

# Socialism from Below

by David McNally

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## **Introduction: The Crisis of Socialism**

Socialism today confronts a crisis. We are told on a daily basis that socialism is dead; that there is no alternative to capitalism. As a result of decades in which police-state dictatorships called themselves "socialist," huge numbers of people now equate socialism with grey-faced bureaucrats who watch over parades of tanks and missiles and who jail those who think freely, organize independent unions, fight for their rights, read banned literature, or listen to "subversive" music. Rather than freedom, the word socialism often triggers images of repression. As if this were not bad enough, the collapse of many of these bureaucratic regimes during the 1980s gave credence to the idea that socialism is unworkable, that it inevitably produces an inefficient economic system. In this context, pundits have declared "the end of history;" they insist that capitalism has defeated all comers, that it no longer has any serious rivals.

To complicate matters further, people calling themselves "socialists" and "communists" often appear today as born-again converts to the ideals of capitalism. In Italy, the Democratic Party of the Left has declared that "there are no alternatives to the market economy." In a similar vein, Britain's Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair has stated that "Margaret Thatcher's emphasis on enterprise was right." And in Canada, the New Democratic Party, the parliamentary part of the left, has governed just like any other mainstream party of capitalism. In Ontario, Canada's largest province, an NDP government grotesquely violated union rights and undertook major cuts to social programs. Indeed, then NDP Premier Bob Rae claimed that "the choice isn't between capitalism and socialism. The question is what kind of capitalism do we want to have."

Actions and statements like this lend enormous weight to the idea that there is no alternative to capitalism. And there is nothing unique to Canada or Europe about all of this. As a Globe and Mail correspondent wrote in July 1996, "In countries such as Poland, China and Vietnam, parties or governments that still use the label Communist are actually implementing the policies of capitalism."

Yet, paradoxically, the socialist critique of capitalism has rarely seemed more relevant than it does at the moment. In a world where 447 billionaires own property equal to the annual income of fully half of humankind; in which one billion people live in what the World Bank terms "absolute poverty"; where more than 100 million children labour in sweatshops; where environmental devastation escalates at an alarming rate; and where the oppression of women, people of colour, lesbians and gay men, aboriginals, and people living with AIDS shows no sign of lightening; in such a world the socialist critique of exploitation, inequality and oppression takes on particular urgency.

At its birth, socialism was the banner under which working people resisted the horrors of the factory system and demanded a new society of equality, justice, freedom and prosperity. Socialism promised the emancipation of labour, a society

founded on workers' control where labour would be transformed from drudgery done in the pursuit of profit into collective activity done in the service of human needs. Early socialists looked forward to a world society free of nationalism and war, a world without gender and racial inequalities; they envisioned a cooperative and democratic society run by and for the majority. Rather than authoritarian regimes that deny even the most elementary democratic rights, socialism was understood as a new society of freedom.

This pamphlet is dedicated to recovering that original vision of socialism and freedom and to showing how it might be renewed for the early 21st century. To renew socialism means two things. First, to return to its original sources and to show how these still speak to the dilemmas we face in late capitalist society. And, second, it means showing how authentic socialism might be extended and developed in order to address new problems and challenges that are posed by new social and historical conditions.

This pamphlet begins, then, with the birth of socialism and proceeds to trace key parts of its history over the past 150 years or so. I discuss this history not in order to create a dogma to be memorized by the "disciples" of socialism. I do so because any movement for human emancipation has a duty to learn from the great struggles, errors, and accomplishments of the past. Throughout, my discussion is informed by one overriding conviction: that the heart and soul of socialism is the struggle for human freedom, and that the socialist ideal of a free society needs to be revitalized if we are to mount any meaningful challenge to exploitation and oppression.

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## **I. The Dream of Freedom**

The dream of human freedom is as old as class society itself. So long as one section of society has been held down and exploited by another, some women and men have dreamt, spoken and written about the possibility of a new kind of life. And sometimes they have fought to break the chains of domination that tied them to a life of drudgery and misery. We find hints of this dream of freedom in the oldest of historical documents. The Old Testament of the Bible, for example, promises the coming of the messiah who will vanquish the rich and liberate the poor. Take the following passage from the Book of Isaiah, for instance, where it is proclaimed that the messiah would come "to preach good tidings to the meek...to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and the opening of the prison to them that are bound." In the same vein, the New Testament announced that Jesus was this messiah who had come to emancipate the poor and the oppressed. Similar sentiments are expressed in other world religions.

Throughout the Middle Ages in Europe, the legend persisted that some day a new liberator would come to slay the sinful rich and free the poor. When peasants rose in rebellion against their lords and masters, particularly during the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries, they continually looked for a powerful leader appointed by God who would lead them into a new promised land.

The popular culture of Europe nourished a rich tradition of opposition to the rich and powerful. During times of feasting and carnival, the people engaged in rituals of "dethroning" kings, crowning the humblest member of society, blaspheming against bishops and priests, mocking the powerful and the well-to-do. Such practices were not unique to Europe. An Ethiopian proverb, for example, captures a similar sentiment. It states: "When the great lord passes the wise peasant bows deeply and silently farts."

Most of these cultures of resistance and movements of popular rebellion had strongly religious overtones. People did not typically conceive of themselves as having the capacity to overthrow their rulers and to build a new society of their own efforts. They looked to a mystical, not a human, transformation of society. They turned to God who, through the agency of certain human beings, would cleanse the world of evil, violence and oppression.

Such a mystical outlook persisted even up to the mighty struggles against the monarchy during the English Revolution of the 1640s. These struggles saw the emergence of a powerful communist doctrine based on the notion that all people should own and work the land in common. The radical English writer Gerard Winstanley wrote, for example, that "True freedom lies in the free enjoyment of the earth." At the same time, Winstanley and his radical followers adhered to a religious view of things in which the birth of a new society would be the work, not of ordinary men and women, but of God.

It was not until the late 18th century that the idea began to emerge that human beings could themselves refashion society. Only with the rise of capitalism in Europe and the emergence of the modern working class did critics of society begin to think in terms of a human transformation of social life. And it was with these developments that the idea of socialism from below emerged. But at the start, socialism was largely elitist and antidemocratic in character. It was only through several decades of working class struggle that socialism took the form of a movement devoted to the self-emancipation of the oppressed.

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## **II. Birth of the Socialist Idea**

The term "socialism" made its appearance in print in England in 1827. Five years later, the term was used for the first time in a French publication. It is no accident that the socialist idea — and the socialist movement — first appeared in England and France. For socialism was a product of two revolutions in human affairs, each with their respective roots in those two countries: the industrial revolution in England and the popular-democratic revolution in France.

### *THE FRENCH REVOLUTION*

The great French revolution of 1789-1799 involved the most massive popular struggles that had yet been seen in history. Rooted in popular hatred of an oppressive monarchy, the revolution rose on the backs of the masses of poor people in Paris who united under the banner of "liberty, equality and brotherhood." Beginning as a rebellion against the abuses of the monarchy, the revolution grew into a massive challenge to all forms of oppressive authority — whether it was that of lords, priests or factory owners. Initially, the battle against the monarchy unified large sections of society. As the revolution advanced, however, a new ruling group tried to halt the process in order to maintain their grossly unequal system of property and power. As a result, the popular movement divided into conservative and revolutionary camps.

In the conservative camp were those who saw freedom simply in terms of the freedom to own property. In the revolutionary camp were those who represented the Paris poor and who recognised that freedom was impossible without equality; that it was meaningless to talk of liberty if this was confined to the right of some men and women to starve to death while others grew rich off the labour of others. As the radical leader Jacques Roux put it at the height of the French Revolution in 1793:

Liberty is no more than an empty shell when one class of men is allowed to condemn another to starvation without any measures being taken against them. And equality is also an empty shell when the rich, by exercising their economic monopolies, have the power of life or death over other members of the community.

Out of the French Revolution, then, emerged the essential socialist idea that democracy and freedom require a society of equality. The French radicals recognised that genuine freedom presupposed the liberty of all to participate equally in producing and sharing the wealth of society. They understood that if some had the unequal right to own and monopolise land, property or factories, then others might just as unequally be condemned to a life of drudgery, misery and poverty.

But a society of equality requires a minimum level of abundance. So long as

economic life remains relatively backward, equality can only mean the common hardship of shared poverty. A healthy and thriving popular democracy requires a state of prosperity in which all the basic needs of people can be satisfied. Without a certain degree of economic productivity, therefore, the demand of the French revolutionaries for liberty and equality could only remain utopian. It was only with the enormous economic development unleashed by the industrial revolution in England that a society based upon equality and abundance became a realistic possibility.

### *THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION*

The English industrial revolution conjures up images of dark and dirty textile mills, of ten-year-old children labouring in coal mines, of women and men working 12- and 14-hour days — in short, of suffering and misery. Such an image is largely correct. The industrial revolution that swept Britain, beginning in the last quarter of the 18th century, was a massive dislocation in social life: old communities were destroyed; people were forced off the land and into workshops and factories, or into lives of poverty and unemployment; industrial diseases multiplied; hunger, poverty and illness spread; life expectancy fell. At the same time, however, several ingredients of the industrial revolution held out the prospect of an end to these ills. The new machineries of production that developed, especially during the early 1800s, offered the possibility of sharply reducing drudgery and toil and of massively increasing the production of wealth so as to eliminate poverty forever.

In reality, the industrial revolution did no such thing. Rather than leading to an improvement in the conditions of labour, the new industry was used to increase the fortunes of a few — the new industrial capitalists. Nonetheless, some writers saw in the industrial revolution an enormous potential for improving the human condition. Even some well-intentioned bankers and factory owners came to believe that the forces of this revolution should be harnessed to serve human ends. Many of these become early advocates of what has come to be known as "utopian socialism."

### *THE UTOPIAN SOCIALISTS*

Britain's best known utopian socialist was the cotton manufacturer Robert Owen. Like most of the early socialists drawn from the capitalist class, Owen did not call for a mass, democratic restructuring of society. For Owen, the working class was a suffering, downtrodden mass, not a group capable of remaking society. Rather than build a political movement of the oppressed, Owen sought to persuade politicians, landlords, and wealthy businessmen to embrace the cause of social reform. Of the four essays that make up his *New View of Society* (1813), one was originally dedicated to Britain's prince Regent, another to the middle class reformer William Wilberforce, and a third to his "fellow manufacturers." In the latter essay, Owen described workers to his colleagues as "your vital machines."

Although he briefly flirted with support for trade unions in the early 1830s, Owen returned to addressing himself to "men of influence." His whole approach was based upon appeals to those at the top of society; the idea of mobilizing those at the bottom was entirely foreign to his outlook. Indeed, when the workers of Paris rose up in June of 1848, Owen welcomed their suppression, arguing that it was the duty of the army to "overwhelm the deluded mass opposed to them."

In this respect, Owen was similar to the two earliest French utopian socialists, Henri Saint-Simon and Charles Fourier. Saint-Simon was a real estate speculator turned banker who rose to great wealth in the decades after the French Revolution. Fascinated by the enormous potential of science and technology, Saint-Simon began to argue the case for a "socialist" society that would eliminate the disorderly aspects of capitalism. Saint-Simon's "socialism" was decidedly anti-democratic. He did not envisage an expansion of human rights and freedoms. Instead, he hoped for a planned and modernised industrial society ruled over by an international committee of bankers. In many respects, Saint-Simon anticipated the development of state capitalism; he looked forward to a capitalist system in which industry would be owned and directed by a government made up of a scientists, managers and financiers.

