
ASPECTS OF PERESTROIKA

South African activists are deeply interested in the radical changes happening in the Soviet Union. In this article we look at some of the internal and international restructuring taking place as part of the USSR's new policy of perestroika. Following this is a series of extracts on the Third World and South Africa by CPSU General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, taken from his book 'Perestroika - New thinking for Our Country and the World'.

RESTRUCTURING IN THE USSR

THE South African struggle for national liberation is taking place in a period of a worldwide transformation from capitalism to socialism.

Imperialism and capitalism through its policy of plunder and extermination has left a legacy of economic underdevelopment in the Third World. There is poverty, ignorance, hunger, epidemic diseases, malnutrition, a high infant mortality rate and corruption. The struggle for national liberation can only be meaningful if it is aimed at defeating imperialist domination in the underdeveloped and developing countries.

Political and economic liberation from imperialism inevitably strengthens the world's progressive forces. The USSR as the leader of the socialist bloc plays an important role in the international struggle against imperialism. The general direction of this struggle is dependent on the general development of political and economic

events in the USSR itself. So any radical changes taking place in the USSR are of international significance.

The repercussions of change in the USSR could have either disastrous or beneficial results for the whole of progressive humanity. This is why it is important for progressives and South African activists to study developments in the USSR.

What is perestroika and glasnost?

Although there is no precise translation in English, generally **perestroika** refers to 'restructuring', 'renewal' or 'reconstruction' while **glasnost** means 'openness'. Glasnost is political and social openness, self-criticism and criticism in the interests of socialism.

In a speech last year to the 18th Congress of Trade Unions of the USSR, USSR General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev said referring to socialist democracy: "The more democracy we have, the faster we shall advance along the road of restructuring and social renewal, and the more order and discipline we shall have in our socialist home".

Perestroika is the process of radical transformation of socio-political, economic and philosophical ideas and practise taking place in the USSR. According to Gorbachev: "Perestroika concerns virtually every main aspect of public life". He is the first to point out that although identified with him, the success of perestroika depends on millions.

The radical reforms being implemented in the Soviet Union are viewed by the nation as being deeply rooted within the socialist system based on Marxism-Leninism. Implementation of perestroika, then, marks another stage in the development of socialism.

Why perestroika?

According to Gorbachev, this process of renovation is based on the history of socialist experience since the October revolution of 1917.

Armed with the analytical tools of Marxism and Leninism, the Bolsheviks transformed the semi-feudal Russia into a modern industrial giant in less than five decades of socialist experience - an economic miracle capitalism realised after 300 years.

Imperialist aggression in World War Two caused incalculable destruction to the Soviet economy, and 20 million people perished. The defeat of Nazism by Soviets demonstrated the capacity of the socialist society. This was further emphasised by the post-war

economic recovery.

Before full economic recovery could become a reality, however, another phenomenon came onto the world political stage - nuclear weapons, with consequent heightened tension with the imperialist camp.

It was in the mid 50s that Soviet economy developed to higher levels with more attention being given to development of agriculture, housing, light industry and consumer goods. However, lack of democratic processes to match these developments stifled the economic reforms.

The CPSU attempted to correct the situation by formulating new approaches to economic management. This move paid dividends in its initial stages as evidenced by the general rise in the standard of living. However it was not long before economic stagnation set in with consequent degeneration of other aspects of social life.

Crisis and economic failures

This crisis was described by Gorbachev in these words: "The country began to lose momentum. Economic failures became more frequent. Difficulties began to accumulate and deteriorate, and unresolved problems to multiply. Elements of what we call stagnation and other phenomena alien to socialism began to appear in the life of society."

It was at the April 1985 plenary meeting of the CPSU Central Committee and at its 27th Congress that the problem was roughly diagnosed. The diagnosis revealed that problems stemmed from the economy. Serious lack of efficiency in production was the major problem.

It manifested itself in the dropping of growth rates, the wastage of natural resources, the underutilisation of the electronic and computer revolution for economic progress, poor quality and shortages of goods and the lagging behind in scientific and technological development.

This economic dislocation had negative effects on other aspects of social life. The growing requirements of housing and education, health services and foodstuffs were not being met.

There was, too, a gradual erosion in the ideological and moral values of the people: "eulogizing and servility was encouraged, the needs and opinions of working people ignored". Many leaders stood beyond control and criticism. The arts, science and culture were affected by mediocrity and formalism.

Perestroika: the radical option

It was against this background that the April 1985 plenary meeting of the Central Committee of the CPSU adopted revolutionary steps for modernising the Soviet life. At the core of this modernisation process under the banner of perestroika is radical reorganisation of the economy so as to accelerate the socio-economic development of the whole Soviet society. The new economic policy was combined with glasnost and the democratisation process with its emphasis on giving the people full participation in modernising socialism rather than being the task and responsibility of a few leaders.

Perestroika is viewed as a lengthy revolutionary process which has definite stages. Its revolutionary character is understood as the imparting of a new quality to socialism rather than a change in property relations or transference of state power from one class to another. The revolutionary reforms envisaged by perestroika are basically aimed at realising socialism's potential to the fullest. It is thus not a radical move from socialism to its highest stage - communism.

Workers at the heart

Central to its success is the support of socialism's central force - the worker. The worker's material and spiritual life could be enriched and elevated when the full potentialities of socialism are realised and thus becoming a truly humanitarian system.

The worker must not only master the process of production, he has to be a full participant in deciding matters of state and social life in general. Hence the deepening of democracy in practise is the indispensable component of perestroika. Contrary to reactionary voices from imperialist sectors, perestroika does not mean revision of socialism but its development.

