

# Self-management in Yugoslavia: a failed experiment in democratic socialism?

In 1986 EDDIE WEBSTER\* went to Yugoslavia on a study visit. In this article he describes the Yugoslavian system of worker self-management, and analyses the contradictions that manifested themselves in the system. He draws some lessons for South Africa. This article continues the debate about socialism started by our coverage of China (Vol 14 No 2), the publication of Slovo's paper (Vol 14 No 6) and several other articles.

For forty years 'a conspiracy of silence' has existed in South Africa on what socialism is and how it works in practice. The Suppression of Communism Act in 1950 effectively isolated the South African Left from the many debates around the shortcomings of actually existing socialism.

Supporters of the SA Communist Party (SACP) have not until very recently felt the need to put forward a clear socialist alternatives for South Africa (see 'SACP draft Workers Charter', *Labour Bulletin* Vol 14 No 6). They accepted the leadership of the ANC in the fight against apartheid, and insisted that the SACP would only begin pursuing its own programme once a democratic South Africa had been achieved.

Attempts by courageous individuals, such as Richard Turner, to develop a democratic socialist alternative for South Africa were brutally

*\*Eddie Webster is a founder member of Labour Bulletin and head of sociology at Witwatersrand University*



crushed by the apartheid state. His socialist manifesto, *The eye of the needle*, was banned in 1973 and he was tragically assassinated five years later.

The unbanning of the SACP has changed all this, and has opened up the possibility of a South African *glasnost*. For the first time local economists are putting forward clear socialist alternatives for a democratic South African economy. At its Third National Congress last year, COSATU decided to embark on a workers charter campaign.

Most dramatically, SACP general secretary Joe Slovo, influenced by perestroika and the democratic spirit of the trade union movement, has denounced 'Stalinism' in the Soviet Union as 'a bureaucratic-authoritarian style of leadership which denuded socialism of most of its democratic content and concentrated power in the hands of a tiny, self-perpetuating elite'.

### Centralised economic planning: the Soviet model

How was the Soviet economy organised? Soviet thinkers and party and technical bureaucrats had no experience to draw on. Under Lenin, and especially under Stalin, from the 1920's onwards they developed a

system of centralised economic planning and control which hung together and actually worked.

These early socialist planners believed a planned economy would overcome the severe economic recessions, gross inequalities and unemployment that charac-

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and health services and social welfare for all.

Until perestroika economic planning in the Soviet Union was highly centralised and hierarchical. The first step in planning was to formulate broad political and economic objectives. Priorities were established by



terised the capitalist economic system.

Indeed, the achievements of the Soviet Union over the next two decades were impressive. A heavy industrial base was constructed at break-neck speed. More impressively, the Soviet Union achieved important social goals such as full employment, expanded education,

the central party and state apparatus.

For example, they might decide on rapid economic growth through developing heavy industry. The plan would then be developed around these goals. The plan would be elaborated at different levels of the bureaucracy. Targets were set. Finally, directives would be sent out to



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the various enterprises stating what must be produced.

Planning decisions were thus made in a top-down fashion. Little or no formal provision was made for negotiation with enterprise management. There was thus very little participation at the base.

### Problems of central planning

Gorbachev has called the Soviet system of planning the 'administrative-command economy'. There are two major problems with central planning. Both problems cause inefficiency.

- The first problem is that it takes an enormous amount of time to develop a detailed plan for the whole country. By the time the plan is formulated many things have already changed. Factories sometimes get their plan a year late.
- The second problem is that information is often 'lost' between the planning centre and the enterprise because so many people have to make so many decisions. In a famous case, hairpins were forgotten in one Polish plan, and because of this no new hairpins could be found anywhere in Poland in 1957.

As Blazyca writes: "The majority of people have abso-

lutely no voice in the construction of the plan. The basic source of the waste and inefficiency of Soviet planning lies in this feature - the system's lack of democracy."

Soviet economists recognised the shortcomings of the centrally planned economy about 30 years ago. They saw that their country had failed to make the transition to a sophisticated consumer-oriented society 30 years ago, but they could not work out what to do about it.