The socialism of Charles Fourier had more to commend it. A self-taught eccentric, Fourier developed some highly original ideas with respect to the emancipation of women and to self-governing communities. But Fourier's outlook suffered from two main defects. First, he dismissed the potential of modern industry for bringing into being a society of abundance and hoped nostalgically for a return to preindustrial conditions of life. Second, Fourier looked not to the masses of working people but to enlightened rulers to usher in the socialist utopia. He spent his time drawing up rigid blueprints for the new society and sent copies to rulers like the Czar of Russia and the President of the United States.

Indeed, this is the common thread that runs through the outlook of all the early utopian socialists. Each of them looked to some well-intentioned members of the ruling class to bring about a socialist transformation of society. Each rejected the notion that socialism would have to be achieved democratically — through the mass action of working people. For this reason, all their views can be described as variants of socialism from above — a view in which the masses of people are mere playthings in whose interests an enlightened elite will change society. As the historian of socialism George Lichtheim has put it:

*French socialism, at the start, was the work of men who had no thought of overturning society, but wished to reform it, by enlightened legislation if possible. This is the link between Robert Owen, Charles Fourier, and Henri de Saint-Simon.*

There was, however, one revolutionary doctrine of socialism during this period. This consisted of what can best be called conspiratorial communism. Out of the



defeat of the popular struggles of the French Revolution, one far-sighted group of rebels centered around a man named Gracchus Babeuf, developed a communist perspective. Babeuf and his followers believed that true democracy could only be constructed on the basis of common ownership of wealth. But they could see no way of winning a majority of society to support their communist program. The masses of French people sought little else than protection of their own private property — their plot of land or their workshop. They showed little interest in a socialist transformation of society. For this reason, Babeuf — and his later follower, Adolphe Blanqui — could only conceive of a revolution made by a minority, the communist elite. As a result, democracy remained foreign to their socialist program as well.

### *THE EARLY ANARCHISTS*

The same is true, sometimes to a shocking degree, of the earliest exponents of the radical doctrine known as anarchism. It's "founder," Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, was an anti-semite and a woman-hater who vigorously opposed democracy. He opposed workers' strikes, and supported France's military dictatorship in the early 1850s. "All this democracy disgusts me," he wrote on one occasion. The masses, he argued are "only savages...whom it is our duty to civilise, and without making them our sovereign."

The Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin carried on this tradition, declaring that "Proudhon is the master of all of us." Bakunin continued his "master's" anti-semitism, believing in the existence of an international Jewish conspiracy that included Karl Marx and the wealthy Rothschild family. Moreover, Bakunin was forever creating conspiratorial "brotherhoods" organized according to a rigid hierarchy with himself and his appointed followers at the top.

Early anarchism too, then, lacked a commitment to democratic emancipation. Not until the 1840s were democracy and socialism to come together in a powerful new form.

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### **III. Marxism: Socialism from Below**

The radical thought of the 1820s and the 1830s was profoundly elitist and anti-democratic in character. Utopian socialism was the creation of upper-class reformers; anarchism originated in the anti-democratic protest of the small property owner; conspiratorial communism conceived of a transformation of society brought about by a select and secret group. The programs of social change advocated by thinkers associated with these trends did not look forward to a collective reordering of society by the mass of the oppressed themselves.

By the 1840s, however, a new current in socialist thought was emerging. The rise of capitalism in England and France had brought into being a new social force that was pressing for widespread change in society. This force was the working class — a class of wage-labourers concentrated in large factories and workplaces and increasingly inclined to resort to collective action, such as strikes, and collective organisation, in the form of trade unions. Between the years 1830 and 1848 — which mark two separate revolutionary uprisings in France — the emerging working class changed the shape of European politics.

In Britain, major strike waves had taken place in the mid-1820s. In 1834, the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union was founded. Mass strikes took place in 1842. In 1847, on-going agitation among workers forced the government to pass the Ten Hour Bill, thus limiting the length of the workday. In France, the years 1831 and 1834 saw strikes and insurrections among the silk weavers of Lyons. Uprisings among Parisian workers occurred in 1832 and 1834.

This upsurge in militant working class activity powerfully influenced the thinking of some radical writers and organisers. A few of them began to think of the working class as the group that could change society. Indeed, some theorists began to talk in terms of the working class liberating itself through its collective action. Notable in this regard was the French revolutionary Flora Tristan, who linked together ideas of working class self-emancipation and women's liberation with the proposal for a world-wide organisation of workers. But it was in the writings and the organising of a German socialist, Karl Marx, that the working class took centre stage in socialist thought. Inspired by the emergence of this class, Marx developed a wholly new socialist outlook based upon the principle of socialism from below.

Marx was the first major socialist thinker who came to socialism through the struggle for democratic rights. As a young man in Germany during the early 1840s, Marx edited a newspaper which supported the widespread extension of democratic liberties. Increasingly, Marx came to view political restrictions on democracy as a result of the economic structure of society. When the government closed down his newspaper in 1843, Marx moved to Paris. There he encountered a vibrant working class and socialist movement. Several years later, Marx moved to England where he undertook a painstaking study of the nature of the capitalist

economy. Out of his experience in France and England, Marx developed a consistently democratic and revolutionary socialist outlook.

### *THE YOUNG MARX*

The young Marx started from the problem of political alienation in modern society. He was concerned with the fact that, rather than the people controlling the state, the state controlled the people. Marx described this as a condition of political alienation — in which a human social institution, the state, escaped the control of the people and came to dominate them like an alien power. As he studied the capitalist economy, Marx came to a startlingly original conclusion: that this political alienation of people from the state was rooted in alienated labour. So long as people did not control the work they did or the products they created, they would live in an alienating society. And in such a society, he argued, the state too would escape the control of the majority. A truly democratic society could only be created if alienated labour were to be overcome, and if people were able to democratically control their work and the usage of the wealth they create.

It followed for Marx that democracy must begin at the very base of society — in the workplaces and factories — and from there extend through neighbourhoods and communities. So long as the majority do not control their working lives, so long as capitalists hold the bulk of economic power in society, a minority will continue to dominate political life. Full democracy thus requires the overcoming of alienated labour and class division in society. Only then will each individual fully and equally participate in social and political affairs. Unlike the utopian socialists, Marx thus insisted that socialism had to represent a higher stage of democracy than anything yet seen. He opposed all socialist and communist views that involved a curtailing of democracy. As he wrote in an 1847 pamphlet outlining the views of a socialist grouping in which he was involved:

*We are not among those communists who are out to destroy personal liberty, who wish to turn the world into one huge barrack or into a gigantic workhouse. There certainly are some communists who, with an easy conscience, refuse to countenance personal liberty and would like to shuffle it out of the world because they consider that it is a hindrance to complete harmony. But we have no desire to exchange freedom for equality. We are convinced that in no social order will freedom be assured as in a society based upon communal ownership.*

Equally important, if socialism was to represent a new society of freedom, then it had to be achieved through a process in which people liberated themselves. Unlike the utopian socialists who looked to an elite to change things for the masses, Marx argued that the masses had to free themselves. Freedom could not be conquered for and handed over to the working masses. Socialism could only be brought into being through the mass democratic action of the oppressed.

## *SELF-EMANCIPATION*

Marx was the first major socialist thinker to make the principle of self-emancipation — the principle that socialism could only be brought into being by the self-mobilisation and self-organisation of the working class — a fundamental aspect of the socialist project. As he wrote in the statement of aims of the First International Workingmen's Association, "The emancipation of the working class must be conquered by the working class themselves."

Unlike the conspiratorial communists, Marx insisted that there was a majority force in society that would bring socialism into being. He argued that the modern working class of wage-labourers was organized in such a way that it would be pushed, in the course of struggle, towards socialist objectives. Through his study of English economics, Marx came to see that capitalism had created, for the first time in human history, an oppressed class that worked collectively in large workplaces. If this class was to liberate itself, he pointed out, it could only do so in common. If it was to reorganise the economic basis of society, it could only do so in a collective fashion. If the factories, mines, mills and offices were to be brought under the control of those who worked in them, this could be achieved only through the coordinated action of thousands upon thousands of working people. Thus, a working class revolution would of necessity arrive at a new form of collective economy and society in which the means of producing wealth — the factories, schools, hospitals, mines, mills and offices — would be owned and managed in common by the whole of the working class.

Such a democratic and collective society would have to be based upon the fullest possible political democracy. Marx made this point clear from his earliest writings. But it was only with the workers' revolution in Paris in 1871, the upheaval which established the short-lived Paris Commune, that Marx came to see some of the forms that a workers' state, workers' democracy, would take.

In March of 1871, the army of France admitted defeat at the hands of Prussia. Fearing a Prussian take-over of France, the workers of Paris rose up and took control of their city. For more than two months, the workers ruled Paris before their uprising was drowned in blood. In order to secure their rule, the Parisian workers took a series of popular democratic measures. They suppressed the standing army and replaced it with a popular militia; they established the right of the people to recall and replace their elected representatives; they decreed that no elected representative could earn more than the average wage of a worker; they instituted universal male suffrage and universal education.

Marx immediately rallied to the cause of the Paris Commune. He hailed the action of the "heaven-stormers" of Paris. Most important, he learned significant lessons from the experience of the first workers' revolution. Prior to the Paris Commune, Marx had given little thought to the form that a workers' revolution would take.

Now he drew a conclusion of tremendous importance. The working class, he wrote, could not "simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery and wield it for its own purposes." Rather, the working class had to create an entirely new form of state in order to secure people's democracy and workers' power.

Marx insisted that the abolition of the standing army along with the institution of free and universal education, universal suffrage, the right to recall representatives and limits on the salary of any elected official were all essential elements of any workers' state. The Paris Commune, Marx wrote was "essentially a working class government ... the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economic emancipation of labour." Economic emancipation, the elimination of class divisions and private ownership of the means of producing wealth, could only take place under the direct and democratic rule of working people through their own state.

The experience of the Paris Commune was also a reminder of some of the limits of working class organizations. Despite the important role played by poor and working class women in the upheaval, the Commune did not give women the vote. Individuals like Louise Michel fought on the barricades, gave speeches and wrote tracts designed to rally the people of Paris to the cause of the Commune. But its leaders displayed a terrible blindspot when it came to the full participation of women. This aspect of the Commune illustrated the way in which divisions and backwardness among workers could persist even in the midst of a major political upsurge in which old ideas and traditions were being radically challenged.

### *MARX AND ENGELS ON OPPRESSION*

Marx and Engels started to appreciate this fact slowly, over a number of years. When the International Working Men's Association was launched in 1864 (its name still reflecting some of these limitations), Marx fought the French section's opposition to organizing women into trade unions. Marx insisted that workers' organizations should include all workers — irrespective of gender, race or nationality. Later, Marx's daughter Eleanor played an important role in organizing working women in Britain into the so-called "new unions" which reached out to unskilled workers. More than this, both Marx and Engels understood that women were oppressed by the structures of the privatized family in capitalist society. Indeed, Engels wrote a most important study, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, designed to explain how women came to be oppressed in class-divided society, and how that oppression might be abolished in a society without classes. Not surprisingly, Engels' book has been shown to be flawed on a whole number of points by more than 100 years of further research. But that is not the key point. Marx and Engels' views on many questions appear outdated today. What matters, however, is less the specific answers they gave than their dedication to the idea of an inclusive international movement of the working class.

