

Has Socialism Failed?

By Joe Slovo

South African Communist Party

Contents

- Introduction
- Ideological Responses
- Marxist Theory Under Fire
- Socialism and Democracy
- Socialist Economic Alienation
- A Look at Ourselves

The subject matter of this discussion paper will no doubt be debated for years to come both inside and outside the ranks of communist and workers' parties. The publication of this draft has been authorised by our party's leadership, as a launching pad for further critical thought. Some colleagues have made extremely valuable suggestions, which have been incorporated. But, as a whole, it represents the first reflections of the author only.

January 1990

1. INTRODUCTION

Socialism is undoubtedly in the throes of a crisis greater than at any time since 1917. The last half of 1989 saw the dramatic collapse of most of the communist party governments of Eastern Europe. Their downfall was brought about through massive upsurges which had the support not only of the majority of the working class but also a large slice of the membership of the ruling parties themselves. These were popular revolts against unpopular regimes; if socialists are unable to come to terms with this reality, the future of socialism is indeed bleak.

The mounting chronicle of crimes and distortions in the history of existing socialism, its economic failures and the divide which developed between socialism and democracy, have raised doubts in the minds of many former supporters of the socialist cause as to whether socialism can work at all. Indeed, we must expect that, for a time, many in the affected countries will be easy targets for those aiming to achieve a reversion to capitalism, including an embrace of its external policies.(1)

Shock-waves of very necessary self-examination have also been triggered off among communists both inside and outside the socialist world. For our part, we firmly believe in the future of socialism; and we do not dismiss its whole past as an

unmitigated failure.(2) Socialism certainly produced a Stalin and a Ceaucescu, but it also produced a Lenin and a Gorbachev. Despite the distortions at the top, the nobility of socialism's basic objectives inspired millions upon millions to devote themselves selflessly to building it on the ground. And, no one can doubt that if humanity is today poised to enter an unprecedented era of peace and civilised international relations, it is in the first place due to the efforts of the socialist world.

But it is more vital than ever to subject the past of existing socialism to an unsparing critique in order to draw the necessary lessons. To do so openly is an assertion of justified confidence in the future of socialism and its inherent moral superiority. And we should not allow ourselves to be inhibited merely because an exposure of failures will inevitably provide ammunition to the traditional enemies of socialism: our silence will, in any case, present them with even more powerful ammunition.

1. It is, for example, sad to record that among the early foreign policy initiatives of the new government in Hungary was to play host to South Africa's foreign minister. By doing this it has, without even the diplomatic niceties of consulting with the representatives of the repressed and dominated majority, moved away from one of the most humanitarian aspects of the policies of the socialist world, i.e. to be in the vanguard of those who shun apartheid.

2. Among other things, statistics recently published in The Economist (UK) show that in the Soviet Union - after only 70 years of socialist endeavour in what was one of the most backward countries in the capitalist world - there are more graduate engineers than in the US, more graduate research scientists than in Japan and more medical doctors per head than in Western Europe. It also produces more steel, fuel and energy than any other country (The World in the 1990s; Economist publication). How many capitalist countries can match the achievements of most of the socialist world in the provision of social security, child care, the ending of cultural backwardness, and so on? There is certainly no country in the world which can beat Cuba's record in the sphere of health care.

2. IDEOLOGICAL RESPONSES

The ideological responses to the crisis of existing socialism by constituents of what was previously known as the International Communist and Workers' movement (and among our own members) is still so varied and tentative that it is early days to attempt a neat categorisation. But at the risk of over-simplification, we identify a number of broad tendencies against which we must guard:

Finding excuses for Stalinism

Attributing the crisis to the pace of perestroika

Acting as if we have declared a moratorium on socialist criticism of capitalism and imperialism and, worst of all,

Concluding that socialist theory made the distortions inevitable.

A. Sticking to Stalinism

The term 'Stalinism' is used to denote the bureaucratic-authoritarian style of leadership (of parties both in and out of power) which denuded the party and the practice of socialism of most of its democratic content and concentrated power in the hands of a tiny, self-perpetuating elite.

While the mould for Stalinism was cast under Stalin's leadership it is not suggested that he bears sole responsibility for its negative practices. The essential content of Stalinism - socialism without democracy - was retained even after Stalin in the Soviet Union (until Gorbachev's intervention), albeit without some of the terror, brutality and judicial distortions associated with Stalin himself.

Among a diminishing minority there is still a reluctance to look squarely in the mirror of history and to concede that the socialism it reflects has, on balance, been so distorted that an appeal to its positive achievements (and of course there have been many) sounds hollow and very much like special pleading. It is surely now obvious that if the socialist world stands in tatters at this historic moment it is due to the Stalinist distortions.

We should have little patience with the plea in mitigation that, in the circumstances, the Stalinist excesses (such as forced collectivisation) brought about some positive economic achievements. Statistics showing high growth rates during Stalin's time prove only that methods of primitive accumulation can stimulate purely quantitative growth in the early stages of capitalism or socialism - but at what human cost? In any case, more and more evidence is emerging daily that, in the long run, the excesses inhibited the economic potential of socialism.

Another familiar plea in mitigation is that the mobilising effect of the Stalin cult helped save socialism from military defeat. It is, however, now becoming clear that the virtual destruction of the command personnel of the Red Army, the lack of effective preparation against Hitler's onslaught and Stalin's dictatorial and damaging interventions in the conduct of the war could have cost the Soviet Union its victory.

Vigilance is clearly needed against the pre-perestroika styles of work and thinking which infected virtually every party (including ours) and moulded its members for so many decades. It is not enough merely to engage in the self-pitying cry: 'we

were misled'; we should rather ask why so many communists allowed themselves to become so blinded for so long. And, more importantly, why they behaved like Stalinists towards those of their comrades who raised even the slightest doubt about the 'purity' of Stalin's brand of socialism.

In the socialist world there are still outposts which unashamedly mourn the retreat from Stalinism and use its dogmas to 'justify' undemocratic and tyrannical practices. It is clearly a matter of time before popular revulsion leads to a transformation. In general, those who still defend the Stalinist model - even in a qualified way - are a dying breed; at the ideological level they will undoubtedly be left behind and they need not detain us here.

