

There Is No Socialism Without a Communist Party

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More people in the U.S. have a favorable attitude to socialism today than two, five, or ten years ago. Proclaimed socialists have moved from taboo, to fringe, to a definite current of active politics.

However, communism – the organized movement that will overthrow capitalism and create a socialist order – has not kept up with the turn to socialism. We have communist experience from the October Revolution, the liberation of China, and other momentous upheavals. Let us see how we can achieve victory in our very different society.

For about 200 years something called socialism has been the positive culmination of anti-capitalism. When people are driven to fight exploitation, when people rebel against racist and religious oppression, when a global corporate economy drives their wages down and takes away their jobs, they learn that socialism is the alternative. When the struggle to better yourself is a horrible tangle of expensive college and student debt, and then a place

to live is too expensive, and prosperity is always a mirage in the distance, then you learn that socialism is the alternative.

The essence is classes and class struggle. On one side of the battlefield are hugely wealthy tycoons and families and ridiculously paid corporate executives. Closely tied to them are elites who watch over governance, "culture," and technology. On the other side, the working class get their income from ordinary employment or partial employment or scrounging by. These are the two basic classes of capitalism. There are also small business owners, criminals (who prey mostly on working people), and other sections. The only classes that determine the course of history are the capitalist class and the working class – and each has its historical system, capitalism and socialism.

Democratic Socialists Versus Socialism

The movement for socialism emerges within capitalism as the positive answer to it. Consequently, compromisers and phonies immediately begin to water down socialism. They sell it as a string of re-

forms. Bernie Sanders' twelve-point program back in December 2014, when he tested a run for president, is a typical recital.¹ The most important items on his list are socially guaranteed health care for all, a big increase of the minimum wage, laws to protect the right to form a union, pay equity for women, and a comprehensive set of construction projects for transport, schools, and clean water.

These are fine things, and Sanders ran a rousing presidential campaign on them. If we did all of them, if we taxed the rich to pay for it, and if we raised up everyone to middle-income levels of comfort – no matter their skin color or how they choose to worship or who is their personal partner – what more could we want? That is the socialism of Bernie Sanders and a swarm of leftish political groups with the word "socialist" in their name.

Their socialism is humanized capitalism. Win enough reforms from the capitalist class, and all is well. The term for people of this view used to be social democrat. They usually call themselves democratic socialists now. Some of them just forget about replacing the capitalist order. Others mention socialism like a bow before the cross. Still others tell the fairy tale that we can take a reformist road to socialism. For example, the once glorious but

now pathetic CPUSA declares, "Socialism in the United States can be achieved peacefully and democratically through the electoral arena."²

Certainly, workers' struggle has won real, large, and vital reforms. Public elementary education was obtained over a long haul from 1850 to about 1930. Social insurance, trade union rights, and some regulation of corporate depredations were won mostly in the 1930s to the early 1970s.

Since then, however, our struggle has been defensive. There has not been one major reform for working people for more than forty years. None is in sight, and a scientific analysis of capitalism and its path of development proves that the era of mass reforms is gone for good.³

Democratic socialists avoid scientific historical analysis as though it would eat their flesh. History in its essence unfolds a series of economic modes – fundamental economic relationships based on the methods of production and labor of the era.⁴ Capitalism had a beginning, the accumulation of capital thrives in the middle of its life arc, and its decay is irreversible. But no class of exploiters accepts the march of history and makes way for a new regime. Socialism and the working class can only take the helm by the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism.

It has never happened any other way - neither by the incremental reforms of social democracy in Sweden, France, Germany, and Britain nor by electing a socialist president like Salvador Allende in Chile.

The goal of democratic socialists and other reformists is to enact reforms. To that end they arrive sooner or later at a strategy of election victories. Oh, they will thunder that you should turn up the "street heat" and they browbeat you about organizing masses. Inevitably, it all goes to what they need: majority votes in the legislature or congress. It is the only way to enact reforms and give them the force and relative stability of law. The logic of attempting to make capitalism more human is iron-clad.

Reformers do dispute whether they can push an existing party and its legislators to enact big reforms. Today, that would be the Democratic Party. Or must they must launch a new electoral party and work for realignment of the U.S. two-party system? A pair of reformists, who call themselves Marxist no less (Max Elbaum and Bob Wing), declare:

We have to answer the hard strategic and practical questions of this moment [for them, life

is a succession of "this moments"; they never see the long view, the socialist prize], like:

How do we convert the energy we see in the streets to electoral power? [We cannot pass official laws in the street, so we must elect legislators and congresspersons.]