In this regard, it is worth noting that Marx and Engels also became more attentive over time to national and racial divisions among workers. Initially, Marx held the highly optimistic idea that European workers would automatically take up the cause of the whole of oppressed humanity. But by the 1860s, he was coming to a more subtle view. In the case of England, for example, Marx concluded that anti-Irish sentiment tied English workers to a identification with their own rulers. Antagonism towards the Irish "is the secret of the impotence of the English working class," he wrote. Any serious working class movement had to oppose anti-Irish bigotry, insisted Marx. For this reason, the International Working Men's Association was obliged "everywhere to put the conflict between England and Ireland into the foreground, and everywhere to side openly with Ireland." The duty of socialists, in other words, was to champion the struggles of oppressed peoples, to side openly with them, in order to undermine the bigotry of workers in the dominant nations.

The same approach informed Marx's attitude towards the Civil War between North and South of the United States. Much as he mistrusted the politics of the leaders of the US North, Marx argued that European workers had an obligation to support the Northern cause in order to eradicate slavery. "Labour in the white skin cannot be free," he insisted, "while labour in the black skin is in chains." At the same time, Marx argued that the battle against the US South should be turned into a "really revolutionary war" — meaning the arming of blacks and their full involvement in the military struggle.

As the years went by, Marx and Engels came to more informed and sensitive views about the integrity of anti-colonial struggles in India and China, and peasant movements in Russia. While there were a number of real shortcomings to their views in some of these areas, they came increasingly to embrace these movements as important parts of the world-wide struggle of the oppressed, as struggles which could make a vital contribution to the self-emancipation of the labouring people of the world.

There is no question that Marx's outlook constituted the most far-reaching revolutionary vision of his time. Marx's socialist perspective represented a thorough fusion of the idea of mass democracy with the notion of a commonly owned and managed economy. His work signalled an entirely new direction in socialist thought and politics. Central to Marx's socialism were two basic principles. First, that the working class had to emancipate itself through its own collective action. Freedom could not be given over to the working class, it had to be conquered by the oppressed themselves. Secondly, in order to bring about a socialist transformation of society, the working class would have to overthrow the old state and create a new, fully democratic state for itself. These two principles — of self-emancipation and of the democratic workers' state — became the very essence of 'Marxism', of socialism from below.

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#### **IV. Rosa Luxemburg, V. I. Lenin and the First Crisis of Marxism**

Of the various radical and revolutionary outlooks that emerged from the dual experience of the French revolution and the industrial revolution in England, only Marx's combined a passionate commitment to popular democracy and a socialized economy with an understanding that only the working class, through its self-activity, could bring into being a new society of freedom and abundance. Yet, in the 50 years after his death in 1883, the "Marxist" legacy was to become a contested one. So much so that, a mere decade or two after Marx's death, the Marxist movement was to undergo a serious crisis and division.

During the 1890s capitalism entered into a 20-year period of prolonged economic expansion. On the tails of economic growth, most European workers were able to achieve real improvements in their living standards. In massive numbers, these workers joined trade unions and socialist parties, many of which were influenced by Marxist ideas. In Germany, for instance, the Social Democratic Party had one million members by 1912 and received four million votes in the general election of that year. In a period such as this, when things are improving without resort to militant or revolutionary struggle, it is easy to assume that slow, gradual improvement is the natural course of things. Socialists are not immune to such ideas. Indeed, a mechanical version of "Marxism" developed during this period which argued that iron laws of historical evolution made the transition from capitalism to socialism inevitable. In this context, most European socialists came to the view that socialism would be achieved gradually, through the slow transformation of capitalism into a kind of welfare state in which workers would prosper.

Gone was Marx's notion that socialism could only come into being through a revolutionary transformation of society from below. In its place developed the view that capitalism would slowly grow over into socialism. Such a transition to socialism was seen as involving little more than the election of socialist members of parliament. The German socialist Eduard Bernstein was the most outspoken theorist of this reformist and top-down conception of socialism. But all the major European socialist parties of the time were influenced by this outlook. And, in a much watered down form, it remains the perspective of social democratic parties today.

The dominant trend in socialist thought during this period, then, was a new variant of socialism from above. The struggle of working class people to create new institutions of popular democratic control was seen as having little or nothing to do with the creation of a socialist society. Instead, elected socialist officials would simply take over the existing bureaucratic structures of society and run them more humanely. Rather than a qualitatively different society, socialism was depicted as a gently improved form of the existing social order. Yet, despite the wide influence of this doctrine, some Marxists remained committed to the idea of socialism from below. The most important of these was the Polish revolutionary



Rosa Luxemburg.

## *ROSA LUXEMBURG*

Rosa Luxemburg became a revolutionary socialist in her native Poland at age 16. Two years later, she fled to Switzerland in order to avoid arrest by the Polish police. After several years of study, she moved to Germany, where she became the acknowledged leader of the left wing inside the Social Democratic Party. While in her twenties, Luxemburg wrote several major works criticising the attempts by reformists to strip Marxism of its democratic and revolutionary essence. Against them, Luxemburg argued that capitalism could not be transformed into socialism without mass struggle as the system is based upon exploitation and inherent contradictions. When these contradictions become especially acute, capitalism plunges into periods of crisis that inflict terrible suffering upon millions of people. And such periods also intensify competition among capitalism powers — competition which manifests itself in colonialism, militarism, and war. For all these reasons, Luxemburg maintained that the socialist movement had to base itself on a thorough-going opposition to capitalism. In the long run, the only choice for humanity was socialism or barbarism.

This prognosis was proved overwhelmingly correct with the outbreak of world war in 1914. Nearly the entire reformist wing of European socialism abandoned the long-established principle of opposing all wars between capitalist nations. Instead, they reverted to crass patriotism, each party backing its national government. This situation — "socialist" support for war by imperialist powers — represented the first major crisis of the Marxist movement. In the midst of this crisis, a current of socialist internationalists came together. Rosa Luxemburg — along with her comrade Clara Zetkin and the Russian revolutionaries Lenin and Trotsky — headed this internationalist wing of the European socialist movement, the wing that called for the workers of all countries to reject the war and overthrow "their" national governments. While the Marxist internationalists were extremely isolated in the early years of the war, by its final years (1917-19), working class revolutions did break out — first in Russia, then in Germany (and later in Hungary, Austria and Italy).

Rosa Luxemburg played a central role in the German revolution of 1918-19. And in that struggle, she passionately and insistently affirmed the basic principles of socialism from below. Time and time again, she argued that the working class would have to build a new world from the burning ashes of a Europe consumed by war, hunger and poverty. The struggle for socialism, she asserted, depends upon the fight against exploitation and oppression in every factory and workplace. The new society could only be created by the mass action of the working class. Nobody could give freedom over to the working class. As she wrote at the height of the German revolution:

*The struggle for socialism has to be fought out by the masses, by the*

*masses alone, breast to breast against capitalism, in every factory, by every proletarian against his employer. Only then will it be a socialist revolution. ...Socialism will not and cannot be created by decrees; nor can it be established by any government, however socialist. Socialism must be created by the masses, by every proletarian. Where the chains of capitalism are forged, there they must be broken. Only that is socialism, and only thus can socialism be created.*

Tragically, the struggle of the German workers was to be crushed — by a government composed of reformist "socialists." In the process of stamping out the German workers' revolution, this same 'socialist' government organised the murder of Rosa Luxemburg and her comrade Karl Liebknecht. Bureaucratic and reformist socialism from above would have nothing to do with the self-mobilization of the masses, with the struggle for socialism from below.

But while the revolution was defeated in Germany, this was not the case in Russia. There, a mass socialist party — the Bolsheviks — had undertaken a successful working class seizure of power.

#### *LENIN AND THE BOLSHEVIK PARTY*

The Bolshevik Party emerged in 1903 as a distinct current within the Russian socialist movement. Unlike the socialists in western Europe, the Russian Marxists did not confront conditions of expanding political democracy and rising living standards. Because economic and political circumstances in Russia were harsher than in most of western Europe, ideas about changing society through gradual, democratic reforms did not find a wide audience. Much of Russia's socialist movement remained more revolutionary in temperament, and this was particularly true of that current known as the Bolsheviks (from the Russian word for "majority").

The most important leader of the Bolsheviks was Vladimir Lenin. Contrary to most approaches to Russian history, Lenin was neither devil nor saint. He was a committed revolutionary socialist who devoted considerable energies to building a movement that could organize the advanced and most class conscious workers into a party of their own. Like anyone involved in the complex work of political organizing, Lenin could be guilty of serious errors of judgment. And, contrary to those who make a dogma out of his writings, he did not provide a ready-made model for socialist organization in any and all conditions. But, in the specific historical conditions of early twentieth-century Russia, the party he helped to build did develop into a mass organization of tens of thousands of militant workers.

The history of the Bolshevik Party is a most uneven one. There were periods in which the Bolshevism took on a dogmatic and sectarian complexion. This was especially true of the years of defeat and retreat for the Russian workers

movement, when police repression, poverty and isolation turned socialists in on themselves. During such moments, the Bolshevik Party assumed a rigid and monolithic character. There is often little in its practice at such times that genuine socialists today would want to emulate. But during the great periods of upsurge by the Russian working class — 1905 and 1917 — Bolshevism managed to overcome many of these limitations. As author Marcel Liebman argues, the Bolshevik Party underwent a metamorphosis in 1917 as it became a truly mass party of class conscious workers. "Having been obliged by force of circumstance to organize in a not very democratic way, or even in a basically anti-democratic one, the Party opened itself in 1917 to the life-giving breeze of democracy." Thus, when socialists today look back to the experience of the Bolshevik Party, they ought not to romanticize every moment of its history; instead, they should try to learn from its most vibrant, democratic moments — those moments when it was transformed into a fighting party of tens of thousands of militant workers.

Of course, these transformations in the Bolshevik Party went hand in hand with theoretical and political shifts. In fact, during the period of war and revolution (1914-17), Lenin's own political views shifted and developed in important ways. First, he went back to the writings of Marx and Engels on the Paris Commune and came to the conclusion — as had Rosa Luxemburg at an earlier date — that the Marxist view of the state and of a workers' revolution had been grossly distorted by the reformists. In his pamphlet, *State and Revolution*, Lenin restated the Marxist position that the working class would have to overthrow the bureaucratic and elitist state developed by capitalism and replace it with its own democratic workers' state. "The liberation of the oppressed class is impossible," Lenin argued, "without the destruction of the apparatus of state power created by the ruling class." The new workers' state would be a "transitional state" based on "the extension of democracy to such an overwhelming majority of the population that the need for a special machine of suppression will begin to disappear." As socialist society developed, the state itself would begin to "wither away," he argued.

Second, Lenin came over in 1917 to the views of Leon Trotsky on the nature of the coming revolution in Russia. For years, all major trends in Russian socialism had believed that a bourgeois democratic revolution — a revolution against Czarism and for the establishment not of socialism but merely of liberal capitalism — would have to precede a workers' revolution in Russia. In 1906, Leon Trotsky developed a dissenting view. Only the working class of Russia, Trotsky argued, would be willing and able to carry through the fight for democratic reforms and for a democratic republic. But why, he asked, should the workers be expected to stop at that point? Why should they not extend the fight for democratic rights into a struggle for workers' control and socialist democracy? In fact, Trotsky asserted, democracy in Russia could only be brought into being through a workers' revolution. The struggle for democratic rights, therefore, would tend almost automatically to pass over into a struggle for workers' power.