The emergence of perestroika and glasnost in the mid-1980's in the Soviet Union, and the collapse of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe, has led to a widespread belief that socialism has failed.

The ideas of the free-marketeer Hayek enjoy high prestige in the Economic Institute in Moscow. Visitors to the Soviet Union have remarked ironically that British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher seems to be more popular in the Soviet Union than in Britain.

### Abandoning socialism?

So has the time come to abandon the ideals of socialism? I would argue not. But socialists need to analyse the lessons of existing socialism in order to learn lessons for the future. If we accept the arguments of perestroika and



Joe Slovo, that the Soviet model has failed, what form of socialism are we offering?

Socialists need to demonstrate that they are not merely offering to end the present concentration of economic and political power. Socialism should genuinely avoid a new concentration of power.

One example of socialism that was the reverse of the Soviet model is the example of Yugoslavia. Yugoslavian socialism has been based on decentralisation and worker self-management in the workplace.

What lessons can we draw from what has been called 'the boldest experiment in workers' democracy since the Paris Commune of 1871'?

### Yugoslavia: revolution from below

Yugoslavia took a fundamentally different route towards socialism than the Soviet Union and other East European countries. Tito, the long-standing leader of the Yugoslavian Communist Party (YCP), broke with Stalin in 1949-1950. With the break, Yugoslavia avoided the Soviet path of an 'administrative-command system'.

Instead, after 1950 it virtually turned the Soviet model upside-down. It did this by purposefully weakening the



central state machinery.

Unlike the Soviet Union, the Yugoslavs believed that economic development could be linked to 'emancipation of

per year. During the 1960's Yugoslavia was widely seen as the one country that offered socialists a model of workers' control.

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and sharp ethnic conflict.

In 1988 Milovan Djilas, ex-communist and one of the early leaders of the YCP, wrote that "Yugoslavia's economic crisis was the manifestation of a fundamental political sickness presaging the imminent death of communism. I believe that what is happening today is the beginning of the end of communism.

"The Communist Party in Yugoslavia is disintegrating and many things are out of control. I am convinced we are witnessing the last stages of communism throughout the world and that Yugoslavia will be the first European nation to divest itself of the system" (*Business Day*, 11/10/88).

Djilas turned out to be remarkably accurate in his prediction. A year later Yugoslavia's reformist prime minister, Ante Markovic, announced a package of sweeping changes designed to introduce a 'Western-style economic system' in order to overcome the economic crisis.

As part of the package Yugoslavia will welcome large-scale foreign investment, has opened a stock exchange, and has introduced financial reforms. Instead of developing an alternative route to socialism, Yugoslavia, its critics joke, is the first example of the socialist path to capitalism!

CROQUIS RÉVOLUTION

PAR PILOTELL.



QUE LE PEUPLE VEILLE !!!!

*The Paris Commune - the first (shortlived) experiment in workers' democracy*

the masses' through decentralisation of political and economic power.

In the decade that followed the break with the Soviet model, production increased faster than any other country in the world, averaging 13%

In the 1970's this success story began to crack. Yugoslavia began to experience major economic and social problems - large-scale unemployment, massive international debt, declining real wages, triple digit inflation



# The break with Stalin



**W**hy did Yugoslavia break with the Soviet Union and the Cominform in 1949-1950? Until the Second World War Yugoslavia was an economically backward country run by a monarchy that goes back to the Austro-Hungarian empire. In 1941 the YCP called for a general mobilisation and rebellion to throw out the occupying Nazi armies. The YCP led a revolutionary armed struggle for liberation from Nazi occupation.

This struggle took on the character of a socialist revolution. After the war the new communist government nationalised property on a wide scale. Nationalisation was accompanied by a tightening of economic and political control at the centre. In many ways it was similar to the Soviet model of socialism. The party took control of the state apparatus. It immediately appointed administrators to oversee all aspects of the economy, including the appointment of factory managers.