How do we fight racism and defend immigrants while setting a strong class pole?

What are effective tactics for conducting the fight against corporate Democrats on Democratic Party terrain? [We do not recognize that the Democratic Party is the most sophisticated political agent of corporate capital; we regard it as "terrain." They apparently wrote this *after* Bernie Sanders found out that the Democratic Party was not flat terrain on which he and Hillary Clinton would fight for the presidential nomination.]

And how do we do this while building the broadest possible front against Trump and Trumpism? [For decades Elbaum and Wing have defined their top priority as responding to a threat from the right.]⁵

What a slavish attitude! Mass protest is good, but we must channel it into reformist electoral groups; overthrow of the capitalist class is in the future – forever.

A vigorous communist party is right there in the struggles and movements against the endless out-

rages of capitalism. Even if there is no such party, people struggle against oppression. But without a communist party, there is no socialism. The U.S. is no exception.

Three Tasks

A challenge faces any group dedicated to socialist revolution: it must *enter the history of its country*. That happens when it accomplishes three tasks.

One, it explains the mode of production in the country, analyzes where the mode is in its lifetime, and lays out the principles of its successor. Two, it determines the revolutionary potential of the classes who are exploited in the mode of production.

Three, it finds a path of revolutionary struggle that works.

The parties of the great revolutions for socialism performed these three scientific and practical tasks. For the first one, the early communists of tsarist Russia showed that it was a landlord-peasant society within which capitalism had begun to develop. There was no going back, a hope of Russian revolutionaries before they mastered historical materialism. Vladimir Lenin published a thorough study of *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* in 1899.

The country had to break out of its agrarian mode of production and industrialize. The Bolsheviks put forward a program of first smashing the old mode of production and then proceeding to *socialist* industrialization.

Similarly, Chinese communists knew that their millennia-old society was a landlord and peasant order with a toehold of capitalism. Capitalism there was weaker, smaller, and more completely owned by foreign imperialists than in tsarist Russia.

The United States is obviously a capitalist country. Where is U.S. capitalism in its lifetime as a mode of production? The industrial phase was completed almost fifty years ago. Radical economic analysis since then has largely dwelt on phenomena like financialization, globalization, and casual employment. Yet these are more effects than causes of the motion of the economy.

There is a terrible symptom of the need for basic analysis of the mode of production and where it is today: U.S. communist groups seem unable to put forward essential, concise, and concrete principles of socialism. They repeat the general ideal of production for use not profit, and the allocation of economic resources by a social plan, inherited from the great Soviet drive to industrialize. The main point

they add is that plans should be worked out "democratically." This vague, feel-good qualifier adds nothing you can put your finger on. It serves as an evasion. The summary then collapses into a list of magnificent reforms that would be possible under socialism. The first of the three tasks is still on the to-do list.

Revolutionary Potential and Path

The parties of the great revolutions for socialism performed the second and third tasks, taking measure of the revolutionary potential of the exploited classes and finding methods of struggle with them. They did it with a combination of rigorous Marxist analysis, specific insight into their country, and sustained hard work.

The Bolsheviks in Russia relied on the industrial workers. They were concentrated in large factories in basic industries, especially metal working. They were strong in Petrograd, less so in Moscow, and active in a few spots in the rest of the tsarist empire (like the oil fields of Baku, where Joseph Stalin became an experienced revolutionary). Although the largest class, the peasants, had a tradition of episodic and sometimes dynasty-threatening uprisings (for example, Pugachev's rebellion against serfdom

in 1773-4), they were not a force for a countrywide people's war by 1900. (But deep hatred of the estate owners smoldered inside them.) Along with a handful of revolutionary Marxist intellectuals, the most advanced workers constructed a compact Russian party at the end of the nineteenth century and grew it through the failed revolution of 1905 and years of police-state suppression.

The party navigated nine intense months in 1917. The tsarist head of the landlord ruling class was so rotten that it just fell off in February. In tumultuous months of revolutionary surges and counter-revolutionary crackdowns, the Bolsheviks won over a majority of active workers to take state power in October (by the old Julian calendar still in use in Russia).

In passing it is worth stating the obvious: the question of who is at the core of the revolution is different than the matter of whom the revolution liberates. The Bolsheviks led the broad majority of the population. Their program always laid out the principles of smashing landlordism in agriculture and distributing the land for use among the working peasants.