B. Blaming Gorbachev

Most communists, of course, concede that a great deal 'went wrong' and needs to be corrected. Some, however, fear that the corrective methods are so hasty and extreme that, in the end, they may do more harm than good. The enemies of socialism, so it is argued, are being given new powerful weapons with which to destroy socialism and to return to capitalism. The pace of Gorbachev's perestroika and glasnost are, either directly or indirectly, blamed for the 'collapse' of communist political hegemony in countries like Poland, Hungary, GDR and Czechoslovakia.

In the countries mentioned, despite the advantage of over 40 years of a monopoly of education, the media, etc., the parties in power could not find a significant section of the class they claimed to represent (or, for that matter, even a majority of their own membership) to defend them or their version of socialism. To blame perestroika and glasnost for the ailments of socialism is like blaming the diagnosis and the prescription for the illness. Indeed, the only way to ensure the future of socialism is to grasp the nettle with the political courage of a Gorbachev.

When things go badly wrong (whether it be in a movement or a country) it is inevitable that some who have ulterior motives jump on to the bandwagon. When a gap develops between the leadership and the led, it always provides openings for real enemies. But to deal with the gap in terms only of enemy conspiracies is an ancient and discredited device. Equally, to fail to tackle mistakes or crimes merely because their exposure will give comfort to our adversaries is both short-sighted and counter-productive.

In any case, a number of additional questions still go begging:

Firstly, have we the right to conclude that the enemies of a discredited party leadership are the same as the enemies of socialism? If the type of socialism which the people have experienced has been rubbished in their eyes and they begin to

question it, are they necessarily questioning socialism or are they rejecting its perversion?

Secondly, what doctrine of pre-Stalinism and pre-Mao Marxism gives a communist party (or any other party for that matter) the moral or political right to impose its hegemony or to maintain it in the face of popular rejection?

Thirdly, who has appointed us to impose and defend at all costs our version of socialism even if the overwhelming majority have become disillusioned with it?

In general, it is our view that the fact that the processes of perestroika and glasnost came too slowly, too little and too late in Eastern Europe did more than anything else to endanger the socialist perspective there. It is through these processes - and they must be implemented with all possible speed - that socialism has any hope of showing its essentially human face. When socialism as a world system comes into its own again - as it undoubtedly will - the 'Gorbachev revolution' will have played a seminal role.

C. Abandoning the Ideological Contest

We are impressed with the contribution which crusading pro-perestroika journals (such as Moscow News and New Times) are making to the renovation of socialism. At the same time, we must not overlook the alarming tendency among many media partisans of perestroika to focus so exclusively on the blemishes of the socialist experience that the socialist critique of capitalism and imperialism finds little, if any, place.

In keeping with this excessive defensiveness, there is a tendency to underplay some of the most graphic pointers to the superior moral potential of socialist civilisation. For instance, it is a sad commentary on earlier socialist history that the Soviet people are now moved to erect monuments to the victims of the Stalin period. But the capitalist world is planning no monuments to those of its citizens ravaged by its cruelties nor to millions of victims of its colonial terror.

The transformations which have occurred in Poland, Hungary, the German Democratic Republic, Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria are revolutionary in scope. With the exception of Romania, is there another example in human history in which those in power have responded to the inevitable with such a civilised and pacific resignation?

We should remember De Gaulle's military response in 1968 when ten million workers and students filled the streets of Paris. It is not difficult to forecast how Bush or Thatcher would deal with millions in their streets supported by general strikes demanding the overthrow of their system of rule.

Some Soviet journals have become so exclusively focused on self-criticism that the social inequalities within capitalism and the continuing plunder by international capital of the resources of the developing world through neo-colonial manipulation, unequal trade and the debt burden, receive little emphasis. Middle class elements, including many journalists within socialist societies, seem mesmerised by pure technocracy; the glitter of Western consumerism, and the quality of up-market goods, appear to overshadow the quality of life for society as a whole.(2)

There is less visible than at any time a critique of imperialism's continuing human rights violations and its gross interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states through surrogates and direct aggression, and its continuing support for banditry and racist and military dictatorships.

The gloss which is put in some of these journals on social and political conditions inside the capitalist West itself has been described by Jonathan Steele in the British Guardian as little less than 'grotesque'. In some contributions capitalism is prettified in the same generalised and unscholarly way as it used to be condemned, i.e. without researched statistics and with dogma taking the place of information. The borderline between socialism and what is called welfare capitalism is increasingly blurred.

In contrast to all this, whatever else may be happening in international relations, the ideological offensive by the representatives of capitalism against socialism is certainly at full blast.

The Western media gloat repeatedly with headlines such as 'Communism - R.I.P.'. Professor Robert Heilbroner, a luminary of the New York New School, has already raised his champagne glass with a victory toast for capitalism. Asserting that the Soviet Union, China and Eastern Europe have proved that capitalism organises the material affairs of humankind more satisfactorily than socialism, he goes on to proclaim:

'Less than 75 years after it officially began, the contest between capitalism and socialism is over; capitalism has won ... the great question now seems how rapid will be the transformation of socialism into capitalism, and not the other way around.'(3)

Just in case more is needed to fulfil this prediction, some of capitalism's most powerful representatives are there to give history a helping hand. Reagan's final boast for his eight years in office was that he saw to it that not one more inch of territory in the world 'went communist'. Bush takes up the baton with: 'We can now move from containment to bring the socialist countries into the community of free nations'. The Guardian (2/6/89, United Kingdom) reports a multi-million pound

initiative, endorsed by British ministers, to encourage change in Eastern Europe. And so on.

In the face of all this, it is no exaggeration to claim that, for the moment, the socialist critique of capitalism and the drive to win the hearts and minds of humanity for socialism have been virtually abandoned. The unprecedented offensive by capitalist ideologues against socialism has indeed been met by a unilateral ideological disarmament.

To the extent that this has come about through the need to concentrate on putting our own house in order it is, at least, understandable. But, in many cases, there is an inability to distinguish between socialism in general and the incorrect methods which were used to translate it on the ground. This has led to an unjustified flirtation with certain economic and political values of capitalism.