Despite its obvious shortcomings this period of 'administrative socialism' (as it is now termed in Yugoslavia) yielded important gains. The government succeeded in rebuilding the post-war economy. But towards the end of the decade industrial workers began to show discontent. They became increasingly disillusioned with the inefficiencies of the state bureaucracy. Furthermore the peasants, who had fought the war on the slogan of 'the land to those who culti-

vate it', resisted the collectivisation programme.

Although the

YCP kept its belief in the socialisation of agriculture even after the break with the Soviet Union, *de facto* peasant farming continued and currently accounts for 85% of agricultural land.

Amidst these rising frustrations the break with Stalin occurred. Yugoslavia refused to subordinate itself to the discipline of the Soviet Communist Party and was expelled from the Cominform. The YCP then dropped the highly centralised economic model of the Soviet Union, and encouraged decentralisation through establishing workers' councils. These councils were to be elected in all workplaces.

## Separating party from state

At the same time Kardelj called for the separation of the party (the YCP) from the state apparatus to avoid bureaucratisation. He also called for a form of 'direct democracy' which would transcend Western multi-party or Soviet one-party representation. The utopian idea of everyone physically voting by popular ballot on every issue was rejected. Instead, the government adopted a system of direct voting on some issues, while others would be decided by elected and accountable delegates in regional and national parliaments.

Kardelj believed that formal political parties would be unnecessary as working people would have direct control. Power would be at the base. This was how the Yugoslavians saw Marx's idea of 'the dictatorship of the proletariat'. The working class would be organised as the state.



Marshall Tito





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socialism**

**Worker self-  
management**

The aim was to transform the party from an organ of power to an ideological and political vanguard. It was believed that when self-management enjoyed ideological hegemony the YCP would no longer be needed. The state would 'whither away' as it was replaced by the structure of self-management. In 1952 the YCP was renamed the League of Communists to show that it no longer intended being a conventional political party.

The YCP was able to risk this break with the Soviet Union and the Cominform because it had such widespread support within Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia was the only country in Eastern Europe that succeeded in liberating itself from Nazi occupation without any assistance from the Soviet army. It faced little opposition to establishing socialism.

Yugoslavia was the first country to establish a democratic system of worker self-management of the economy. But contradictions have led to an economic crisis in this system.

After the revolution, the Yugoslavs say, socialism faces two dangers. Firstly, the danger of a capitalist restoration. Secondly, the danger of monopolistic tendencies within socialism, because of the total power which the state exercises. When a centralised state is allowed to concentrate enormous power in its hands, a new stratum of bureaucrats emerges which resembles the capitalist class of old.

State management of the economy perpetuates the alienation of the worker from the means of production, for he/she has no more control over them than before. The crucial element of ownership is *control*.

Under bureaucratic despotism, as Djilas calls the Soviet system in his classic book, *The new class*, the economy, and therefore the position of

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**THE CHARGES  
AGAINST THE**

**BACKGROUND TO COMINFORM  
MOVE**

From Our Political Correspondent  
THE news that Marshal Tito and other leaders of the Yugoslav Communist Party have been expelled from the Cominform has taken the whole world by surprise. News so far received in South Africa gives no indication of the immediate cause, but one thing must be borne in mind: the charges levelled against the Yugoslav Communist Party are very serious, and the Cominform would not have taken the drastic step of expelling some of its most prominent members unless the situation warranted it.

The Cominform alleges that the Yugoslav Communist Party has split from the united socialist front and "started on the road leading to the betrayal of the international solidarity of the working people." Replying to the Cominform's imputations, the Yugoslav Communist Party has described some charges as "shameful and distorted" and others as "lies and slanders."

**YUGOSLAV COMMUNISTS CRITICISED**

The Cominform says Marshal Tito's Communists make propaganda against the Soviet Union and try to discredit the Red Army. It also says they adopt a hostile attitude towards the Russian Communist Party.

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Laws are passed pre...  
such as the nationalisation...  
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was not ready.

**SMUGGLED  
FROM**



**The Guardian,  
South Africa's  
Communist Party  
aligned - paper in  
the 1940s,  
responds to the  
expulsion of the  
Yugoslavians  
from the  
Cominform**



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the working class vis-a-vis the means of production, is in all ways similar to the capitalist economy.