Answering the charge that Russia was too backward to be able to construct a

socialist society — for which a situation of abundance was a central precondition — Trotsky argued that while Russia remained backward, Europe as a whole did not. The Russian revolution, he argued, would be part of a Europe-wide conflict. Aided by the advanced workers' movements of central and western Europe, he contended, Russia could "skip" the stage of liberal capitalism and proceed directly to the construction of a socialist society. Trotsky described this process as a permanent revolution. The revolution would have to be permanent in two senses. First, the battle for democracy would have to pass over into a revolution for workers' power. Secondly, the Russian revolution would have to spread and become part of the European revolution — indeed, of a world revolution.

It is important to note in this regard that the theory of permanent revolution involved a much more strongly internationalist outlook than other socialist perspectives. By insisting that workers in less developed countries could undertake struggles for socialism, Trotsky's theory overcame certain "Eurocentric" tendencies within socialism — the idea that the socialist movement was a strictly European affair. Indeed, after 1917 both Trotsky and Lenin gave a new emphasis to the role of anti-colonial struggles as a central part of the international socialism.

### *THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION*

When working women in the Russian city of St Petersburg took to the streets demanding bread and peace in March of 1917, few realised that the Russian revolution had begun. Once the demonstration of the women workers sparked a wave of revolutionary struggle against Czarism, however, Lenin immediately embraced the perspective of Trotsky and declared that only a revolutionary workers' movement could win the battle for democracy — and in so doing it would begin the struggle for socialism. At the same time, Trotsky recognised that without an organised political party no revolution could succeed. He therefore joined the Bolsheviks. Together Lenin and Trotsky helped to push the Bolshevik Party into organising a workers' uprising in October (November by the western calendar) of 1917.

The Russian revolution was based upon a wholly new kind of social organisation, the workers' council or soviet. These councils, based on elected delegates from the workplace and the neighbourhoods, became the new decision-making bodies of Russia. They were organs of direct democracy whose delegates, like those of the Paris Commune, could be recalled by the electors. The soviets represented a new form of mass democracy. It was for this reason that Lenin and Trotsky made the demand for "All power to the soviets!" the central slogan of the Russian revolution. The soviets, they claimed, would be the basis of the new workers' state; they would represent the embodiment of workers' democracy. And after the Bolshevik-led uprising of October 1917, the soviets did indeed become the foundation of the Russian workers' state. The American journalist John Reed, in Russia at the time, carefully described the organisation of this new state:

*At least twice a year delegates are elected from all over Russia to the All-Russian Congress of Soviets ... This body, consisting of about two thousand delegates, meets in the capital in the form of a great soviet, and settles upon the essentials of national policy. It elects a Central Executive Committee, like the Central Committee of the Petrograd Soviet, which invites delegates from the central committees of all democratic organisations. This augmented Central Executive Committee of the All-Russian Soviets is the parliament of the Russian Republic.*

The soviets, Reed pointed out, were amazingly vibrant and active organisations, concerning themselves with all aspects of social policy. "No political body more sensitive and responsive to the popular will was ever invented," he stated.

During 1917 and 1918, the Russian soviets teemed with revolutionary initiative and enthusiasm. For the first time, millions of ordinary workers and peasants found themselves able to participate in the major decisions that affected their lives. Control of the factories was taken over by the workers, land was seized by the poor peasants, the embryo of an entirely new form of society was created.

But only the embryo. For the germ cell of socialism to grow, it required several essential ingredients. One was peace. The new workers' state could not establish a thriving democracy so long as it was forced to raise an army and wage war to defend itself. A second essential ingredient was abundance. Unless the basic material needs of all people could be satisfied, it would be impossible to keep alive a direct and active democracy. Hungry people can only keep their concern with politics alive for so long. Sooner or later, the more pressing need for bread intervenes. For these reasons, a third ingredient was indispensable — the spread of the revolution. Only successful workers' revolutions in Europe could end the threat of war and provide the economic assistance upon which workers' Russia depended. It was with these considerations in mind that Lenin stated, four months after the October revolution, "The absolute truth is that without a revolution in Germany we shall perish."

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## **V. From the Russian Revolution to the Rise of Stalinism**

Worker's Russia was not greeted by a revolution in Germany, by warm arms and offers of fraternal assistance. Instead, it was greeted by the invasion of 17 armies from 14 countries. Alone, isolated, encircled, revolutionary Russia undertook the heroic task of defending itself. Under the leadership of Trotsky, a Red Army was created that for nearly three years criss-crossed Russia battling the armies of imperialism. In the end, the Red Army prevailed — but at a terrible price. Russia was bled dry. Its industry had collapsed. It could no longer feed its population. With economic and social collapse came political decay. As workers' democracy disintegrated, a new bureaucracy rose to power.

The dimensions of Russia's collapse are truly staggering. By 1920, industrial production had fallen to a mere 13 per cent of its 1913 level. There were massive shortages of every conceivable item. But most desperately, there was a chronic shortage of food. Famine swept the countryside. According to Trotsky, cannibalism emerged in some of the provinces. There was a huge flight of people from the cities, where food was nearly impossible to find, back to the country. The population of Petrograd, the major industrial city, fell from 2.5 million in 1917 to 574,000 in August of 1920. And even those workers who remained in the cities were often too sick or too hungry to work. Absenteeism reached an average of 30 per cent. Disease haunted the country. Between 1918 and 1920, 1.6 million people died of typhus, dysentery and cholera. Another 350,000 perished on the battle field.

By 1920, the very face of Russia had changed. Workers' democracy, in the meaningful sense of the term, had disappeared — as had most of the working class, through death or retreat to the countryside. In many cases elections to the soviets ceased. The Bolshevik Party remained alone in power confronted by a country that was slowly dying. Increasingly, the leadership of this party came to distrust all dissent; its rule became more and more dictatorial. Even dedicated revolutionaries like Lenin and Trotsky were not immune to these tendencies. In some cases, as at Kronstadt in 1921, the Bolshevik government crushed dissent that, even if misguided, grew out of genuine popular grievances, not right-wing conspiracy. That these developments were largely a result of overwhelming pressures is indisputable; but these pressures took an enormous toll, leading to a growing bureaucratization of political life. In the early 1920s, this ruling party divided into a series of factions, each with a different view as to how society should be governed and socialism constructed. While many individuals crossed back and forth between the contending factions, within a few years of Lenin's death in 1924 (he had been sick and largely incapacitated since 1922) there were two dominant points of view.

Grouped around Joseph Stalin were those forces that represented the rising Soviet bureaucracy. Stalin's group argued that the Russian government should go about the task of building "socialism in one country." For this group, "socialism"

lost any foundation in organizations of workers' democracy, soviets. They came increasingly to identify socialism with a bureaucratic monopoly of power which allowed no place for organs of mass democracy. Further, they began to define socialism as a state-controlled and planned economy which would industrialise backward Russia on the basis of ruthless labour discipline and starvation wages.

Grouped around Leon Trotsky were the forces known as the "Left Opposition." In the early 1920s, Trotsky had started to oppose many of Stalin's policies. At first, Trotsky's opposition was timid and cautious; his criticisms did not go so far as had those of some earlier oppositionists. Shortly before his death, Lenin had suggested that he and Trotsky should form a "bloc" against Stalin. By the mid-1920s, the Left Opposition had been created around two central planks. First, democracy had to be re-established in the Bolshevik Party and in the mass organisations such as the trade unions and the soviets. Secondly, the Soviet government had to abandon all such retrograde notions as socialism in one country — which identified socialism with an impoverished and bureaucratically-dominated society — in favour of a revolutionary and internationalist perspective that saw Russia's salvation in spreading the revolution. The program of the Left Opposition was far from perfect; in particular, it put insufficient emphasis on the revival of workers' democracy. But at the time it represented the only perspective that held out any hope of resisting the degeneration of the revolution.

### *COUNTER-REVOLUTION*

By 1927 the debate was largely over. Trotsky's revolutionary perspective fell on deaf ears. Although some thousands of workers did take up the slogans of the Opposition, the mass of the working class was hungry and demoralized. It remained largely indifferent to the rallying cry of the Left Opposition. Meanwhile hundreds of thousands of careerists had joined the Bolshevik Party. Many of these were former Czarist officials who foresaw the possibility of state employment if they proclaimed themselves "communists." With the Bolshevik Party dominated now by such elements (200,000 original communists had died during the Civil War), Stalin's victory was assured. In November of 1927, Trotsky was expelled from the Bolshevik Party. He would soon be deported from the Soviet Union.

At that point, Stalin undertook to reshape the entire nature and direction of Russian society. This reshaping had four main aspects: the elimination of all dissent; the liquidation of all forms of democracy and of genuine working class organisation; the slashing of the living standards of the working class; and the physical annihilation of millions of peasants. The purpose of these policies was to transfer economic resources from fulfilling the consumption needs of human beings to the building of a massive military-industrial complex that could compete with western capitalism.

The elimination of dissent had begun in the early 1920s. Now it intensified with expulsions from the Bolshevik party in 1927. Then came sweeping arrests. In the

mid-1930s, a wave of "show trials" led to the slaughter of the original Bolshevik leaders of the revolution. But the most astounding and gruesome form of repression came in the slave labour camps. By 1931, two million people had found their way into these camps. By 1933, the figure was five million. In 1942 it reached a staggering 15 million.

The destruction of the remnants of workers' democracy proceeded apace. Strikes were outlawed in 1928. After 1930, workers were no longer allowed to change jobs without state permission. Trade unions were reduced to bureaucratic playthings controlled by the state. Other democratic gains of the revolution were buried. Access to divorce was severely curtailed. Abortion was made illegal. Homosexuality, made legal with the revolution, was criminalized once again. A regime of police terror prevailed.

In 1929, the first Five-Year Plan was introduced. The aim Stalin announced, was to "catch up and overtake" the West. In order to take control of food production, several million peasants were slaughtered. In the towns, workers' wages were cut in half between 1930 and 1937. A rate of growth of 40 per cent was declared. Such a growth rate could only be achieved through ruthless exploitation of the working class — by forcing workers to produce more and more output for lower and lower wages.

From this point on, the whole axis of Russian development changed. Gone was the commitment to workers' democracy and international socialism. In their place, a privileged bureaucracy had installed the aims of industrial and military development in order to build a world power. Under Stalin, the Soviet Union undertook to make its peace with world capitalism. The objective of defeating international capitalism through workers' revolutions was replaced by the aim of building a modern military-industrial complex. To this end, the Soviet Union developed its own cynical foreign policy, helping to strangle revolution in Spain in 1936-37 in an effort to appease the West, and signing a non-aggression pact with Hitler's Germany in 1940. After the Second World War, Stalin's Russia claimed control of large parts of eastern Europe — Poland, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, and Hungary in particular. When these nations challenged Russian rule, tanks were sent in to crush dissent — as in Hungary in 1956, and Czechoslovakia 12 years later.

