

How to tell a real socialist

We are not the only group calling ourselves socialist. Anyone seeking to understand what is wrong with present-day society will come across others, all having some such word in their names as “socialist”, “workers”, “revolutionary” or “communist”. Most of these will be of Leninist or Trotskyist origin and have aims, theories and methods which have nothing in common with ours.

Their basic position is that ordinary people are not capable of understanding socialism and therefore need leaders to tell them what to do. Lenin, the mentor of all these groups, expressed this by saying that, left to themselves, workers were only capable of developing a “trade union consciousness”. Only a minority of people within society, initially mainly from outside of the ranks of the workers, could understand socialism and it was their duty to organise themselves as a “vanguard party” to lead the workers. As this minority had to operate in a hostile capitalist environment it had to organise itself on military-style lines, with its own hierarchically-structured leadership operating in secret and able to hand down “the party line” to the rank-and-file membership.

This theory concedes that ordinary workers on their own can achieve a degree of discontent over particular issues and can organise to try to obtain some redress but only within the system. It sees the role of the vanguard party as to exploit this discontent in order to extend its influence and establish its top members as the leaders, in the beginning of workers’ struggles to obtain better conditions within capitalism but eventually to lead them in an armed insurrection against the capitalist state. The leading role of the vanguard party wasn’t to stop there; after the insurrection its role would become to control the new coercive state that would be set up and to direct the construction of a new society, ordering ordinary workers what to do and what not to do.

This view – Leninism, to give it its proper name – which originated at the turn of the century in Russia which was then politically and economically the most backward European country, was alien both to the democratic traditions of the working class movement in the rest of Europe and in North America and to the views of Marx and Engels (who in fact were a product of this movement and shared its traditions). It is sometimes called “Marxist” but in fact has nothing in common with the view Marx endorsed that “*the emancipation of the working class must be the work of the working class itself*” or that Engels expressed when he wrote in his Preface to the 1888 English edition of the Communist Manifesto that Marx “*entirely trusted to the intellectual development of the working class, which was sure to result from combined action and mutual discussion*” and in his 1895 Introduction to Marx’s Class Struggles in France that “*when it gets to be a matter of the complete transformation of the social organisation, the masses themselves must participate, must understand what is at stake and why they are to act*”.

Clearly people who expressed such views thought that workers were capable of acquiring much more than a mere trade union consciousness.

But socialism is simple

Quite apart from this, the basic idea that most people are not able to understand socialism is

just plain wrong. Socialism is a simple idea. Any normally-constituted person can understand it: that, instead of the means for producing things being owned by a privileged class of rich individuals or state or corporate bureaucrats, they should be owned in common and democratically-controlled by everybody; that, instead of goods and services being produced for sale on a market or to make a profit, they should be produced just to satisfy the variety of different needs that people have.

Becoming a socialist means coming to want a society organised on this basis, and to recognise that present-day society, capitalism, because it is a class-divided and profit-motivated society, can never be made to work in the interest of everyone. These are conclusions which people can easily come to on the basis of their own experience and reflection and in the light of hearing the case for socialism argued.

But not only can people understand socialism, they must understand it if socialism is to be established. The very nature of socialism as a society of voluntary cooperation and democratic participation rules out its being established by some minority that happens to have got control of political power, whether through elections or through an armed insurrection. People cannot be led into socialism or coerced into it. They cannot be forced into cooperating and participating; this is something they must want to do for themselves and which they must decide to do of their own accord. Socialist society can function on no other basis.

This is the basic principle that underlines the whole political activity of the Socialist Party. It commits us to a policy of making sure that hearing the case for socialism becomes part of the experience of as many people as possible. It commits us to treating other workers as adults who are capable of being influenced by open public debate and argument and not to try to hoodwink or manipulate them. It commits us to opposing the whole concept of leadership, not just to get socialism but also for the everyday trade-unionist struggle to survive under capitalism.

We do not seek to lead such struggles but limit ourselves to urging workers to organise any particular struggle in a democratic way under the control of those directly involved. Our own party is organised on this basis and we envisage the mass movement for socialism, when it gets off the ground, being organised too on a fully democratic basis without leaders.

Cynicism

The Leninist perspective is quite different, in fact diametrically opposed to this. If you think, as they do, that most workers are never going to be able to acquire a socialist consciousness (or, in plain English, are never going to be able to understand socialism) but are only capable of being discontented with particular aspects of capitalism, then, clearly, you are not going to waste your time trying to explain the basic principles of socialism to them. That would be to cast pearls before swine.

Instead, you are going to put before them only what you think they can understand -- proposals to improve and reform the present capitalist system-- and you are going to try to assume the leadership of such struggles as a way of achieving support for your vanguard party. You are going to try to initiate such struggles yourself and you are going to try to muscle in on any struggles of this sort that groups of workers have started off themselves.

But you are going to be even more cynical than this, because you know that reformism ultimately leads nowhere (as you will admit in your theoretical journals meant for circulation amongst your members, though in your populist, agitational journals). Your purpose in telling workers to engage in such struggles is to teach them a lesson, the hard way which is the only way you think they can learn/ by experiencing failure. Your expectation is that when, these reformist struggles fail the workers will then turn against capitalism, under your leadership. In fact they never do, so all you achieve is to encourage reformist illusions amongst workers, an effect we socialists have to try and undo.

So the Socialist and the Leninist have two quite different approaches and practices; Us and them are in fact pulling in opposite directions. We give an absolute priority to putting the case for socialism to workers in a simple, clear way. They dismiss this as a waste of time. We say that capitalism can never be reformed so as to work in the interest of the majority. They pretend that it can. We say workers should rely on their own understanding and democratic self-organisation, not on leaders. They put themselves forward as leaders and seek to get workers to follow them.

The only thing we have in common is that, unfortunately, they too call themselves socialists. But, holding the views they do, how can they be?

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