The perversion of democracy in the socialist experience is falsely contrasted to its practice in the capitalist West as if the latter gives adequate scope for the fulfilment of democratic ideals. The economic ravages caused by excessive centralisation and commandism under socialism seem also to have pushed into the background the basic socialist critique of capitalism that a society cannot be democratic which is ruled by profit and social inequality and in which power over the most vital areas of life is outside public control.

D: Losing Faith in the Socialist Objective

Some communists have been completely overwhelmed by the soiled image of socialism which they see in the mirror of history. They conclude that it reflects not only what was (and in the case of some countries, what still is), but, in addition, what inevitably had to be in the attempts to build a socialist society as understood by the founding fathers of socialist doctrine.

If, indeed, what happened in the socialist world had to happen because of some or all of our theoretical starting points, if the Stalin-type perversion is unavoidable, then there is no more to be said; we must clearly either seek an alternative to socialism or throw overboard, or at least qualify, some of its postulates.(4)

We believe, however, that the theory of Marxism, in all its essential respects, remains valid and provides an indispensable theoretical guide to achieve a society free of all forms of exploitation of person by person. The major weaknesses which have emerged in the practice of socialism are the results of distortions and misapplications. They do not flow naturally from the basic concepts of Marxism whose core is essentially humane and democratic and which project a social order with an economic potential vastly superior to that of capitalism.

1. Marx used the term 'primitive accumulation' to describe the original process of capitalist accumulation which, he maintained, was not the result of abstinence but rather of acts (including brigandage) such as the expropriation of the peasantry as happened during the British Enclosures (Capital Volume 1, Part VII).

Preobrazhensky in *The New Economics* (1926) talked about 'primitive socialist accumulation' involving the expropriation of resources from the better-off classes to generate capital for socialist industrial development. Here, the term is used to describe the arbitrary measures taken against the Soviet peasantry to forcibly 'enclose' them into collectives.

2. Socialism, as a transition phase to communism, is not based on full egalitarianism. But clearly the socialist maxim 'to each according to his contribution' is not applied absolutely in a socialist society which devotes a large slice of its resources to social services, subsidising basic necessities, and implementing the human right of guaranteed employment. The middle strata in socialist society are inevitably worse off than their counterparts in the West. Access to the flesh-pots of consumer goods (which the West produces for the upper crust in almost mind-bending variations) is more restricted when society tries to use its surplus to achieve a more just distribution of wealth.

3. *The New Yorker*, January 23, 1989.

4. In the recent period a number of European and African political parties have 'officially' abandoned Marxism-Leninism as a theoretical guide. In the case of FRELIMO, the decision appears to be the result of second thoughts on what may, in the circumstances, have been a premature transformation of the movement into a communist vanguard. But in the case of some Western parties the decision seems to be a response (with undoubted electoral implications) to the distortions of the socialist experience rather than a reasoned conclusion that Marxism is not a viable tool in the socialist endeavour. A leading Soviet academic (reported in *Work in Progress* No.48, July 1987, p.7) has predicted that South Africa has no chance of becoming socialist for a century.

3. MARXIST THEORY UNDER FIRE

Let us touch on some of the concepts which have come under fire in the post-perestroika polemics:

Marxism maintains that the class struggle is the motor of human history.(1) Some commentators in the socialist media are showing a temptation to jettison this theory merely because Stalin and the bureaucracy around him distorted it to rationalise tyrannical practices. But it remains valid both as an explanation of past social transformations and as a guide to the strategy and tactics of the struggle to win a socialist order; a struggle in which the working class plays the dominant role.

The economic stagnation of socialism and its poor technological performance as compared to the capitalist world sector cannot be attributed to the ineffectiveness of socialist relations of production but rather to their distortion. Socialist relations of production provide the most effective framework for maximising humanity's productive capacity and using its products in the interests of the whole society.

Marxist ethical doctrine sees no conflict between the contention that all morality is class-related and the assertion that working class values are concerned, above all, with the supremacy of human values.(2) The separation of these inter-dependent concepts (in later theory and practice) provided the context in which crimes against the people were rationalised in the name of the class. We continue to assert that it is only in a non-exploitative, communist, classless society that human values will find their ultimate expression and be freed of all class-related morality. In the meanwhile the socialist transition has the potential of progressively asserting the values of the whole people over those of classes.

The great divide which developed between socialism and political democracy should not be treated as flowing naturally from key aspects of socialist doctrine. This approach is fuelled by the sullied human rights record and the barrack-room collectivism of some of the experiences of existing socialism. We believe that Marxism clearly projects a system anchored in deep-seated political democracy and the rights of the individual which can only be truly attained when society as a whole assumes control and direction of all its riches and resources.

The crucial connection between socialism and internationalism and the importance of world working-class solidarity should not be underplayed as a result of the distortions which were experienced. These included excessive centralisation in the era of the Comintern, subordination of legitimate national aspirations to a distorted concept of 'internationalism', national rivalries between and within socialist states (including examples of armed confrontation). Working class internationalism remains one of the most liberating concepts in Marxism and needs to find effective expression in the new world conditions.

In summary, we believe that Marxism is a social science whose fundamental postulates and basic insights into the historical processes remain a powerful (because accurate) theoretical weapon. But this is not to say that every word of Marx, Engels and Lenin must be taken as gospel; they were not infallible and they were not always correct in their projections.

Lenin, for example, believed that capitalism was about to collapse worldwide in the post-October period.

It was a belief based on the incorrect premise that, as a system, capitalism was in an irreversible crisis and that capitalist relations of production constituted an obstacle to the further all-round development of the forces of production.

This was combined with a belief in the imminence of global socialist transformation, which undoubtedly infected much of the earlier thinking about the perspectives of socialist construction in the Soviet Union.

Also, it could well be argued that the classical description of bourgeois democracy(3) was an over-simplification and tended to underestimate the historic achievements of working class struggle in imposing and defending aspects of a real democratic culture on the capitalist state; a culture which should not disappear but rather needs to be expanded under true socialism.

But we emphasise again that the fundamental distortions which emerged in the practice of existing socialism cannot be traced to the essential tenets of Marxist revolutionary science.

If we are looking for culprits, we must look at ourselves and not at the founders of Marxism.