The revolutionary potential of the industrial workers was not simply a consequence of their eco-

conomic concentration. To be sure, with that concentration they had the power to win certain strikes. Because they could stop the flow of profits, it was worthwhile in many situations for the capitalist to agree to a wage increase and get on with making money. Trade union strength, however, is not the same thing as revolutionary potential. Russia needed to industrialize in order to liberate all the oppressed, and the industrialization had to be socialist not capitalist. The most political of the industrial workers understood this truth – and they were ready to be at the center of it. When the Communist Party debated fiercely in the middle 1920s what to do once it was clear that revolution was not imminent in Europe, the Bolsheviks determined to industrialize the Soviet Union.

The Chinese Communists took a different measure of revolutionary classes in their country. In the early and middle 1920s they, too, relied on the workers in the big cities, especially Shanghai and Guangzhou (Canton). But industry was less developed than in Russia. Small commerce was more important in China, relative to industrial production. In 1927 the Kuomintang (KMT) with imperialist aid slaughtered thousands of workers and communists in Shanghai. They were not prepared to

repulse the vicious political police, triad criminal gangs, and KMT soldiers. The hope of copying Russia was crushed.

Already, however, Mao Zedong among the communists had discerned that the revolution should rely on the Chinese peasants. His “Report On an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan” published in March 1927 conveys the potential that Mao found when he went to an inland province and investigated. His analysis, “Why Is It That Red Political Power Can Exist in China?” of October 1928 answers its title question with remorseless fact and logic. Political power was divided among regional warlords, and in a country of difficult transportation away from the major rivers, border areas between provinces were temporary safe havens. More fundamentally, the peasants of China had a rich heritage of uprisings. Their rebellions toppled an imperial dynasty every few hundred years. Their Taiping Heavenly Kingdom liberation war of 1851-1864 came within a hair of countrywide victory. By then, and more so after the end of the dynastic system in 1911, the landlord agrarian economy was unable to develop further, on its own and especially when plundered by half a dozen imperialist powers.

In China unlike Russia, revolutionaries *could* go to the countryside and lead peasants to a modified form of their age-old rebellions: people's war waged by an army of a new type. The communist program stood for land reform and an end to gentry exactions and imperial taxes. Land would go to the tillers. Communists led liberated areas and carried out the program in them. The peasants rallied to people's war. Victory took another twenty years of fighting across the country – a stark contrast to the Russian road. Soon after liberation in 1949, China's communists began to show peasants that cooperation and collective farming created greater prosperity than individual small plots. And the communists embarked on socialist industrialization.

Revolutionary Class of the U.S.

The U.S. social-economic order is thoroughly capitalist, has no significant pre-capitalist agrarian features, and is highly polarized between a small capitalist class and a vast working class, with a slice of petty bourgeois in between. The revolutionary class of the United States can only be the working class.

In the 1930s class struggle heated to boiling in the industrial core of the working class. Workers mounted sit-down strikes, some more than a month long, and defended themselves in street battles against battalions of police. They forced the bosses to accept trade unions in automobile plants, tire and glass factories, steel mills, and radio and electrical equipment production. The action began in heavy and durable-goods industry and was fiercest there, but militancy and success rolled through department stores, the small shops of the garment industry, city subway and bus transit systems, restaurants and cafeterias, and more.

Compared with the Bolshevik workers of tsarist Russia, the U.S. working class worked in a more developed economy – well into mass production, assembly lines and semiskilled labor – but with plenty of room to run. Still, in both countries the workers drew strength from their association in a large workplace and the rough equality of all semiskilled work. Their labor was at the heart of capital accumulation.

Workers in Russia were a drop in the ocean of an agrarian society. In the U.S. of the 1930s they were the largest class of industrializing capitalism. A crucial difference was that the economic powers

and ruling class of Russia were set against meaningful reforms for the benefit of workers and peasants. Their basic class interest forbid modernization of the agrarian regime. By contrast, the bosses of General Motors, General Electric, U.S. Steel, and so on ultimately negotiated wage increases in order to get on with making profit. They did not give in immediately and gracefully, and a significant portion of capital opposed President Roosevelt's strategy of concessions to tamp down unrest. A clique of DuPont, Morgan, and other big capitalists even plotted a coup and fascist takeover. But socialist revolution was not the only way out, nor was it a serious threat in that decade.

At its peak, the center of the industrial era was Detroit, the headquarters of the big three automobile corporations. The massive Ford River Rouge factory complex was in nearby Dearborn. The auto bosses were lords over millions of workers in the industrial Midwest and across the country. Capitalism marched on – right up to a barrier it cannot surmount. By the 1970s, economic advance turned into stagnation and paralysis, although distorted technological progress continues.