How can this state capitalism be prevented? *Worker self-management* and *decentralisation* are the key features of the Yugoslavian system of 'socialist democracy'.

### Decentralisation

Each of the eight Yugoslavian republics has a great deal of autonomy and decision-making power. The YCP in each state uses distinct languages, policies and practices. The national central committee of the party acts to co-ordinate the policies of the various states at the national level.

At the economic level decentralisation meant moving away from strict central planning to a market economy. Strict central planning, the Yugoslavs believed, was not consistent with worker self-management because decisions would be made by the central planning apparatus rather than by the workers.

The retreat from central planning and the opening up of the market was obviously not achieved overnight. Laws were changed over time. Today central planning still exists, but it has taken on a new character.

The Yugoslavian system

of planning is called indicative planning to distinguish it from the top-down commandist system of directive planning. Indicative planning has two components:

- National plans are drawn up from the reports of local self-managed institutions - the communes and enterprises.
- Plans are established by elected delegates on the basis of consensus.

Plans - usually five year plans - are therefore more representative of what the direct producers themselves consider is possible. The plan does not dictate to them what goods should be produced, nor how and who should market them. In theory at least, indicative planning overcomes some of the problems of the Soviet model.

Decisions about the production and distribution of goods are not always made by the direct producers alone. There are times when the interests of a particular group of producers comes into conflict with the general interest of the particular republic or the national state.

In such cases the state has to intervene. But these interventions are decided by the elected indicative planning bodies, not by state-appointed bureaucrats.



### Workers manage the factories

The premise underlying worker self-management is that producers should have genuine control over the surplus they generate, and that no person may exploit another. This means that workers manage the means of production. However, they do it in the name of the community where true 'ownership' lies.

Ninety-two per cent of the economy is socially owned. A small number of privately-owned enterprises exist, such as family-run restaurants. But an owner may not employ more than five employees, and the owner must work in the enterprise him/herself.

Nationalisation, the Yugoslavians argue, is the lowest form of socialism. All the Yugoslavian architects of self management - Djilas, Kidric, Popovic and Kardelj - drew a crucial distinction between state ownership and social ownership. By social control they meant collective ownership by the whole community. The key difference was the idea of control - the aim of social ownership, they believed, was to take control away from the central state to the direct producers and consumers.

### Workers councils

The structure of workers' management is made up of two bodies in each enter-



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*A call from the Freedom Charter - but how? In South Africa, many see the answer in nationalisation - "the lowest form of socialism" according to Yugoslavian communists*

*Picture: Eli Weinberg*

prise; the workers' council and the management board. Members are not paid extra for being on these committees, and much of the business is done after working hours. The key instrument of workers' control is the workers' council. A council must be elected in every company.

The council holds all the formal power: it can veto all important management decisions, it appoints management personnel, sets salary scales, decides on hiring and firing, establishes capital investment programmes, carries out long-term planning, and in general runs the company. As stipulated by law, workers' councils comprise between 15 and 120 members, depending on the size of the company.

The term of office for council members is fixed at two years. Half the members are replaced each year. No council member may serve two consecutive terms. Elec-

tions are run according to universal suffrage, secret ballot and direct elections.

Workers cannot be fired or transferred while serving on the council, but they can be recalled at any time. There is evidence that the elections are legitimate contests and are not manipulated by the Communist League.

Every year the workers' council re-elects its executive organ, the management board. The board members number between 5 and 11, plus the director. The board members are usually chosen from the ranks of the workers' council. To prevent the formation of a bureaucratic elite within the enterprise, only a third of the management board may be re-elected. No member may serve more than three consecutive terms, and at least 75% of the board must be workers directly involved in production. The management board maintains close contact with the management personnel, and play a more

active role in the company's day-to-day operations.