The Fault Lies with us, not with Socialism

In some cases, the deformations experienced by existing socialist states were the results of bureaucratic distortions which were rationalised at the ideological level by a mechanical and out-of-context invocation of Marxist dogma. In other cases they were the results of a genuinely-motivated but tragic misapplication of socialist theory in new realities which were not foreseen by the founders of Marxism.

The fact that socialist power was first won in the most backward outpost of European capitalism, without a democratic political tradition, played no small part in the way it was shaped. To this must be added the years of isolation, economic siege and armed intervention which, in the immediate post-October period, led to the virtual decimation of the Soviet Union's relatively small working class. In the course of time the party leadership was transformed into a command post with an overbearing centralism and very little democracy, even in relation to its own membership.

Most of the other socialist countries emerged 30 years later in the shadow of the cold war. Some of them owed a great deal to Soviet power for their very creation and survival, and the majority, for a great part of their history, followed the Stalinist economic and political model. Communists outside the socialist world and revolutionaries engaged in anti-colonial movements were the beneficiaries of generous aid and consistent acts of internationalist solidarity. They correctly saw in Soviet power a bulwark against their enemies and either did not believe, or did not want to believe, the way in which aspects of socialism were being debased.

All this helps to explain, but in no way to justify, the awful grip which Stalinism came to exercise in every sector of the socialist world and over (3) the whole

international communist movement. It was a grip which, if loosened by either parties (e.g. Yugoslavia) or individuals within parties, usually led to isolation and excommunication.

We make no attempt here to answer the complex question of why so many millions of genuine socialists and revolutionaries became such blind worshippers in the temple of the cult of the personality. Suffice it to say that the strength of this conformism lay, partly, in an ideological conviction that those whom history had appointed as the custodians of humankind's communist future seemed to be building on foundations prepared by the founding fathers of Marxism. And there was not enough in classical Marxist theory about the nature of the transition period to provide a detailed guide to the future.

This under-developed state of classical Marxist theory in relation to the form and structure of future socialist society lent itself easily to the elaboration of dogma which could claim general 'legitimacy' from a selection of quotes from the masters. But the founders of Marxism

'never invented specific forms and mechanisms for the development of the new society. They elaborated its socialist ideal ... they provided the historically transient character of capitalism and the historical need for transition to a new stage of social development. As for the structure of the future society to replace capitalism, they discussed it in the most general terms and mostly from the point of view of fundamental principles' (my emphasis).(4)

In particular, let us consider two issues:

socialism and democracy, and the related question

social and economic alienation under socialism.

1. This must be understood as providing the immediate explanation of the way major social change manifests itself in a situation in which the relations of production have become obstacles to the development of productive forces.

2. This type of formulation is preferred to the one occasionally used by Gorbachev that there are certain universal human values which take priority over class values. This latter formulation tends to detract from the inter-dependence of working class and human morality. It also perhaps goes too far in separating morality from its class connection, even though it is clear that the assertion of certain values can be in the mutual interests of otherwise contending classes.

3. See Lenin, State and Revolution, Selected Works pp 203-4.

4. M. Gorbachev in Pravda November 26th, 1989.

4. SOCIALISM AND DEMOCRACY

Marxist ideology saw the future state as 'a direct democracy in which the task of governing would not be the preserve of a state bureaucracy' and as 'an association in which the free development of each is a condition for the free development of all'.(2) How did it happen that, in the name of this most humane and liberating ideology, the bureaucracy became so all-powerful and the individual was so suffocated?

To find, at least, the beginnings of an answer we need to look at four related areas:

The thesis of the 'Dictatorship of the Proletariat' which was used as the theoretical rationalisation for unbridled authoritarianism.

The steady erosion of people's power both at the level of government and mass social organisations.

The perversion of the concept of the party as a vanguard of the working class, and

Whether, at the end of the day, socialist democracy can find real expression in a single-party state.

A. Dictatorship of the Proletariat

The concept of the 'Dictatorship of the Proletariat' was dealt with rather thinly by Marx as 'a transition to a classless society' without much further definition.(3) For his part Engels, drawing on Marx's analysis of the Paris Commune, claimed that it indeed 'was the Dictatorship of the Proletariat'.(4) The Paris Commune of 1871 was an exceptional social experience which brought into being a kind of workers' city-state (by no means socialist-led) in which, for a brief moment, most functions of the state (both legislative and executive) were directly exercised by a popular democratic assembly.

The concept of the 'Dictatorship of the Proletariat' was elaborated by Lenin in *State and Revolution* in the very heat of the revolutionary transformation in 1917. Lenin quoted Engels approvingly when he said that 'the proletariat needs the state, not in the interests of freedom but in order to hold down its adversaries, and as soon as it becomes possible to speak of freedom the state as such ceases to exist' (Engels, Letter to Bebel). In the meanwhile, in contrast to capitalist democracy which is 'curtailed, wretched, false ... for the rich, for the minority ... the dictatorship of the proletariat, the period of transition to communism, will, for the first time, create democracy ... for the majority ... along with the necessary suppression of the exploiters, of the minority.'(5)

Lenin envisaged that working-class power would be based on the kind of democracy of the Commune, but he did not address, in any detail, the nature of established socialist civil society, including fundamental questions such as the relationship between the party, state, people's elected representatives, social organisations, etc. Understandably, the dominant preoccupation at the time was with the seizure of power, its protection in the face of the expected counter-revolutionary assault, the creation of 'democracy for the majority' and the 'suppression of the minority of exploiters'.

Rosa Luxemburg said, in a polemic with Lenin:

'Freedom only for the supporters of the government, only for the members of one party - however numerous they may be - is not freedom at all. Freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently ... its effectiveness vanishes when "freedom" becomes a special privilege.'(6)

These words may not have been appropriate as policy (which is what Luxemburg argued for) in the special conditions of the phase immediately after the seizure of power in October 1917. Without a limitation on democracy there was no way the revolution could have defended itself in the civil war and the direct intervention by the whole of the capitalist world. But Luxemburg's concept of freedom is surely incontrovertible once a society has achieved stability.