The effect of Stalinism was to do inestimable damage to the image of socialism. With repressive, bureaucratic states calling themselves "socialist," huge numbers of people decided they wanted nothing to do with a movement carrying that name. When a mass workers' movement calling itself Solidarity rose up in Poland in 1980-81, it was brutally repressed, demonstrating once again that the Stalinist regimes were enemies of the working class. Suffering economic crises and lacking popular support, the Stalinist regimes in eastern Europe fell like dominoes from 1989 on. No greater condemnation is possible than that delivered by the mass of the people who cheered on the disintegration of these corrupt police states.



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## **VI. Leon Trotsky and Anti-Stalinist Socialism**

DURING THE TERRIBLE decade of the 1930s when Stalin was committing barbarous crimes in the name of "socialism," the voice of Leon Trotsky kept alive some of the basic elements of socialism from below. Stalin had returned to an ideology resembling authoritarian pre-Marxian socialism. Gone was socialism's democratic essence. Stalin's "Marxism" was a variant of socialism from above. A bureaucratic elite was to oversee the transformation of a poor and backward country into a modern power, whatever the cost in human terms. That such a perspective could be called "socialist" or "communist" was a horrible travesty.

It was Trotsky's great virtue that, as an internationally known leader of the Russian revolution, he insisted that Stalin's regime represented the betrayal of socialism. Against all odds, Trotsky maintained that socialism was rooted in the struggle for human freedom. Furthermore, against the nationalistic notion of "socialism in one country," he asserted that socialism could only come into being on a world scale. In so doing, he defended the uncompromising internationalism of Marx, Luxemburg and Lenin.

After the Communist Party in Germany had failed to mobilize united working class action to stop the Nazis, Trotsky fought desperately to build a new revolutionary socialist movement. At a time when Stalin's counter-revolution was reshaping Russia and the fascism of Hitler and Mussolini was sweeping across Europe, crushing workers' movements in its path, this was no mean task. Even if he had never developed the theory of the permanent revolution, never played a leading role in the revolution of 1917, nor built the Red Army, Trotsky's contribution to keeping alive the socialist flame during the 1930s would have insured him a lasting place in the history of international socialism.

The conditions of the 1930s, however could not but affect Trotsky's outlook. The great periods of Marxism have been those in which revolutionary socialists have been actively bound up with mass movements of the working class. The health and dynamism of Marxism has always depended upon a certain unity of theory and practice. For Marx and Engels, these great periods were the revolutionary wave of 1848 in Europe and that of the Paris Commune of 1871. During the failed Russian revolution of 1905, socialist theory was advanced by the likes of Trotsky, Luxemburg and Lenin. The next great period was that of 1917-1921. Then, revolutionaries such as Luxemburg, Lenin, Trotsky and the Italian communist Antonio Gramsci played central roles in revolutionary movements of the working class. During each one of these periods Marxist theory was developed and enriched on the basis of the living experience of the working class movement.

During the 1930s, however, Trotsky was cut off completely from any genuine workers' movement. Throughout Europe, the working class was reeling from defeat after defeat. The socialist and communist movement was on the defensive, struggling desperately to defend itself from the hammerblows of fascism. While

Trotsky's commentaries on the events of this period are often brilliant, they were unable to inspire any significant numbers of working people into action. Further, Trotsky's new communist movement remained confined to handfuls of the radical intelligentsia. Their divorce from mass struggles — indeed an incredible remoteness from the day-to-day experience of the working class — could only distort the theory and practice of what came to be known as "Trotskyism."

The Trotskyist movement paid dearly for its isolation. In many countries it too often became little more than a debating society for people who had no real experience of working class struggle. Many fine and dedicated individuals joined the ranks of this movement. But their socialist politics were shaped in small, marginalized groups cut off from any real involvement in mass movements. Shut in on themselves in a period of terrible defeats, these groups often became little more than a collection of squabbling factions and individuals. Increasingly, the problems of reaching a mass audience were attributed to "traitors" in their own midst, rather than the objective problems posed by the world around them. Trotsky denounced the "closed circles," the "literary arrogance" and the "conceit and grand airs" of socialists who felt capable of pronouncing on the general strategy and tactics of revolution in any corner of the world although they had failed to gain a toehold in the workers' movement of their own country. Yet, for all his criticisms, Trotsky could not supply the only real corrective to such a hot-house atmosphere: involvement and education in the class struggle.

These problems were compounded by defects in Trotsky's own analyses of events. As the 1930s went on, Trotsky tended towards more and more dramatic, even apocalyptic, predictions. Increasingly he insisted that capitalism had entered its "death agony," that it could never again expand economically. "The disintegration of capitalism has reached extreme limits," he wrote in 1939, "likewise the disintegration of the ruling class. The further existence of this system is impossible." It had been an axiom of Marx's thought that capitalism could always get out of a crisis if it was able to grind down workers sufficiently to boost profit rates. With this in mind, later Marxists had argued that there is no such thing as a permanent crisis of capitalism; either workers overturn the system or capitalism will restructure itself at workers' expense. But Trotsky's analysis took on a heavily fatalistic character. All the elements of a world-wide revolutionary upheaval were in place, he insisted, except for adequate political leadership. It followed that "the crisis of humanity is the crisis of revolutionary leadership." The building of the meagre forces of the Fourth International thus came to be seen as a matter of life or death for the working class movement.

This analysis gave an inflated, sometimes messianic, sense of self-importance to Trotsky's followers. Many started to declare themselves the true leadership of the working class movement despite the fact that most workers had never heard of their groups. The issuing of grandiose pronouncements often became a substitute for the patient political work required to build a meaningful organization. And when things went badly, when workers failed to respond to the appeals of tiny

revolutionary groups, it became more and more common for Trotsky's followers to blame their failings on heretics and renegades in their own midst.

Political confusion and disagreement about what was happening in Russia only made matters worse. As Stalin's counter-revolution intensified — as communist militants were executed, peasants slaughtered, the last vestiges of democracy eliminated — the question arose as to the nature of the society that was taking shape in Russia. Many people began to argue that a new kind of class domination had developed in Russia, that nothing of lasting value remained from the revolution of 1917. Trotsky resisted such arguments. While vehemently condemning Stalin's regime, which he even described as "a Bonapartist fascist bureaucracy" that had become "a weapon of bureaucratic violence against the working class," he argued that Stalin's Russia remained a workers' state, albeit of a degenerated kind. Trotsky acknowledged that the soviets had been destroyed, that union democracy had disappeared, that the Bolshevik party had been stripped of its revolutionary character, and that a new "political" revolution would be necessary to overthrow the Stalinist dictatorship. Still, he insisted that Russia was a workers' state. And he did so on the basis of one criterion alone: that property remained nationalized, in state hands. This was evidence, he believed, of a lasting gain brought about by the 1917 revolution; private property had not been restored by Stalin.

For some of Trotsky's followers, this was not good enough. A workers' state, they insisted, required the existence of some form of workers' power or workers' control. Nationalized property did not make a society superior to private, liberal capitalism. These critics argued that a new ruling class, basing itself upon state-owned property, had come into being. Some of these critics referred to this new system as bureaucratic collectivism. Still others saw it as duplicating the forms of exploitation found under classic capitalism; they characterized the Stalinist regimes as state capitalist societies.

The present writer sympathizes with the critics of Trotsky's view of Stalinist Russia as a workers' state. But it must be added that the situation was a difficult and complex one, and that a strong and vigorous movement would have allowed such differences of analysis to coexist. Such a movement would have acknowledged the complexity of the problems involved while insisting upon its revolutionary socialist opposition to the Stalinist regimes. But the small, isolated Trotskyist groups were incapable of holding together in the midst of such differences. Even during Trotsky's lifetime, the movement he had created began to split and fracture over these issues. After his death, as new Stalinist regimes were created in eastern Europe and elsewhere, these differences became more and more difficult to contain. The Trotskyist movement entered upon a history of almost permanent fracturing. While individual groups often played an admirable role in galvanizing significant struggles — anti-war movements, struggles for abortion rights, student upheavals — the movement which took Trotsky's name failed to develop into a genuinely mass organization. Unable to affect real events,

Trotsky's followers too often clung to their "orthodoxy," to a doctrinaire attachment to the writings of their founder as a security blanket, a kind of faith designed to keep them together through hard times. Their squabbles over who was the true disciple and who the heretic became more and more obscure to ordinary people.

As a result, the Trotskyist movement was largely incapable of developing Marxist ideas to confront the changing realities of capitalism and the working class in new historical situations. While many of Trotsky's ideas — his theory of permanent revolution, his writings on literature and art, and his passionate critiques of Stalinism — are an important source for the traditions of socialism from below, they are far from adequate on their own and cannot be treated like a dogma. Socialism from below must draw upon other vital traditions of Marxist theory and practice. Especially important in this regard are the writings of Antonio Gramsci.

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## **VII. Antonio Gramsci and the Renewal of Socialism from Below**

Antonio Gramsci is probably the most widely discussed Marxist figure in the West today. Born on the Italian island of Sardinia in 1891, Gramsci studied philosophy and linguistics at university, and joined the Socialist Party of Italy (SPI) in 1913. Three years later, he gave up his studies to become a full-time worker for the SPI. The Socialist Party was growing considerably at this time, its membership rising from about 50,000 in 1914 to 200,000 by 1919. In the general election of the latter year the SPI became the largest party in the Italian parliament, winning 156 seats and two million votes.

During the war, Gramsci settled in Turin where he became closely associated with the city's militant metalworkers. Shortly after, a great upsurge of working class struggle occurred, beginning with a rash of factory occupations by workers in northern Italy in February 1920. In April, the struggle rose to a new level when Turin employers tried to reduce the power of workers' organizations known as "internal commissions" within the factories. Confronted with this attack, 400,000 Turin workers occupied their factories. Yet, even this phase of the struggle paled by comparison with events that erupted in August when employers refused to negotiate with the metalworkers' union. Hearing that employers had locked out 2000 Milan metalworkers, the union called an occupation of 300 Milan plants. When the employers responded with a national lock-out, a nation-wide wave of factory occupations ensued. Half a million workers seized control of their factories, raising red flags and organizing armed workers battalions to prevent the police or army from trying to take back the factories.

Within days, on a suggestion from Gramsci and other socialists in Turin, the workers restarted production without management. Gramsci had wanted to demonstrate that workers' controlled production was entirely possible — and now such an experiment was in motion. For Gramsci and tens of thousands of working class militants, the socialist revolution was now underway in Italy.

But for the leaders of the unions and the PSI, all this was a bit much. They had wanted to use mass struggle to force the employers to negotiate; they were certainly not interested in an experiment in workers' control of industry, or a working class seizure of power. As a result, they moved quickly to demobilize the struggle. First, they invented the absurd tactic of calling a referendum on whether to proceed with a socialist revolution — a referendum in which roughly 590,000 workers voted "no" while 409,000 voted "yes"! Then the labour leaders reached a settlement with the employers under which the factories were returned to their capitalist owners.

For Gramsci and tens of thousands of working class socialist activists, the sell-out of the struggles of 1920 was a staggering disappointment. Within months, tens of thousands of SPI members split away to form the new Communist Party. But just as the socialist revolutionaries were regrouping, so was the ruling class. In

October 1922, Mussolini undertook his famous march on Rome which brought the fascists to power. Four years later, the fascist government imprisoned Gramsci, then general secretary of the Communist Party. Gramsci was to spend 11 years behind bars, all of that time with deteriorating health. When his sentence expired in 1937, he was too ill to leave the clinic in which he had been placed by prison authorities; he died there only days after he was due for release. But while in prison, he had written thousands upon thousands of pages devoted to sorting through the problem of socialist revolution in an advanced capitalist society organized differently from Czarist Russia. These writings, known as Gramsci's Prison Notebooks, are a rich source of Marxist analysis and reflection on socialist struggles in advanced capitalism.