The director is the chief executive of the firm. He/she is responsible for organising production and carrying out the plans approved by the workers' management bodies. The director represents the company in dealings with the state and other parties. In theory the director's powers are strictly limited by the workers' management bodies. One director interviewed in a study stated: "I don't make the decisions. I only make suggestions to the workers' council. Most of the time they are accepted. If the council decides differently and I don't accept the decision, they can make me resign."

### **Increasing power of the directors**

In spite of this formal position, in reality often the directors do have a lot of influence over the councils. This is because they are full-time professional managers



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with a great deal of expertise. The workers find it difficult to control them. In practice the directors are no longer accountable for their actions and decisions. The director has power without formal authority. In contrast the workers council has formal authority without real power. This can make the system confusing and inefficient. A further criticism of the system is that it is very time-consuming. Referendums have to be held to get the support of workers for re-investment plans.

It is important to note that no independent union organisation existed during the struggle for liberation. The unions acted as a 'transmission belt' for the party both before the revolution and after. Under the system of worker self-management unions are in an ambiguous position. They have no independent base on the shop floor, and are in fact the arm of the state in the factory. Wages are set by the workers council and workers do not have the right to strike.

Instead the trade unions function to educate their members about self-management and assist them to make it function better. Candidates for the workers council elections, for example, are usually nominated by the trade unions. In addition, the unions are expected to look

after the social interests of their members by arranging sports and social events.

## Contradictions in self- management

How effective has the system of workers' self-management been? In his book *The economics of feasible socialism*, Alec Nove describes the system of worker self-management in Yugoslavia as "a bundle of contradictions". He identifies five of these contradictions:

### *1. There is, first, the question of income distribution.*

The aim is to distribute income according to the contribution of the individual worker on the principle of 'to each according to their work'. As a result those who are more skilled or work harder get a higher income. But no worker may get more than five times that of the lowest paid worker in that factory.

However, in Yugoslavia income is linked directly to the results of the enterprise. Income will depend more on whether the enterprise is or is not economically successful, than on the individual's contribution. The success of the firm may have very little to do with workers' efforts. It

could be effected by factors outside their control - such as a fall in price, an increase in costs or, more commonly, regional factors. The result is that sharp differences in income exist between the same jobs in different factories.

Regional inequalities are caused by different natural resources and by historical differences in productivity.

In fact these differences have widened since 1945, partly because of the policy of decentralisation. This makes it difficult for the state to re-allocate resources from wealthy regions to poorer regions. Regional inequalities have contributed to the intensity of national conflict in Yugoslavia.

These contradictions, Nove concludes, are unavoidable wherever payment is related to a firm's success. Yet if pay is not related to the success of the firm, then where is the workers' material interest in the success of 'their' firm?

*2. The workers council decides how to distribute the firm's profit.* This stimulates wage inflation. The workers council is tempted to distribute most of the profit to the workers, and then borrow money for investment. This causes high inflation. In 1986 Yugoslavia owed the World Bank \$12 billion, which had been borrowed largely to finance imports of







machinery and equipment. Repayment is difficult because of the low productivity of local industry.

**3. The workers as a collective have no long-term economic interest in the success of the company.**

Workers are in no sense co-owners or shareholders. They are involved in managing the company, but only while they work for it. When they resign to go elsewhere (which happens frequently) or when they retire, they have nothing to sell. This means they have no material interest in the value of the company.

**4. Yugoslavian experience suggests that workers do not all have the desire to participate.** Many workers are not keen to sit on committees and to acquire the detailed knowledge that would enable them to be in any significant sense co-managers. It is for this reason above all that the power of the directors has increased.

**5. The final contradiction identified by Nove is that of unemployment.** Yugoslavia has a high unemployment rate - 30%. This was disguised in the 1960's when over a million migrants went across the border to work in West Germany. Now that most have been sent back to Yugoslavia, the unemployment crisis is visible.

Is there a connection be-

tween self-management and unemployment? It seems certain, says Nove, that there is.

Under the Yugoslavian system the workers council usually divides the profit between all the workers employed in the firm. The more workers there are the smaller the share of profit for each worker. This means there is no incentive to employ more workers - and the problem of unemployment gets worse.