Lenin clearly assumed that whatever repression may be necessary in the immediate aftermath of the revolution would be relatively mild and short-lived. The state and its traditional instruments of force would begin to 'wither away' almost as soon as socialist power had been won and the process of widening and deepening democracy would begin. Lenin was referring to the transitional socialist state (and not to the future communist society) when he emphasised that there would be an extension of 'democracy to such an overwhelming majority of the population that the need for a special machine of suppression will begin to disappear ... it is no longer a state in the proper sense of the word (because) the suppression of the minority of exploiters ... is easy, simple', entailing relatively little bloodshed, and hardly needing a machine or a special apparatus other than 'the simple organisation of the armed people (such as the Soviets) ...'(7)

We know that all this is a far cry from what happened in the decades which followed. The whole process was put in reverse. The complete 'suppression of the exploiters' was followed by the strengthening of the instruments of state suppression and the narrowing of democracy for the majority of the population, including the working class.

The anti-Leninist theory advanced (in the name of Lenin) to 'justify' this process was that the class struggle becomes more rather than less intense with the entrenchment of socialism. In some respects this became a self-fulfilling prophecy;

a retreat from democratic norms intensified social contradictions which, in turn, became the excuse for an intensification of the 'class struggle'.

One of the key rationalisations for this thesis was the undoubted threat, even after the end of the civil war, posed by imperialism and fascism to the very survival of the Soviet Union and the continuing Western conspiracies to prevent the spread of socialist power after 1945. But events have demonstrated that if the survival of the Soviet Union was at risk from the fascist onslaught it was, among other reasons, also the result of damage wrought to the whole Soviet social fabric (including its army) by the authoritarian bureaucracy. And if Western 'conspiracies' have succeeded in threatening the very survival of socialism in places like Eastern Europe, it is the narrowing rather than the extension of democracy which has played into their hands.

The term 'Dictatorship of the Proletariat' reflected the historical truth that in class-divided social formations state power is ultimately exercised by, and in the interests of, the class which owns and controls the means of production. It is in this sense that capitalist formations were described as a 'dictatorship of the bourgeoisie' whose rule would be replaced by a 'dictatorship of the proletariat' during the socialist transition period. In the latter case power would, however, be exercised in the interests of the overwhelming majority of the people and should lead to an ever-expanding genuine democracy - both political and economic.(7).

On reflection, the choice of the word 'dictatorship' to describe this type of society certainly opens the way to ambiguities and distortions.

The abandonment of the term by most communist parties, including ours, does not, in all cases, imply a rejection of the historical validity of its essential content. But, the way the term came to be abused bore little resemblance to Lenin's original concept. It was progressively denuded of its intrinsic democratic content and came to signify, in practice, a dictatorship of a party bureaucracy. For Lenin the repressive aspect of the concept had impending relevance in relation to the need for the revolution to defend itself against counter-revolutionary terror in the immediate post-revolution period.(8) He was defending, against the utopianism of the anarchists, the limited retention of repressive apparatus.

But, unfortunately, practices justified by the exigencies of the earlier phases became a permanent feature of the new society. As time went on the gap between socialism and democracy widened; the nature and role of the social institutions (such as the Soviets, the party and mass organisations) which had previously given substance to popular power and socialist democracy, were steadily eroded.

B. Elected Bodies and Mass Organisations

The steady erosion of the powers and representative character of elected institutions led to the alienation of a considerable portion of society from political life. The electorate had no effective right to choose its representatives. Gone were the days when the party had to engage in a political contest to win a majority in the Soviets. The legislative organs did not, in any case, have genuine control over legislation; by their nature they could only act as rubber stamps for decisions which had already been taken by party structures. The executive and judicial organs were, for all practical purposes, under the direct control of the party bureaucracy. In practice the majority of the people had very few levers with which to determine the course of economic or social life.

Democracy in the mass organisations was also more formal than real. The enormous membership figures told us very little about the extent to which the individual trade unionist, youth or woman was able to participate in the control or direction of their respective organisations. At the end of the day these organisations were turned into transmission belts for decisions taken elsewhere and the individual members were little more than cogs of the vast bureaucratic machine.

The trade union movement became an adjunct of the state and party. Workers had no meaningful role in determining the composition of the top leadership which was, in substance, answerable to the party apparatus. For all practical purposes the right to strike did not exist. The extremely thin dividing line between management and the trade union collective on the factory floor detracted from the real autonomy of trade unions. Apart from certain welfare functions, they tended, more and more, to act like Western-style production councils, but without the advantage of having to answer for their role to an independent trade union under the democratic control of its membership.

Much of the above applied to the women's and youth organisations. Instead of being guided by the aspirations and interests of their constituencies, they were turned into support bases for the ongoing dictates of the state and party apparatus.(9)

The Party

In the immediate aftermath of the October revolution, the Bolshevik party shared power with other political and social tendencies, including Mensheviks and a section of the left Social Revolutionaries. In the elections for the constituent assembly in 1918, the Bolsheviks received less than a third of the popular vote.(10)

There may be moments in the life of a revolution which justify a postponement of full democratic processes. And we do not address the question of whether the Bolsheviks were justified in taking a monopoly of state power during the extraordinary period of both internal and external assault on the gains of the revolution. Suffice it to say that the single-party state and the guiding and leading

role of the party subsequently became permanent features of socialist rule and were entrenched in the constitutions of most socialist states.(11) Henceforth the parties were 'vanguards' by law and not necessarily by virtue of social endorsement.

This was accompanied by negative transformations within the party itself. Under the guise of 'democratic centralism' inner-party democracy was almost completely suffocated by centralism. All effective power was concentrated in the hands of a Political Bureau or, in some cases, a single, all-powerful personality. The control of this 'leadership' by the party as a whole was purely formal. In most cases the composition of the highest organ - the congress which finalised policy and elected the leadership - was manipulated from the top.

The Central Committee (elected by variations of a 'list' system emanating from the top) had only the most tenuous jurisdiction over the Political Bureau. Within this latter body a change of leaders resembled a palace coup rather than a democratic process; invariably the changes were later unanimously endorsed.