Three concepts figure centrally in Gramsci's application of Marxism to western capitalist societies. First, there is the idea of civil society. In Gramsci's view, the ruling class in the West does not simply dominate society by means of the state — the political bureaucracy, police, army, and courts. Instead, he suggests, western capitalism is characterized by a diverse civil society — consisting of schools, political parties, mass media, churches, and other organizations — through which the ruling class can extend its influence over the mass of the population. Most of the time, he argues, institutions of civil society play a more important role than does the state in securing bourgeois rule.

This leads to the second of Gramsci's key ideas, the notion of hegemony. In the West, he argues, the capitalist class normally relies less on coercion, on domination by direct use of force and intimidation, and puts greater emphasis on winning the consent of the governed. The ruling class seeks to establish a moral and ideological leadership, or hegemony, over society as a whole by instilling its values within the general population. This means, said Gramsci, that a revolutionary movement must be concerned not merely with overthrowing the state, but also with winning the oppressed majority to a new set of values and beliefs, with breaking the intellectual and cultural domination of the ruling class. A revolutionary movement must construct a counter-hegemony, he suggests; and this means establishing a socialist movement with its own intellectual and cultural institutions.

With this in mind, Gramsci introduces a third idea, the war of position. In Russia, he argues, once the Czarist regime went into crisis, the main task was to pull sufficient forces together to overturn the state. This entailed a "war of maneuver," a complex set of tactics designed to strike when the other side was off balance. But such an approach won't work where the ruling class rules as much or more by consent than coercion. In such circumstances, Gramsci maintains, the Marxist movement will have to engage in a protracted war of position within society, a campaign of building an intricate system of political trenches — newspapers, cultural organizations, trade unions, women's, peasant and youth organizations — that enable the revolutionary socialist movement both to weaken the hegemony of the ruling class and to begin building its own political

culture within the spaces of the old society. While Gramsci continues to insist that a revolutionary assault on the state would be required, he envisioned years of building a new kind of mass revolutionary movement as its essential precondition.

Gramsci thus rejected the idea, still held by some on the left, according to which a profound societal crisis breaks out like lightning in a thunderstorm, and a revolutionary movement arises virtually from nowhere to topple the old order. Gramsci described such views as a kind of "historical mysticism" that awaits a "miraculous illumination." Modern capitalism, with its complex civil society, will not be susceptible to a dramatic meltdown in which a revolutionary movement surges from the margins to seize power. Given its complex network of institutions and political parties, the ruling class in the West has considerable resources for reclaiming "the control . . . slipping from its grasp." Rather than simply transfer a revolutionary strategy that fit France in 1848 or Russia in 1917, western Marxists will need a much more sophisticated strategy, one devoted to the development of a genuinely mass revolutionary movement long in advance of a social and economic crisis.

Gramsci thus constructed a new and more complex model of a revolutionary party within an advanced capitalist society, one that is especially important in the age of radio, television, film, video and the internet. It is not the case, however, that Gramsci believed all that was needed was to engage in cultural and intellectual combat with capitalist hegemony. Not for a moment did he suggest that artists and intellectuals could simply produce paintings, books, plays, films, and so on as an adequate means of challenging capitalist power. Political parties are the "historical laboratory" for developing a counter-hegemony, he insisted; revolutionary parties are "the crucibles where the unification of theory and practice" can take place. The building of a new type of mass revolutionary party had to be the central commitment of every serious Marxist.

At the same time, Gramsci was aware of the danger that the leaders of a socialist party might become conservative and bureaucratic in outlook, that they might become habituated to seeing things only through the windows of a party office and lose contact with the actual experience of the oppressed. Political parties, claimed Gramsci, have a "tendency to become mummified and anachronistic." It is vital, therefore, that a genuinely socialist party be organically connected to the experience of masses of working class people. And this means that the party's intellectuals — its speakers, journalists, and organizers — need to be immersed in that experience. It also means that the party must develop intellectuals of a new type, what Gramsci called organic intellectuals, people whose intellectual life and outlook is formed by their organic involvement in the struggles of the oppressed.

To this end, Gramsci argued for a close interaction between the "spontaneous" struggles of working class people and the political "leadership" of a revolutionary party. He argued that spontaneous movements, however uneven they might be, should not be "neglected or despised." It was the job of a socialist party to be a



part of these struggles, while at the same time trying to raise them to a higher level — to free them from nationalism, sexism, or other traditional ideas — and to use such struggles to demonstrate to the mass of the people that they have the power to become "creators" of new values, "founders" of a new form of society. Gramsci thus envisioned an ongoing interaction between day-to-day struggles and educative activities designed to create the rudiments of a socialist political culture in the here-and-now. Both elements — immediate struggles and political and cultural education — were essential. The unity of the two was to be achieved in a political movement dedicated to the self-mobilization and self-education of the working class.

Gramsci did not provide a recipe book for building revolutionary movements in advanced capitalist societies; he was not the creator of a new dogma. His Prison Notebooks are often vague and merely suggestive; and there are many features of late capitalist society he could not possibly have anticipated. But while in prison he reflected profoundly upon his experience in the working class and socialist movements, including the experience of a near-revolution whose failure opened the door to fascism. In so doing, he addressed ways in which a socialist movement might contend with the cultural and ideological forms of capitalist domination of society. Preliminary and suggestive as these ideas might be, they are an invaluable source for those who want to continue the task of organizing for socialism from below today.

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## **VIII. Rebels within the Movement: Socialist Voices for Gender, Racial and Sexual Liberation**

EARLY SOCIALISTS hoped, somewhat romantically, that workers would increasingly recognize their common interests and unite irrespective of nationality, gender, ethno-racial identity and sexual orientation. "Workers of the world unite," intoned the Communist Manifesto without paying much attention to how difficult this might prove. Yet the reality is that divisions plague the working class, and these often have to do with the involvement of many workers in oppressive practices. White workers are often complicit in racism; male workers in sexism; straight workers in heterosexism towards lesbians and gay men. Workers in dominant nations, like English-speaking Canada, are often hostile to the national aspirations of those, like aboriginal peoples and the Québécois, who have suffered historic oppressions.

By showing how workers inherit the traditional ideas of the dominating classes, Gramsci's notion of hegemony can help us understand why oppressed people of the working class are often complicit in the oppression of others. But Gramsci didn't spend much time analyzing specific forms of oppression and division and how they might be countered. It has been left largely to dissidents within the socialist movement to try to force the struggles for anti-racism, lesbian and gay liberation and the emancipation of women onto the socialist agenda. In the process, many of these people have extended and developed Marxism in order to explain forms of oppression that were often neglected by their forerunners.

These dissidents have often encountered fierce opposition within the left. Sometimes, outright bigotry has been tolerated in the socialist movement; the reformist socialists in Germany at the turn of the century, for example, supported colonialism. But even where such sentiments have not been voiced, those advocating a major commitment to the liberation of specially oppressed groups have frequently found themselves accused of "diverting" the movement away from its central goal — the working class struggle for political power — and of being "divisive" in focussing on issues that speak most directly to only a section of the working class. Yet one of the central principles of socialism from below is that the overwhelming majority of the oppressed must mobilize on their own behalf and for their liberation. For those whose lives are dominated by racism, sexism and/or heterosexism, activism around issues like these is anything but a "diversion." On the contrary, mobilization around such issues is absolutely essential to a truly liberating politics, to people discovering their power and reclaiming some control over their lives. Any emancipatory socialist politics must embrace such struggles — by recognizing them as central components of the class struggle in society, and by encouraging the self-organization of oppressed people on their own behalf.

The record of the socialist left in the areas of anti-racism, women's emancipation and lesbian and gay liberation is a highly uneven one. Nevertheless, the socialist

movement has often been the forum in which some of the most dedicated activists in these struggles have tried to develop strategies for genuine emancipation by linking battles against oppression to an anti-capitalist politics. Their efforts, and the struggles in which they have participated, are key elements of the legacy of socialism from below.

### *ENDING RACIAL OPPRESSION*

Since the great democratic revolutions of the modern era, radical politics have involved the struggle against racist oppression. The French Revolution of 1789, for example, ignited a great uprising of black slaves in what is now called Haiti (then known as San Domingo). Under the leadership of Toussaint L'Ouverture an army of ex-slaves fought and defeated the forces of Spain, France and Britain and created the first black republic in the Americas.

At the height of the black struggle in Haiti and the democratic mobilizations in France, these two revolutions came together in a glorious moment of unity. In January of 1794 a three man delegation from San Domingo was welcomed into the meeting of the French Convention in Paris. A black ex-slave named Bellay addressed the Convention, pledged support to the revolution in France, and called on the body to abolish slavery in the French colonies. After Bellay had finished speaking, a delegate moved that the assembly declare the liberation of black slaves. Historian C.L.R. James picks up the inspiring story: "The Assembly rose in acclamation. The two deputies of colour appeared on the tribune and embraced while the applause rolled round the hall from members and visitors."

By 1794, then, the radical left had taken up the cause of black liberation. As the French Revolution was rolled back, and its democratic content diluted, this commitment too receded. But it was recovered during the Chartist movement in England of the 1830s and 1840s whose most left-wing members also took up the campaign against slavery. Marx and Engels embraced this cause and made it a point of honour during the Civil War in the United States (1861-65). Disgusted by those in the labour and socialist movements who refused to oppose slavery, Marx issued a steady stream of articles and speeches urging the European labour movement to champion one fundamental principle: "the emancipation of the slaves." In America, meanwhile, several of Marx's friends and followers became officers in the Union Army in order to help destroy slavery.

From the 1860s on, Marx and Engels increasingly recognized that the unity of the working class would not come about automatically; that it had to be fought for. And this meant opposing workers' prejudices towards oppressed peoples. I have discussed above Marx's support for Irish independence in order to counter the bigotry of English workers. He and Engels also took up a similar position on the struggle for Polish independence. Arguing against those who saw this struggle as a diversion, Engels insisted that

*Every Polish peasant or worker who wakes up from the general gloom and participates in the common interest, encounters first the fact of national subjugation. This fact is in his way everywhere as the first barrier. To remove it is the basic condition of every healthy and free development. . . In order to be able to fight one first needs a soil to stand on, air, light and space. Otherwise all is idle chatter.*

This really is the key insight of the writings of Marx and Engels from the 1860s. In championing the struggle against slavery in America, and the movements for Polish and Irish independence, they rejected the idea that these issues were diversions from the real struggle. On the contrary, they saw these stirrings for freedom and self-determination as essential to an internationalist movement towards socialism. To talk of workers' unity and socialism without embracing and encouraging such movements is, they insisted, "idle chatter."

This approach informed the work of many of the great black socialists of the 20th century. The Indian Marxist M.N. Roy, for example, argued in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution of 1917 that the anti-colonial struggle would be at the very center of the worldwide movement towards socialism. Similarly, the great West Indian Marxist C.L.R. James saw the black revolt in America as a driving force for the socialist struggle in the United States. Moreover, by focussing on movements of the oppressed in the colonial world, both Roy and James challenged the idea that the center of the struggle for socialism was to be found in Europe and North America. In so doing, they demonstrated that struggles around race and nationality were central to the class struggle on a world scale.

