from the working class in most of the industrialized capitalist societies.[7]

Today, an identification with the bureaucratic regimes masquerading as socialism undermines the rebuilding of an anti-capitalist left. First, it reinforces the popular association of the failed, repressive and *anti-working class* regimes of the Soviet Bloc and China with "socialism." In addition, identifying the Stalinist societies with socialism undermines our organizing — tying us to strategic alliances with liberals and union officials and reformist politicians, or isolating us as "super-radicals" who abstain from real working-class and popular struggles for immediate gains. In recent years, these politics have led anti-capitalist radicals to confuse opposing imperialism with political support for anti-popular governments, like Assad's murderous regime in Syria; or to making excuses for the anti-popular policies of "progressive" governments like the Morales government in Bolivia when it unleashes repression against Indigenous opponents of mining and natural gas extraction.[8] For others, especially inspired by Maoism, it has led them to defend Sendero Luminoso's assassination of peasant and worker leaders in Peru.

"Socialism from below" — the politics of working class self-organization and self-emancipation — offers the only *realistic* alternative to the politics of Stalinism (whether in its Soviet Bloc or Maoist forms). "Socialism from below" makes working people's own struggles — not the diplomatic needs of states claiming to be "socialist" — central to both our strategy for socialism and our *understanding* of socialism.

[1] The best, brief study making the argument that Mao's China and Stalin's Russia were the same type of society is Elliot Liu, *Maoism and the Chinese Revolution: A Critical Introduction* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2016).

[2] Figures are drawn from a variety of sources, always using the lowest estimates: Frank Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine* (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mao%27s_Great_Famine): *The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958-1962* (London: Walker & Company, 2004); Michael Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[3] For a good summary of this position, see Robert Brenner, “The Soviet Union and Eastern Europe—The Roots of the Crisis” *Verso Blog*, Part I: (11 February 2016)

[<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2490-the-soviet-union-and-eastern-europe-the-roots-of-the-crisis> (<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2490-the-soviet-union-and-eastern-europe-the-roots-of-the-crisis>)] and Part II: (12 February 2016)

[<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2491-the-soviet-union-and-eastern-europe-the-roots-of-the-crisis-part-two> (<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2491-the-soviet-union-and-eastern-europe-the-roots-of-the-crisis-part-two>)]

[4] For a detailed discussion of the catastrophic effect of Stalinism on the Communist Parties in the capitalist world, see Fernando Claudin, *The Crisis of the Communist Movement: From Comintern to Cominform*, Two Volumes (New York: Monthly Review, 1975).

[5] See Samuel Farber, *The Politics of Che Guevara: Theory and Practice* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2016).

[6] Charlie Post, “The Popular Front Didn’t Work” *Jacobin* (October 17, 2017) [<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/10/popular-front-communist-party-democrats> (<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/10/popular-front-communist-party-democrats>)]

[7] Charlie Post and Kit Adam Wainer, “Socialist Organization Today” (Detroit, MI: Solidarity Pamphlet, 2006) [<https://www.solidarity-us.org/sot> (<https://www.solidarity-us.org/sot>)]

[8] Jeffrey Webber’s *The Last Day of Oppression, and the First Day of the Same: The Politics and Economics of the New Latin American Left* (London: Pluto Press, 2017) provides an in-depth analysis of the limits of Morales in Bolivia, Chavez in Venezuela and other “pink tide” governments in Latin America.

Charlie Post is a long time socialist active in the faculty union at the City University of New York.

Tags REVOLUTION ([HTTPS://NEWSOCIALIST.ORG/TAG/REVOLUTION/](https://newsocialist.org/tag/revolution/))

SOCIALISM ([HTTPS://NEWSOCIALIST.ORG/TAG/SOCIALISM/](https://newsocialist.org/tag/socialism/))

SOCIALISM FROM BELOW ([HTTPS://NEWSOCIALIST.ORG/TAG/SOCIALISM-FROM-BELOW/](https://newsocialist.org/tag/socialism-from-below/))

STALIN ([HTTPS://NEWSOCIALIST.ORG/TAG/STALIN/](https://newsocialist.org/tag/stalin/))