The invigorating impact of the contest of ideas in Marxist culture was stifled. In practice, the basic party unit was there to explain, defend, exhort and support policies in whose formulation they rarely participated. The concept of consensus effectively stifled dissent and promoted the completely unnatural appearance of unanimity on everything. Fundamental differences were either suppressed or silenced by the self-imposed discipline of so-called democratic centralism. In these conditions the democratic development of party policy became a virtual impossibility.

D. The Single-Party State

Hegel coined the profound aphorism that truth is usually born as a heresy and dies as a superstition. With no real right to dissent by citizens or even by the mass of the party membership, truth became more and more inhibited by deadening dogma; a sort of catechism took the place of creative thought. And, within the confines of a single-party state, the alternative to active conformism was either silence or the risk of punishment as 'an enemy of the people'.

Is this suppression of the right to dissent inherent in the single-party state?
Gorbachev recently made the point that:

'Developing the independent activities of the masses and prompting democratisation of all spheres of life under a one-party system is a noble but very difficult mission for the party. And a great deal will depend on how we deal with it'.(12)

Gorbachev's thought has special relevance to many parts of our own continent where the one-party system abounds. It straddles both capitalist and socialist-

oriented countries and in most of them it is used to prevent, among other things, the democratic organisation of the working people either politically or in trade unions.

This is not to say that all one-party states in our continent have in fact turned out to be authoritarian; indeed some of them are headed by the most humane leaders who passionately believe in democratic processes. Nor can we discuss the role they have played in preventing tribal, ethnic and regional fragmentation, combatting externally inspired banditry, and correcting some of the grave distortions we inherited from the colonial period.

In relation to the socialist perspective, it is sometimes forgotten that the concept of the single-party state is nowhere to be found in classical Marxist theory. And we have had sufficient experience of one-party rule in various parts of the world to perhaps conclude that the 'mission' to promote real democracy under a one-party system is not just difficult but, in the long run, impossible.

But, in any case, where a single-party state is in place and there is not even democracy and accountability within the party, it becomes a short-cut to a political tyranny over the whole of society. And at different points in time this is what happened in most socialist states.

The resulting sense of political alienation of the great majority of the people was not the only negative feature of existing socialism. Of equal importance was the failure to overcome the sense of economic alienation inherited from the capitalist past.

1. Marx: Civil War in France
2. Communist Manifesto
3. Letter to J. Wademeyer, see also 'Critique of the Gotha Programme', Selected Works, p.331
4. Introduction to Civil War in France
5. Selected Works, Volume Two, pp302-3
6. The Russian Revolution, p.79 14
7. Selected Works, Volume Two, pp303-4 15
8. It is instructive to note how Western anti-Marxists and liberals understood and even welcomed the imposition of the most blatant dictatorial methods to deal with

the counter-revolutionaries in the immediate aftermath of the overthrow of the Ceaucescu regime.

9. A stark illustration of this is the failure of any of the women's organisations in the socialist countries to mount agitation against the continuing inequalities between men and women in key social and political sectors. It is utterly inconceivable that the women's organisations could have failed to notice the continuing male-oriented structure of the family and the overwhelming male domination (more so than even in the capitalist West) of all structures of political power.

10. The total number of votes cast was 36.26 million. Of the major parties, the Social Revolutionaries received 20.9 million, the Bolsheviks 9.02 million, the Cadets 1.8 million, the Mensheviks 0.6 million and the rest was shared between 20 other parties.

11. Some of the socialist countries were ruled by a front but in substance the allies of the communist parties had little, if any, power or effective autonomy.

12. Pravda November 26, 1989 18

5. SOCIALIST ECONOMIC ALIENATION

The concept of alienation expressed 'the objective transformation of the activity of man and of its results into an independent force, dominating him and inimical to him ...'(1) Alienation has its origins in class-dominated society based on private property. Under capitalism, in the course of the production process, the worker himself 'always produces objective wealth, in the form of capital, an alien power that dominates and exploits him'.(2) Thus, the exploited classes objectively create and recreate the conditions of their own domination and exploitation. Consciousness of this fuels the class struggle against capitalist relations of production.

The aim of communism is to achieve the complete mastery and control over social forces which humanity itself has generated but which, under capitalism, have become objectified as alien power which is seen to stand above society and exercises mastery over it. Communism, according to Marx, involves the creation of a society in which 'socialised humanity, the associated producers, regulate their interchange with nature rationally, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by some blind power'.(3)

The relevance of all this for our discussion is that only genuine socialist relations of production can begin the process which will lead to the de-alienation of society as a whole and generate the formation of a new 'socialist person'. The process of de-alienation - whose completion must await the stage of communism - cannot be

advanced by education and ideology alone; conditions must be created which lead progressively to real participation and control by each individual (as part of 'socialised humanity') over social life in all its aspects.

The destruction of the political and economic power of capital are merely first steps in the direction of de-alienation. The transfer of legal ownership of productive property from private capital to the state does not, on its own, create fully socialist relations of production, nor does it always significantly change the work-life of the producer. The power to control the producers' work-life and to dispose of the products of labour is now in the hands of a 'committee' rather than a board of directors. And if the 'committee' separates itself from the producers by a bureaucratic wall without democratic accountability, its role is perceived no differently from that of the board of directors. It remains a force over which the producer has no real control and which (despite the absence of economic exploitation of the capitalist variety) dominates him as an alien power.

State property itself has to be transformed into social property. This involves reorganising social life as a whole so that the producers, at least as a collective, have a real say not only in the production of social wealth but also in its disposal. In the words of Gorbachev, what is required is 'not only formal but also real socialisation and the real turning of the working people into the masters of all socialised production'.(4)

De-alienation requires that the separation between social wealth creation and social wealth appropriation and distribution is ended and society as a whole is in control of all three processes. A degree of self-management (at the level of individual enterprises) is only one ingredient in the process of de-alienation; conditions must be created making possible full popular control over all society's institutions of power not just as a 'constitutional right' but as a reality.

Alienation in Existing Socialism

The unavoidable inheritance from the past and the most serious distortions of socialist norms in most of the socialist countries combined to perpetuate alienation, albeit in a new form. Private ownership of the main means of production was replaced by state ownership. Private capital, as an alien power, no longer dominated or exploited the producer. But without real socialisation the key condition for de-alienation continued to be absent.