No one section of the U.S. working class is at the forefront now. In 1950, a third of all workers were

employed in manufacturing industries; by 2000, they were one worker in ten.⁶ "Silicon Valley" today is the opposite of Detroit then: it has no use for millions of workers. (The global cheap-labor workforce could be largely automated away; robots have begun to make their way into Chinese assembly plants.) The real median earnings of U.S. workers peaked in 1973 (*before* finance swelled to take a huge portion of all profit and *before* the global race to low-wage countries began); they have stagnated and fallen ever since.

Working people have waged many difficult, noble struggles, but capital has not been forced to concede a major reform since Medicare in 1965 and the Nader consumer and worker protections of the early 1970s. Our campaigns have been defensive battles to slow down the introduction of two-tier wage schedules, the rollback of social benefits, and the neglect of public services. We try to survive in a decayed economic and social order. U.S. workers are in a situation similar to that of Chinese peasants a hundred years ago!

What Path of Revolutionary Struggle?

What kinds of struggle will change the endless repetition of battles against capitalist oppression

into deep, wide and cumulative revolutionary organization? They will be as different from Russia and China as theirs were from each other; they will be different from the practice of the 1930s, too. Communists need to find them and use them. *This* is the crucial task today.

Imagine several people seated around a table.

* A 25-year old with a college degree who works as a bartender, almost ready to give up her hope of getting into nursing school,

* A 55-year old man pushed into early retirement from his job in a washer-dryer factory; Chinese imports took the business,

* A 35-year old immigrant from Mexico who has a low-paid, accident-prone job slicing chickens in a slaughtering plant,

* A 43-year old elementary school teacher in an inner-city school district; it keeps closing schools as enrollments decline, and

* An unemployed 22-year-old who did not finish high school.

Their situations are all bleak, in different ways.

The common solution is a set of class-inspired demands.

* We want jobs.

* We want a comfortable minimum wage, a good average wage, and a path from the first to the second.

* We want guaranteed health care, good schools and free college, affordable housing, and a secure retirement.

* We want these for everyone, because in common prosperity it is amazing how people get along together.

The demands are compatible with both social democratic and communist politics, but only the overthrow of capitalism can achieve them. For us, socialism is the exit door out of already-industrialized capitalism. It is a new world, not a welfare addition to capitalism. Socialism undertakes the full development of everyone while it meets people's pressing needs. Our socialism can be created by the realization of three principles:

1. No rich and no poor: We move step by step to equal pay for all work. We develop every person for such work.

2. We change corporations from profit monsters into firms chartered to break even, financed by public investment.

3. Everyone who can work gets work, and income by exploitation is abolished.⁷

These principles outline the economic order that can satisfy the immediate, "non-theoretical" demands above. They are also a guide to the momentous era that humanity is about to enter. Something new has opened in our life. One on hand, an

economic strait jacket tightens around us, and the comfortable illusion of bourgeois democracy shatters. On the other hand, elements of a new productive economy appear in many technical areas: the amazing variety of materials, the discoveries and inventions of molecular and sub-molecular biology, the invasion of digital electronics into everything, the enriching yet frightening torrents of information. Capitalism turns these things into monsters that chew up our prosperity, take away our privacy, and make culture ever more tawdry (thank you Amazon, Google, and Facebook). Yet with coop-

eration, with wise study instead of the first grab for profit, with a focus on everyone's work and prosperity, and with a steward's responsibility for nature, a glorious world is at hand.

No one can know in detail what socialism will become, but the principles of no rich and no poor outline the socialist vision in broad, practical concept. The most important task of our time is to unite communism and the working people. There is no socialism without a communist party – and with a communist party, socialism is inevitable.

¹ See this writer's "Senator Sanders and the Impossibility of Reviving Democratic Party Liberalism."

² National chair John Bachtell, People's World website, Nov. 8, 2017.

³ For analysis of the basics of capital accumulation in the scientific-technical phase, see this writer's *The Hollow Colossus*.

⁴ The conventional Marxist terminology is the relations of production and the forces of production. Another way to capture the essence of a mode of production is by the principle that governs its development: in agrarian exploitation such as feudalism, the expansion of the rulers' concrete wealth; capital accumulation in capitalism; and in socialism, the increasingly equal satisfaction of the rising material and cultural requirements of people.

⁵ <https://organizingupgrade.com/about/>

⁶ Bur. of Labor Statistics, various tables.

⁷ See this writer's *No Rich, No Poor* for detailed discussion.