In his book on the slave revolution in Haiti, *The Black Jacobins*, written in 1938, James (who had joined the Trotskyist movement) makes clear that the left cannot ignore the question of race. Insisting that class exploitation is central to the way society is organized, he argued that "to think of imperialism in terms of race is disastrous. But," he continued, "to neglect the racial factor as incidental is an error only less grave than to make it fundamental." Just as anti-racists could not ignore class, in other words, so could socialists not afford to overlook the role of race in political life.

As an activist in the Trotskyist movement of the 1930s and 1940s, James worked to integrate working class and anti-racist politics by indicating their inextricable connections. In a document for the main Trotskyist group in the US in 1948, he sought to show that the black struggle — or, in the language of 50 years ago, "the Negro struggle" — had to be recognized as an independent and vital force in its own right:

*We say, number one, that the Negro struggle, the independent Negro struggle, has a vitality and a validity of its own . . .*

*We say, number two, that this independent Negro movement is able to*

*intervene with terrific force upon the general social and political life of the nation . . .*

*We say, number three, and this is the most important, that it . . .has got a great contribution to make to the development of the proletariat in the United States, and that it is in itself a constituent part of the struggle for socialism.*

Informed by this perspective, some Trotskyists made serious efforts to embrace the independent black struggles of the 1960s and 1970s in the US — particularly those led first by Malcolm X and then by the Black Panthers. Rather than rejecting autonomous black organizations, those socialists most influenced by the analysis developed by C.L.R. James enthusiastically supported the black power movement. And this helped black revolutionary activists to develop a dialogue with the socialist movement. During the last year of his life, for instance, Malcolm X moved closer to a clearly socialist position and began working with socialist groups. In the process, his analysis of the African-American struggle in the US became more and more anti-capitalist. "You can't have capitalism without racism," he told an audience in May of 1964. "And if you find a person without racism," he continued "usually they are socialists or their political philosophy is socialism." In this spirit he told a crowd in February of 1965 that "It is incorrect to classify the revolt of the Negro as simply a conflict or black against white . . . Rather we are seeing a global rebellion of the oppressed against the oppressor, the exploited against the exploiter." And, as he told another interviewer about the coming global rebellion, "I don't think it will be based on the color of the skin."

Rather than building divisions, therefore, the sort of support for independent black movements that James had advocated encouraged closer collaboration between African-American activists and predominantly-white socialist groups. This sort of collaboration continued when organizations like the Black Panther Party and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers also looked to solidarity and joint action with a wide range of progressive organizations.

The theoretical legacy of C.L.R. James continues to be developed today by radical socialist intellectuals. The historian Robin D. G. Kelley, for example, cites James as an inspiration for his own studies on the black working class in the United States. Building upon the way James and others focus on the day to day experience of workers — and the way in which class experience is both gendered and racialized — Kelley insists upon a broad understanding of politics and resistance. Studying black workers' struggles over public space (like busses and parks), or culture, music and recreation, Kelley maintains that "Politics is not separate from lived experience or the imaginary world of what is possible; to the contrary, politics is about these things. Politics comprises the many battles to roll back constraints and exercise some power over, or create some space within, the institutions and social relationships that dominate our lives."

What the effort to integrate socialism and anti-racist politics has done, then, is to underline how people's experience of capitalist society is a total one, comprising experiences of space, sexuality, race, culture, recreation, gender and the family as well as their experiences at work. The result, at least potentially, is a richer Marxist theory and practice that doesn't simply look at "economic" questions but, rather, offers a complex view of how capitalist society operates — and a radical view of liberation that encompasses the transformation of the everyday experience of racial oppression.

### *WOMEN'S EMANCIPATION*

Ideas about women's emancipation emerged at the very birth of the socialist movement. In Britain, the radical Owenite socialist William Thompson published in 1825 a searing critique of women's oppression in capitalist society. Entitled an Appeal of one half of the human race, women, against the pretensions of the other half, men, to retain them in political and thence civil and domestic slavery, Thompson's book linked the liberation of women to the overturning of the capitalist competition and private property. In France too, as we have seen, writers like Flora Tristan developed a sort of socialist-feminism in the 1830s and '40s while Louise Michel and her female comrades played a central role in the Paris Commune of 1871. Yet it must be acknowledged that these were minority voices. The early working class and socialist movement remained male-dominated and in many quarters hostile to talk of the equality of women.

Marx and Engels and their supporters tended to be on the more progressive wing of European socialism on these issues. As noted above, Marx argued for including women in unions and in the First International (against the opposition of French socialists in particular). And Engels, as we have seen, published one of the most important socialist books of the nineteenth century on women's emancipation, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. One of Marx's German followers, August Bebel, also published a pioneering book on the emancipation of women, entitled *Woman Under Socialism*, in 1883. Important as these contributions were, however, the early Marxist movement remained an overwhelmingly male affair. Moreover, even theorists who argued for the social and political emancipation of women — like Bebel in *Woman Under Socialism* — continued to treat motherhood as women's true mission. It wasn't until women themselves began to organize within the socialist movement that a more thorough-going campaign for women's liberation came to the fore. There were two focal points for this Marxist movement for women's liberation in the early 20th century: Germany and Russia.

The German socialist women's movement formally emerged in 1891 when the socialist party (the SPD) brought out its paper *Equality*. Subtitled "For the Interest of the Woman Worker," the paper would be edited for 25 years by Clara Zetkin. It wasn't until 1905, however, that the SPD launched educational and political clubs which organized thousands of women. Then in 1907 Zetkin

organized the first-ever international conference of socialist women with representatives from 15 countries.

But these accomplishments did not come easily — or without setbacks. Zetkin was on the left-wing of the SPD and closely aligned with Rosa Luxemburg. The conservative wing of the party mobilized reformist and anti-feminist arguments against Zetkin's vision of a socialist women's movement. First, they tried to force the movement towards close collaboration with the middle class women's movement of the time (something Zetkin resisted). Then they weakened her editorial control over Equality insisting that it publish articles on fashion and cooking.

Despite right-wing, anti-feminist interference, Zetkin continued to push for an energetic socialist women's movement. In 1910 she organized a second international conference of socialist women where she proposed that March 8th ought to be celebrated as International Women's Day. Then, after the outbreak of world war in 1914, she convened an International Women's Conference against the war in early 1915. For this she was arrested and, like Rosa Luxemburg, imprisoned. After the defeat of the German revolution of 1918-19, the socialist women's movement was taken over by the reformists and Zetkin's work to build a militant, internationalist women's socialist movement was wrecked. But just as the defeat of revolution drove back the socialist women's movement in Germany, so successful revolution in 1917 inspired a burgeoning socialist women's movement in Russia.

Women workers had burst onto the political scene in Russia with militant strikes in the 1890s. In 1900, the socialist movement published a booklet written by N. K. Krupskaya called *The Woman Worker*. Then, during the revolution of 1905, a further outpouring of political activity by women workers occurred. Inspired by this development, the Marxist activist Alexandra Kollontai began to promote the idea of a special working women's movement. Kollontai experienced many years of frustration in this area, encountering widespread hostility from male socialists. Finally in 1913, and with the backing of Krupskaya and Lenin, Kollontai persuaded the Bolshevik Party to bring out a publication for women workers (called *Woman Worker*) and to spearhead a special women's section of the socialist movement.

But it was the revolution of 1917 itself that really drove the socialist women's movement forward. Thousands upon thousands of women played important political roles as speakers, writers and organizers in bringing the workers' government into being. Then, during the Civil War, women again challenged tradition by enlisting in the Red Army to fight the counter-revolution. As historian Richard Stites notes of women in the Red Army: "They fought on every front and with every weapon, serving as rifewomen, armored train commanders, gunners." Indeed, the role played by women in military defence of the revolution may have done more than any other development to shake up traditional views of women in Russia. As part of the revolutionary upsurge, both abortion and divorce were

legalized and women claimed a legal equality unique in the world.

But conservative and patriarchal prejudices do not die overnight. While women were asserting themselves in 1917 and after, they still had enormous ground to cover (including within the socialist movement) to claim full equality. Once the revolution started to recede, and as Stalin reinstated patriotism and the image of motherhood as women's highest calling, Russia reverted to a thoroughly male-dominated society.

Nevertheless, during the short-lived years of revolution, a radical socialist perspective on women's liberation had emerged which has left behind a valuable legacy, not least in the writings of Kollontai. In booklets and pamphlets such as *Women Workers Struggle for their Rights, Sexual Relations and Class Struggle and Communism and the Family*, Kollontai began to reflect upon the end of the family structure characteristic of bourgeois society. "There is no escaping the fact," she wrote, "the old type of family has seen its day." By this, Kollontai meant to celebrate the end of a family structure based upon the subordination of women who could not leave a marriage for lack of economic choices. "No more domestic servitude for women," she wrote. And she continued:

No more inequality within the family! No more fear on the part of the woman to remain without support or aid with little ones in arms if her husband should desert her. The woman in the communist community no longer depends upon her husband but on her work. . . Marriage will be purified of all its material elements, of all monetary considerations . . . free union instead of the conjugal slavery of the past — that is what the communist society of tomorrow offers to both men and women.

This rousing vision of the emancipation of women was lost with the rise of Stalin's dictatorship, and the writings of Kollontai were neglected and buried. But when the modern women's liberation movement emerged, her work was rediscovered. Of course, the women's liberation movement of the 1970s was able to think more radically than could Kollontai about the family, sexuality, love and marriage. Regretably, many socialist women encountered rampant sexism within the left and turned away from socialist politics. But if we are to build a new and inclusive socialist movement today, we need to return to the legacy of people like Clara Zetkin and Alexandra Kollontai in order to build upon and further their efforts to truly integrate socialism and women's liberation.

### *SOCIALISM AND SEXUAL LIBERATION*

Many people today think of struggles for sexual liberation — for the right of women to control their bodies, for accessible birth control and abortion services, for liberation for lesbians and gay men, and for sexual rights for youth — as recent phenomena, dating from the late 1960s. It's certainly true that important movements in these areas emerged at that time. But between 1919 and 1933 a



major sexual liberation movement emerged in Germany as socialists and communists took up struggles against sexual oppression.

In 1891 and again in 1905, August Bebel, a Marxist and a member of the German parliament, introduced motions to end discrimination against homosexuals. When the revolution of 1918-19 overthrew the German king (the Kaiser), socialists began organizing against all the oppressive laws that criminalized abortion, homosexuality and the dissemination of birth control information. Indeed, alongside feminists, nurses, doctors and sex reformers, socialists helped to build a network of 150,000 people which ran birth control and sex education clinics in working class neighbourhoods.

The largest mobilizations for sexual rights came about through the campaign against the anti-abortion laws launched by the Communist Party (CP) in 1931. After two doctors were arrested for performing abortions, over 1000 protest demonstrations took place on International Women's Day (March 8) 1931. Three months later the CP initiated a movement known as the Unity League for Proletarian Sexual Reform. While the Communists were hostile to working with other progressive and left-wing forces (which hurt the effectiveness of the League), this new movement managed to bring tens of thousands of people into struggle for women's rights, legalization of birth control, homosexuality and abortion, sexual rights for youth, and against the "sexual disenfranchisement of the poor."