The immediate producers were given very little real control or participation in economic life beyond their own personal physical and/or mental exertions. In general, the over-centralised and commandist economies of the socialist world helped to entrench a form of 'socialist' alienation. At the purely economic level this form of alienation often turned out to be the worst of both worlds.

Under capitalism economic compulsion sanctified by the rule of capital (threatened unemployment, etc.) plays an important role in providing the 'incentive' for rising productivity despite alienation by(4) workers from the products of their labour. Capitalist economic levers based on the sanctity of private property are, at the end of the day, not over-concerned with the problems of alienation and more easily provide the incentive (in relation to the workers) that 'he who does not work, neither shall he eat'.

Under socialism guaranteed employment and the amount of remuneration did not always depend upon quality, productivity or efficiency, opening the way to parasitism at the point of production. Reward based on the socialist maxim of 'to each according to his contribution' can obviously play a part in increasing productivity. But for socialist society as a whole to really come into its own requires an incentive based on the producer's real participation in the mechanisms of social control over the products of his/her labour; a feeling that the means of production and its products are his or hers as part of society. This incentive was too often absent and stood in the way of the process of de-alienation.

Episodes of direct compulsion against producers, such as the forced collectivisation of the early 1930's and the extensive use of convict labour as a direct state and party exercise, made things worse. Like all forms of primitive accumulation, these episodes created a most profound sense of alienation whose negative consequences are still being felt. Pure exhortation and political 'mobilisation' did not, in the long run, prevent the onset of stagnation. Alienation, albeit in a different form, continued and inhibited the full potential of socialist economic advance.

There were, of course, other negative factors which require more extensive examination than is possible here. These include policies based on what has been called the 'big bang theory of socialism' which ignored the historical fact that many of the ingredients of social systems which succeed one another - and this includes the change from capitalism to socialism - cannot be separated by a Chinese Wall.

The economy of a country the day after the workers take over is exactly the same as it was the day before, and it cannot be transformed merely by proclamation. The neglect of this truism resulted, now and then, in a primitive egalitarianism which reached lunatic proportions under the Pol Pot regime, the absence of cost-accounting, a dismissive attitude to commodity production and the law of value during the transition period, the premature abandonment of any role for market forces, a doctrinaire approach to the question of collectivisation, etc.

But rectification of these areas alone would not establish the material and moral superiority of socialism as a way of life for humanity. Only the creation of real socialist relations of production will give birth to the socialist man and woman whose active participation in all the social processes will ensure that socialism

reaches its full potential and moves towards a classless communist society. Under existing socialism alienation has persisted because of a less than full control and participation by the people in these processes.

In short, the way forward is through thorough-going democratic socialism; a way which can only be charted by a party which wins its support through democratic persuasion and ideological contest and not, as has too often happened up to now, by a claim of right.

1. Marx, Capital, Volume 1, p.716, Penguin Books Edition.

2. AP Ogurtsov, Soviet Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

3. Capital, Volume 3, Chapter 48.

4. Pravda, September 30, 1989.

6. A LOOK AT OURSELVES

The commandist and bureaucratic approaches which took root during Stalin's time affected communist parties throughout the world, including our own. We cannot disclaim our share of the responsibility for the spread of the personality cult and a mechanical embrace of Soviet domestic and foreign policies, some of which discredited the cause of socialism. We kept silent for too long after the 1956 Khrushchev revelations.

It would, of course, be naive to imagine that a movement can, at a stroke, shed all the mental baggage it has carried from the past. And our 7th Congress emphasised the need for on-going vigilance. It noted some isolated reversions to the past, including attempts to engage in intrigue and factional activity in fraternal organisations, sectarian attitudes towards some non-party colleagues, and sloganised dismissals of views which do not completely accord with ours.

The implications for socialism of the Stalinist distortions have not yet been evenly understood throughout our ranks. We need to continue the search for a better balance between advancing party policy as a collective and the toleration of on-going debate and even constructive dissent.

We do not pretend that our party's changing postures in the direction of democratic socialism are the results only of our own independent evolution. Our shift undoubtedly owes a prime debt to the process of perestroika and glasnost which was so courageously unleashed under Gorbachev's inspiration. Closer to home, the democratic spirit which dominated in the re-emerged trade union movement from the early 1970's onwards, also made its impact.

But we can legitimately claim that in certain fundamental respects our indigenous revolutionary practice long ago ceased to be guided by Stalinist concepts. This is the case particularly in relation to the way the party performed its role as a working class vanguard, its relations with fraternal organisations and representatives of other social forces and, above all, its approach to the question of democracy in the post-apartheid state and in a future socialist South Africa.

The Party as a Vanguard and Inner-Party Democracy

We have always believed (and we continue to do so) that it is indispensable for the working class to have an independent political instrument which safeguards its role in the democratic revolution and which leads it towards an eventual classless society. But such leadership must be won rather than imposed. Our claim to represent the historic aspirations of the workers does not give us an absolute right to lead them or to exercise control over society as a whole in their name.

Our new programme asserts that a communist party does not earn the title of vanguard merely by proclaiming it. Nor does its claim to be the upholder of Marxism give it a monopoly of political wisdom or a natural right to exclusive control of the struggle. We can only earn our place as a vanguard force by superior efforts of leadership and devotion to the cause of liberation and socialism. And we can only win adherence to our ideology by demonstrating its superiority as a theoretical guide to revolutionary practice.

This approach to the vanguard concept has not, as we know, always been adhered to in world revolutionary practice and in an earlier period we too were infected by the distortion. But, in our case, the shift which has taken place in our conception of 'vanguard' is by no means a post-Gorbachev phenomenon. The wording on this question in our new programme is taken almost verbatim from our Central Committee's 1970 report on organisation.

The 1970 document reiterated the need to safeguard, both in the letter and the spirit, the independence of the political expressions of other social forces whether economic or national. It rejected the old purist and domineering concept that all those who do not agree with the party are necessarily enemies of the working class. And it saw no conflict between our understanding of the concept of vanguard and the acceptance of the African National Congress as the head of the liberation alliance.