In addition to the five contradictions identified by Nove, two further ones need to be mentioned.

**1. In a capitalist society profits can be reinvested in production in a completely legal fashion - for example through the stock exchange.** But in Yugoslavia until recently no capital market existed, and private property is limited. In such societies wealth is accumulated through fraud and corruption, and is spent on illicit consumption rather than productive investment.

A similar tendency exists in all socialist countries where democracy has been absent, as the recent corruption scandals in both East Germany and Rumania reveal.

**2. The form of production inherited from the Soviet Union is large scale production with an emphasis on quantity rather than quality.**

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This inhibits productivity and the development of more advanced technology and more flexible systems of production. As Avril Joffe argues, this belief that 'big is beautiful' has contributed to the economic crisis of existing socialism.

### Employees per enterprise

Socialism	Capitalism
USSR	USA
712	53
Hungary	Canada
1070	58
Yugoslavia	Japan
531	15

### Assessment

Has the Yugoslavian experiment in worker self-management failed? The answer is a qualified yes. At first, as in the case of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia experienced a period of rapid economic growth.

Its socialist system was able to redistribute the power and to some extent the wealth which was previously monopolised by the land-owners and monarchy. It was also successful in building the basic structure of modern industry - the steel plants, electrical generating capacity and transport.

But it has not succeeded in sustaining this economic growth nor in creating a genuine democracy. There is



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*South African workers call for socialism - what does this mean in the light of the dramatic lessons to be learnt from the experience of Eastern Europe*

*Photo: Benny Gool/Afrapix*

widespread belief in Yugoslavia that the system has to be changed. Changes have already begun; where it will end is not yet clear.

### **Some lessons for South Africa**

As we begin a new decade with high expectations of a new society in South Africa, four 'lessons' seem worth drawing from Yugoslavia.

**The first lesson** is that a decentralised system of worker self-management with a strong role for the market deepened the regional inequalities in Yugoslavia. Decentralisation can only encourage uneven

development and increase the inequalities between regions. Market socialism strengthened the more developed regions of Croatia and Slovenia at the expense of the poorer rural areas of Kosovo and Montenegro, contributing to ethnic conflict.

In South Africa a decentralised state with strong market forces is likely to deepen the inequalities that already exist between the core urban areas and the peripheral rural areas. Unequal development can only be overcome through the planned redirection of resources by the central state.

**The second lesson** relates to worker self-management. If those who 'manage' the firm are going to make long-term decisions about investment they need a relatively free hand to do so. If management is too directly accountable to workers in the plant, it will be inhibited from making the tough choices that are sometimes necessary for the long-term survival of a firm. This problem resulted in the wage inflation described above.

An alternative would be to give workers a direct financial stake in the firm, such as in the Mondragon co-operatives in Spain. This means



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that workers have a long term interest in the firm.

The third lesson is that workers' participation in decision-making in the firm is not enough to make management accountable. The evidence from Yugoslavia is that it is utopian to assume that all employees in an enterprise desire to participate. The best way of ensuring that management is accountable - in a worker-managed firm, a state-managed firm or a capitalist enterprise - is by building strong industry-wide unions which have an independent organisational presence on the shop-floor. This must include the right to strike.

One final point is important when assessing Yugoslavian experience. It is a difficult task to build socialism in one country. To build it in isolation from other socialist countries, as Yugoslavia attempted to do at first, means that the economy is drawn inevitably into the world capitalist system. This certainly happened to Yugoslavia, as with the export of labour to Germany and the international borrowing from Washington.

In an attempt to develop an alternative foreign policy Tito launched the Non-Aligned Movement from Belgrade in 1955. Yugoslavia has remained the key actor in the NAM ever since.

The most recent NAM conference was held in Belgrade last year. However, with the final destalinisation of Eastern Europe Yugoslavia can at last find common ground with its neighbours. Whether this common ground is found on the basis of full-fledged capitalism, or whether these countries try to develop a more subtle 'mix of market and plan' while retaining the positive effects of workers'

participation in management remains to be seen. ☆

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