Probably the most important theorist of the sexual politics movement of the time was the Freudian analyst Wilhelm Reich, a dissident member of the CP. In a series of articles and pamphlets Reich challenged the "bourgeois sexual morality" that dominated the CP. He argued that the Communist Party should develop "a sexual-revolutionary practice" which would focus on challenging the sexual oppression of youth in the family and at school. But Reich was not just calling for a change in attitudes. He insisted that very real material pressures made it difficult for working class youth in particular to develop their sexuality in a free and healthy fashion. He attacked "lack of opportunities, of money and contraceptives" for frustrating sexual development and he advocated birth control and abortion clinics and publicly-funded housing as essential to providing the resources for people to make real sexual choices in their lives. For Reich, sexual liberation should be central to the socialist vision of a free society:

*In capitalist society today there can be no sexual liberation of youth, no healthy, satisfying sex life; if you want to be rid of your sexual troubles fight for socialism. . . Socialism will put an end to the power of those who gaze up towards heaven as they speak of love while they crush and destroy the sexuality of youth.*

Reich was one of the few Marxists of the time to attempt to address issues of sexual oppression. Nevertheless, there were real shortcomings in his analysis —

particularly in his attitude towards homosexuality. Moreover, Reich's opportunity to develop his analysis as part of a growing mass movement was cut short. First he was expelled from the Communist Party for his radical views. Then the rise of Nazism destroyed the movement for sexual liberation in Germany. Not until the resurgence of gay and lesbian liberation beginning in 1969 did these issues again begin to be taken seriously within the left. And, as with anti-racist and feminist politics, much of the left showed itself to be quite backward in its thinking. Like the socialist dissidents many decades earlier, anti-racists, feminists and lesbian and gay liberationists have had to fight to get their struggles recognized as essential elements of radical socialist politics.

### *AN INCLUSIVE SOCIALISM*

The movements and individuals I have discussed constitute important parts of the the legacy of socialism from below. Just like the writings of Marx and Engels, Luxemburg, Lenin, Trotsky and Gramsci, so the writings of socialist dissidents like C.L.R. James, Clara Zetkin, Alexandra Kollontai, and the sexual politics radicals in the German Left ought to be important reference points for socialists today. Again, this has nothing to do with hero-worship or the creation of a dogma. There are many serious shortcomings in the writings of people like James, Zetkin, Kollontai and Reich. Later in his life, James was often uncritical of various Third World nationalisms. Both Zetkin and Kollontai went on to make compromises with Stalinism. And after emigrating to America, Reich developed increasingly eccentric ideas.

But none of this takes away from the freshness and the spirit of liberation that can be found in their writings at times when they were involved with important social movements and political events. If we are serious about an inclusive socialism — one that truly integrates struggles against racial, gender and sexual oppression into a socialist, working class politics — then we must celebrate all those moments when the socialist movement became alive with, and attuned to, struggles against racism, sexism and heterosexism. Anything less does not deserve to be considered a politics of socialism from below

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## **IX. Socialism from Below for the 21st Century**

Socialists today confront a paradox: the world we live in looks increasingly like the class-divided society described by Marx; yet, at the same time, Marxist politics seem weaker than at any time in the past. Let's look first at our class-divided society.

In his major work, *Capital*, Marx argued that capitalism produces "accumulation of wealth at one pole" and "accumulation of misery, the torment of labour, slavery, ignorance, brutalization and moral degradation at the opposite pole." For decades it was common to dismiss this analysis by claiming that modern capitalist societies were becoming more equal over time. Today, no one can seriously make such a claim.

The division of wealth in the world is more unequal than it has ever been. Recent statistics indicate that as of 1996 there were 447 billionaires in the world. These people have more wealth than the combined annual incomes of fully half of humankind.

And the half of humanity that finds itself at the bottom of the economic pyramid does indeed live in the sorts of conditions described by Marx: "misery, torment of labour, slavery, ignorance, brutalization and moral degradation." Across the globe, we find hundreds of millions of children working in sweatshops; we find women and men condemned to work that breaks their bodies and their spirits; we find horrible poverty and disease; we find child prostitution, and epidemic conditions for AIDS, tuberculosis, and fatal diarrhea for dehydrated children. And we find all of this in the midst of colossal wealth.

Never before has humanity possessed such tremendous technologies of production. We have the capacity to feed, clothe, shelter and educate every person on the planet at a morally decent standard — and to do so in an environmentally friendly way. Yet, we fail to do so. Instead, we have a world society divided into pockets of obscene wealth alongside continents of appalling poverty. And this is as true inside the richest countries, as it is between countries.

Take the United States, for example. For twenty years, the rich have been getting richer, the poor poorer. In the US today, the wealthiest one per cent of society owns 48 per cent of all wealth; the bottom 80 per cent has a mere six per cent. Twenty years ago, chief executive officers of large firms in the US earned 35 times more than the average worker they employed; today they earn 187 times as much. And similar trends can be observed in all the advanced capitalist countries. In Canada, 52 corporate executives earned more than \$2 million in 1995 — a 12.6 per cent increase over the year before. And all of this is taking place at a time when hospital workers, teachers, factory workers, hotel and restaurant employees and others are watching jobs disappear and earnings fall.

As we move towards the 21st century, we observe a world in which more and more of humanity knows war, disease, crippling hunger, grinding poverty, and environmental devastation. On top of this, there is the suffering associated with special forms of oppression — the violence and humiliation of racism, the degradation of gender oppression, the fear and indignity generated by heterosexism, the hardship imposed upon people with disabilities.

For all these reasons, the ideas of socialism from below refuse to disappear. Again and again, as people fight back against joblessness and poverty, against racism and oppression, against environmental devastation and the dismantling of social services, some of them question why we couldn't organize society differently. They wonder why we couldn't make human needs, not corporate profit, the priority of a rational and humane society. They wonder why wealth and power couldn't be equitably shared, rather than concentrated in the hands of a tiny minority. In raising such questions, they return to the classic vision of socialism from below.

But, if socialism from below is to become a meaningful force for the 21st century, it cannot just repeat analyses from the past. Genuine socialism is a dynamic, living movement; drawing upon the rich resources of past struggles, it replenishes these in the new conditions in which people struggle today. And at a time of new forms of capitalist restructuring and exploitation, and new kinds of social struggles against the system, socialism must be renewed in ways that speak meaningfully to the experiences of new generations of people.

While building upon the heroic struggles of the past, the socialism with which we meet the battles of the future must also incorporate the fresh initiatives of contemporary struggles to break the chains of oppression. Socialist emancipation in the modern world must also be women's liberation. It must embrace the struggles of women to gain full control over their own bodies, to achieve true equality at work, in society, and in the cultural spheres, to be freed from the overwhelming responsibility for housework and childrearing. Socialist emancipation must also be about anti-racist liberation. It must centrally involve the battles of blacks, aboriginals, and other peoples of colour against systemic discrimination, harassment and injustice. Socialist emancipation must also be lesbian and gay liberation. It must include the struggles of gay men and lesbians to love those whom they choose, and to do so free from the fear of harassment and victimization; it must include their campaigns for equal recognition of their relationships, and for their right to raise their children in an atmosphere free from hate; and it must include active public campaigns in the schools, communities and workplaces to root out anti-gay bigotry in all its forms.

Another key element of renewing socialism from below is establishing again the inextricable link between socialism and democracy. This means restoring to socialism its democratic essence, its passionate concern with human freedom. This means being on the side of all those struggles in which people try to carve

out just a bit more liberty to make decisions about their lives.

The socialism we renew for the 21st century must also be uncompromisingly internationalist. It must oppose all forms of imperialism and colonialism; it must overcome the "Eurocentric" biases of many early socialists. And it must champion the right of oppressed peoples to determine their own future. It must also understand that the socialist goal of a planned world economy and a genuine world community has never been more relevant. It must try to forge real bonds of active solidarity among working people across national boundaries in an effort to bring to life Marx's call for the workers of the world to unite.

The democratic and socialist restructuring of society remains, as it was in Marx's day, the most pressing task confronting humanity. And such a reordering of society can only take place on the basis of the principles of socialism from below. Now more than ever, the liberation of humanity depends upon the self-emancipation of the world working class. We are a long way from that goal at the moment. But the forces of socialism from below are working to renew themselves today in the knowledge that new movements of opposition to capitalism will once more come into being, and that they will need to draw upon the rich legacy of revolutionary socialism. The New Socialist Group exists in order to contribute to the renewal of socialism from below as a vital part of these future struggles.

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## Sources for Further Reading

For those interested in pursuing some of the issues discussed above, I offer a guide to the main works that have influenced the views presented here.

**Origins of Socialism:** For the history of the period, see Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution*. Albert Soboul's *The French Revolution 1787-1799* is the leading treatment in English of the popular struggles that made up the French Revolution. George Lichtheim's *The Origins of Socialism* is a usually reliable guide to early socialist thought.

**Marxism:** David McClellan's *Karl Marx: His Life and Thought* is a reasonably accurate and well-written biography. Hal Draper's brilliant work, *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution*, especially its first volume, is an invaluable but sometimes difficult source. Of course there is no substitute for reading the works of Marx and Engels themselves; the best starting point remains *The Communist Manifesto*.

**Rosa Luxemburg:** Paul Frolich's *Rosa Luxemburg: Her Life and Work* is the best and most accessible biography. Of Luxemburg's own writings, *Social Reform or Revolution* and *The Mass Strike*, the *Political Party* and the *Trade Unions* are highly recommended and can be found in a number of editions.

**The Russian Revolution:** John Reed's *Ten Days That Shook the World* remains the best introduction. Leon Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution* is a superb and penetrating account. Alexander Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power* is among the best of recent scholarly accounts.

**Lenin:** The most important single work by Lenin is his pamphlet *State and Revolution* which is widely available in various editions. Marcel Liebman's *Leninism Under Lenin* is a superbly fair and honest assessment. For Lenin's opposition to Stalin see Moshe Lewin, *Lenin's Last Struggle*.

**Stalinism:** There are now many studies of the horrors of Stalinism, such as Roy Medvedev, *Let History Judge*. Trotsky's *The Revolution Betrayed* remains a classic socialist critique, and Victor Serge's *From Lenin to Stalin* is a marvellous short treatment.

**Trotsky:** In addition to *The History of the Russian Revolution* and *The Revolution Betrayed*, Trotsky's most important writings include *Results and Prospects* and *The Permanent Revolution* along with *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany*.

**Gramsci:** *The Selections from the Prison Notebooks* are a difficult read, but well worth the effort. *The Introduction to the Selections* provides a useful overview of Gramsci's life and work.

**Voices of Liberation from Oppression:** There are a number of selections of

writings by C.L.R. James now available. For a truly wonderful read, however, it is hard to surpass his book *The Black Jacobins*. A good collection of pieces by Alexandra Kollontai is entitled *Selected Writings* (edited by Alix Holt). Some of Wilhelm Reich's writings on sexual liberation can be found in a collection called *Sex-Pol: Essays, 1929-1934* (edited by Lee Baxandall).

**Socialist Renewal:** For excellent works that develop and extend socialist analysis, the following are highly recommended. On lesbian and gay liberation: Gary Kinsman, *The Regulation of Desire: Homo and Hetero Sexualities*, 2nd edition. An excellent overview of Marxist approaches to understanding the oppression of women in capitalist society is Lise Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women*. On race and class with a focus on the US see Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*, and David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. On socialism and environmentalism, see John Bellamy Foster, *The Vulnerable Planet*.

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