Two stages

As a process, restructuring completed its first stage in the mid 1980s: theoretical formulation and adoption of decisions. The second stage, that of practical implementation of perestroika, is in its initial stages. This is the stage in which perestroika will come into contact with the practical activity on the part of millions of Soviet people: "... the creative endeavour of the masses is the decisive power for acceleration." The current slogans of perestroika: "Land to the

"Tillers!" "Factories to the Workers!" "And Power to the People!" expresses the radical commitment of perestroika to the deepening of socialism.

EFFECTS OF PERESTROIKA ON THE INTERNAL SITUATION

Economics

The Soviet economy, which is based on socialism and public ownership, is seen to hold unlimited possibilities for economic progress and intensive development.

Some of the shortcomings of the old economic machinery were identified as the lack of inner stimuli or initiative for self-development, bureaucratization and top heavy management, the "gross output drive" which meant an emphasis on productivity rather than quality or needs, the failure to maintain and upgrade existing factories, wastage of resources, and the policy of wage equalising.

The new economic mechanisms emphasise the process of acceleration and the adoption of resource-saving technologies. An aim is to equal world technological standards and modernisation, priority being placed on the development of Soviet mechanical engineering, electronics etc. New forms of democracy and the encouraging of shared planning at work include new management mechanisms, the election of managers and the setting up or revitalising of work collective councils.

Explaining economic reform, Gorbachev says that while in a planned economy it might be more obvious to start from the centre, reality and accumulated experience dictated a different logic. The result was that they started with enterprises, factories, collectives to create good economic conditions and on that basis introduce changes to the higher echelons of economic management.

In order to facilitate rapid social and economic reform the centralised command system is being replaced by the new democratic system based on centralism and self-management. In order to ensure that economic units serve Soviet society properly a number of measures have been adopted.

Cost accounting envisages an enterprise using publically owned means of production, and meeting all expenses to the state budget with profits made from the sale of products, etc. The state would

finance expansion and modernisation.

New concepts of centralisation involve democratising planning beginning with collectives and enterprises. The emphasis will be on a transition from the centralised distribution of resources (state orders) to wholesale trade (direct ties between producers and consumers). "In short, the advantages of planning will be increasing combined with stimulating factors of the socialist market", writes Gorbachev.

It is hoped that the composition and volume of state orders will be gradually reduced, with central bodies playing a role in gauging labour productivity, monitoring and encouraging development, scientific and technological progress.

The principles of self-financing and self-maintenance are already in operation in a number of industries - construction, transport and agriculture. It was envisaged at the beginning of this year (1988) 60% of industries would be operating on this principle.

The role of the trade unions is seen as giving a stronger social orientation to economic decisions and acting as a counter-balance to technocratic tendencies, and encroachments on the rights of workers. "Trade union committees should have teeth, and not be convenient partners for management".

Political changes

Perestroika sees a strict demarcation between the functions of the state and of the Communist Party in conformity with Lenin's conception of the party as the political vanguard of society, and the role of the Soviet state as an instrument of government by the people. The party has come under criticism for falling prey to bureaucratic centralism, and is being challenged to revitalise democratic centralism.

Representation of working people into the top ranks of government is being increased. Direct representation of civic organisations is to be added to the direct territorial representation of the population. These deputies, elected for a five-year term, would comprise the Congress of USSR People's Deputies. The deputies would also elect a smaller body of about 450 to consider legislative, and monitoring questions.

Democratisation of the political process means developing and deepening Leninist principles of accountability of popular representatives, ensuring that they are subject to recall, and operating on the basis of popular mandate. Gorbachev is also

determined to challenge the stagnation of democracy, by limiting the terms of office of top public representatives.

Social policy

Housing and food production are viewed as the key to improving standards of living. Other aspects of social life have improved due to the improvements in the economy. Housing construction has increased while health services show noticeable improvement. Economic improvements made it possible for the increase of salaries of teachers and medical personnel.

The Soviet legal system is coming under review with special attention being paid to consolidating socialism's guarantees of human rights and freedoms.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN THE ERA OF RESTRUCTURING AND OPENNESS

"We need lasting peace in order to concentrate on the development of our society and to cope with the task of improving the life of the Soviet people", writes Gorbachev. Perestroika's international aspects involve a programme for the advancement to peace without nuclear weapons as an indispensable condition for humanity's survival. Perestroika recognises the development of new factors in world politics: the threat of nuclear war, unprecedented social and economic consequences arising out of science and technology, the universal ecological threat, and the spread of communications systems. It recognises there is a worsening of global problems such as starvation and Third World debt, and calls for international co-operation for the benefit of peace.

Underlying perestroika's international relations is the principle that "every people and every country has the freedom of social and political choice". It counterposes the concept of the "balance of power" and reciprocal equal security to the militarist and interventionist doctrine on which imperialist politics is based.

Universally shared values combined with class values form the general approach to peaceful coexistence to ensure survival of life on this planet. In the face of imperialist domination and aggression the socialist world is appealing to the vast majority of humanity which is concerned with social progress and peace.

Nuclear war, says Gorbachev, cannot be a means of achieving political, economic, ideological or other goals. While socialism is gaining prestige and lessening anti-communist sentiment, giant strides have been made towards disarmament and the cutting of nuclear weapons. The historic signing of the agreement between the Soviet Union and the United States on a cut on intermediate and shorter range nuclear weapons is a notable achievement of perestroika.

There are many lessons that a liberated South Africa could learn from the Soviet Union - how the people built a nation, problems of industrialisation, questions of democracy and socialism.

Political activists and all progressive minded people must be able to judge for themselves whether socialism is gaining strength or weakened by policy changes in the Soviet Union. The current changes being enacted in the USSR as embodied in two concepts: **perestroika** and **glasnost** signify a radical and progressive change in the development of socialism since its victory 70 years ago.

