

Is socialism dead?

The following article first appeared in a university newspaper in Vancouver. We reproduce it as a welcome change from the general media line that events in eastern Europe represent “the failure of socialism”. For those unfamiliar with the Canadian political scene, the “Socreds” are more or less the equivalent of the Tories in Britain and the NDP of the Labour Party.

What’s happening in eastern Europe? We’ve all seen the hundreds of thousands of demonstrators, repressive governments going down one after the other in the face of mass Working Class opposition, general strikes, even armed revolution. Most of the media tells us that socialism and communism are dead, now we know for sure it will never work; Marxism is history, so let’s just get out there and join the young Socreds, make lotsa bucks and enjoy capitalism.

But wait a minute – what *is* Marxism, anyway? Isn’t it supposed to be about fighting for workers’ revolution? Wouldn’t Marx have supported a mass movement for freedom? One hundred years after his death, you still can’t open a daily newspaper without reading the name of Marx, but you will look long and hard for an explanation of what the man actually stood for or wrote about. The fact that Marx actively supported all the popular uprisings of his day, that he fought for radical democracy, freedom of speech and assembly, the rights of oppressed nations, and all civil rights is unreported.

And what *is* socialism anyway? You will see the word socialist used to describe societies as far apart as Sweden and Cambodia, under Pol Pot; parties as far apart as the Bolsheviks and the NDP; and individuals as different as Stalin and Pierre Trudeau. Does the word have any meaning anymore?

Actually, it does, and that’s why the argument about socialism vs. capitalism rages on. But no other debate is so buried under such a mountain of mystification and distortion by vested interests, East and West.

It serves the interests of the Stalins and the Ceausescus and the Pol Pots to present themselves as the brilliant leaders of societies in which exploitation and oppression have been abolished. These are the pigs from Animal Farm. But it also serves the interests of the Western powers to tell the population that socialism already exists, it’s that place over there where governments are so brutal and the soup lines are 5 miles long. As long as they can present capitalism as the most natural, prosperous and just system, they will be safe from the anger of their own working class.

Why are the People Rising? Why is the opposition in eastern Europe so massive? There are many justified complaints: widespread food shortages, government repression, corruption, lack of civil rights, lack of democracy, and so on. There is in some eastern Europeans an almost religious faith that western style capitalism and a free market can solve these problems. Is that true?

We in Vancouver are lucky to live in one of the most peaceful and prosperous backwaters of the world. For most of Africa, Asia and Latin America, the existence of a free market does not mean that “consumers have more choice”. It means that the majority go hungry because they can’t afford enough food. In the former “Eastern Bloc” they ration by keeping food off the shelves. In the capitalist market, they ration by keeping money out of people’s pockets.

Last year there was a big media scare about poisoned fruit from Chile. Most reports didn’t mention the reason the Chilean opposition poisoned export fruit – because most farmworkers in Latin America suffer from malnourishment while the mountains of food they produce fly first class to North America. This is the “miracle” of the free market.

The *Globe and Mail* had an interesting front page one day in December. On one side was the headline “Mass Protest Against Corruption in Leipzig”. On the other side was “RCMP investigating 15 MP’s”. The ruling class in eastern Europe were certainly corrupt, like the ruling class anywhere – but they hardly hold a monopoly on corruption.

One of the things that upset people in east Europe the most was the revelation that their leaders, who never stopped telling the workers that they had to tighten their belts for the good of society, were living high in private compounds guarded by secret police and German Shepherd dogs. The media in East Germany and Rumania were given tours of private headquarters full of luxury goods and gold-plated bathroom fixtures and we all were shocked at the hypocrisy.

But in the west, the ruling class doesn’t even bother to hide their wealth – they prefer to show off. You don’t have to go to any secret compound – just take your car along South Marine Drive (there’s no bus service – if you can’t afford a car you don’t belong there). We are so used to the inhumanity of the market that we hardly notice that millions of people living under capitalism sleep in the streets because they can’t afford to pay rent, that millions die from disease because they can’t afford medical care, that millions starve because they can’t afford food, but we find it perfectly tolerable that someone like junk bond king Michael Milken should earn \$500 million per year for doing no socially useful work of any kind.

It is completely unacceptable to the people of eastern Europe that they have no democratic control over the state bureaucracy. It is true that in the west in many countries we have the very valuable right to vote for this or that member of the ruling class to misrepresent the people in parliament. But MPs actually don’t have much power. You can never vote for those who have the real social power in our society – you can never vote for the boss. You will never lay a democratic finger on the industrialists, the bankers, the bureaucrats, the IMF and the World Bank, the newspaper magnates, the executives of the multinationals, and all their kinfolk, because between them and the working class stands a Chinese wall – the institution of private property, backed up by the constitution, the law, the judges, the police, and if necessary, the army – in short, the state.

If you look at it closely, all the complaints which led to the uprising in eastern Europe exist in the west in even greater measure. And if you look at Marx closely, you’ll find that

he was any enemy of the state as much as he was an enemy of the market.

Real socialism, where working people control all of society and its wealth, never existed in eastern Europe. Real democracy, where people run their neighbourhoods, schools and workplaces democratically from the bottom up, never existed in the west.

The real socialist revolution has yet to come.

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