Despite the inevitable limitations which illegality imposed on our inner-party democratic processes, the principles of accountability and electivity of all higher organs were substantially adhered to. Seven underground Congresses of our party have been held since 1953. The delegates to Congress from the lower organs were elected without lists from above and always constituted a majority. The incoming Central Committees were elected by a secret ballot without any form of direct or

indirect 'guidance' to the delegates. In other words, the Leninist concept of democratic centralism has not been abused to entrench authoritarian leadership practices.

Our structures, down to the lowest units, have been increasingly encouraged to assess and question leadership pronouncements in a critical spirit and the views of the membership are invariably canvassed before finalising basic policy documents. Our 7th Congress, which adopted our new programme, The Path to Power, was a model of democratic consultation and spirited debate.

Special procedures designed to exclude suspected enemy agents as delegates to Congress limited complete free choice. But, in practice, these limitations affected a negligible percentage. Overall, despite the security risks involved in the clandestine conditions, the will of our membership finds democratic expression. This spirit of democracy also informs our relationship with fraternal political forces and our approach to the political framework of a post-liberation South Africa.

Relations with Fraternal Organisations

As we have already noted, one of the most serious casualties in the divide which developed between democracy and socialism was in the one-sided relationship between the ruling parties and the mass organisations. In order to prevent such a distortion in a post-apartheid South Africa we have, for example, set out in our draft Workers' Charter that:

'Trade unions and their federation shall be completely independent and answerable only to the decisions of their members or affiliates, democratically arrived at. No political party, state organ or enterprise, whether public, private or mixed, shall directly or indirectly interfere with such independence.'

The substance of this approach is reflected in the way our party has in fact conducted itself for most of its underground existence.

Our 1970 extended Central Committee meeting reiterated the guidelines which inform our relations with fraternal organisations and other social forces. Special emphasis was once again given to the need to safeguard, both in the letter and in the spirit, the independence of the political expressions of other social forces, whether economic or national.

We do not regard the trade unions or the national movement as mere conduits for our policies. Nor do we attempt to advance our policy positions through intrigue or manipulation. Our relationship with these organisations is based on complete respect for their independence, integrity and inner-democracy. In so far as our influence is felt, it is the result of open submissions of policy positions and the

impact of individual communists who win respect as among the most loyal, the most devoted and ideologically clear members of these organisations.

Old habits die hard and among the most pernicious of these is the purist concept that all those who do not agree with the party are necessarily enemies of socialism. This leads to a substitution of name-calling and jargon for healthy debate with non-party activists. As already mentioned, our 7th Congress noted some isolated reversions along these lines and resolved to combat such tendencies.

But, in general, the long-established and appreciable move away from old-style commandism and sectarianism has won for our party the admiration and support of a growing number of non-communist revolutionary activists in the broad workers' and national movement. We also consider it appropriate to canvass the views of such activists in the formulation of certain aspects of our policy. For example, we submitted our preliminary conception of the contents of a Workers' Charter for critical discussion not only in our own ranks but throughout the national and trade union movements.

Democracy and the Future

Our party's programme holds firmly to a post-apartheid state which will guarantee all citizens the basic rights and freedoms of organisation, speech, thought, press, movement, residence, conscience and religion; full trade union rights for all workers including the right to strike, and one person one vote in free and democratic elections. These freedoms constitute the very essence of our national liberation and socialist objectives and they clearly imply political pluralism.

Both for these historical reasons and because experience has shown that an institutionalised one-party state has a strong propensity for authoritarianism, we remain protagonists of multi-party post-apartheid democracy both in the national democratic and socialist phases, is desirable.

We believe that post-apartheid state power must clearly vest in the elected representatives of the people and not, directly or indirectly, in the administrative command of a party. The relationship which evolves between political parties and state structures must not, in any way, undermine the sovereignty of elected bodies.

We also believe that if there is real democracy in the post-apartheid state, the way will be open for a peaceful progression towards our ultimate objective - a socialist South Africa. This approach is consistent with the Marxist view - not always adhered to in practice - that the working class must win the majority to its side: as long as no violence is used against the people there is no other road to power.(1)

It follows that, in truly democratic conditions, it is perfectly legitimate and desirable for a party claiming to be the political instrument of the working class to

attempt to lead its constituency in democratic contest for political power against other parties and groups representing other social forces. And if it wins, it must be constitutionally required, from time to time, to go back to the people for a renewed mandate. The alternative to this is self-perpetuating power with all its implications for corruption and dictatorship.

Conclusion

We dare not underestimate the damage that has been wrought to the cause of socialism by the distortions we have touched upon. We, however, continue to have complete faith that socialism represents the most rational, just and democratic way for human beings to relate to one another.

Humankind can never attain real freedom until a society has been built in which no person has the freedom to exploit another person.

The bulk of humanity's resources will never be used for the good of humanity until they are in public ownership and under democratic control.

The ultimate aim of socialism to eliminate all class inequalities occupies a prime place in the body of civilised ethics even before Marx.

The all-round development of the individual and the creation of opportunities for every person to express his or her talents to the full can only find ultimate expression in a society which dedicates itself to people rather than profit.

The opponents of socialism are very vocal about what they call the failure of socialism in Africa.(2) But they say little, if anything, about Africa's real failure; the failures of capitalism. Over 90 percent of our continent's people live out their wretched and repressed lives in stagnating and declining capitalist-oriented economies. International capital, to whom most of these countries are mortgaged, virtually regards cheap bread, free education and full employment as economic crimes. Western outcries against violations of human rights are muted when they occur in countries with a capitalist orientation.

The way forward for the whole of humanity lies within a socialist framework guided by genuine socialist humanitarianism and not within a capitalist system which entrenches economic and social inequalities as a way of life. Socialism can undoubtedly be made to work without the negative practices which have distorted many of its key objectives.

But mere faith in the future of socialism is not enough. The lessons of past failures have to be learnt. Above all, we have to ensure that its fundamental tenet - socialist democracy - occupies a rightful place in all future practice.

1. Lenin, Selected Works, Volume 2, p36 .
2. They conveniently ignore the fact that most of the countries which tried to create conditions for the building of socialism faced unending civil war, aggression and externally-inspired banditry; a situation in which it is hardly possible to build any kind of stable social formation - capitalist or socialist.