

Socialism Is a Series of Communist Projects

by Charles Andrews

In the 1950s many workers had steady jobs with a health plan, sick leave, and annual paid vacation. They could afford to buy a home, which in parts of the country had mortgage payments as low as rent. It was a dramatic change from the Great Depression of the 1930s. What did tomorrow hold? The outlook was vague but good. Neither the capitalist class, its government officials, nor church leaders offered a definite vision of the future. Very few people sought out the left.

That life is gone. Precarious employment is the reality for many. Comfortable housing, guaranteed health care, and retirement security are out of reach. Many working people today will consider a radical vision of the future, even seek one out. But if they turn to socialists, they often find a vague, shallow vision of socialist society, of its promise and mission.

Capitalism belongs to the capitalist class. They and their economy are driven by the struggle for profit and the accumulation of capital. Socialism belongs to the working class. Its necessary aim – necessary or it falls back into capitalism – is the abolition of all exploitation and the liberation of workers in every way. This is communism, when labor is not exploited, when there are no rich and no poor. Communism is when everyone is developed to a high level of skill and creativity in work. Communism is when the producers organize their productive work together, and administrative tasks have no more reward than other tasks.

The capitalist mode of production and form of society took centuries to bring to good form. We should expect it to take a long time after the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism to make the breath-taking vision of communism real. Whatever time it takes, the socialist mode of production is always moving, either toward communism or back to capitalism.

Two kinds of socialists

There are really two kinds of socialists. One kind commits to the communist vision and works in the existing society to get the next step closer to it, typically called socialism. These are communists.¹ In contrast, the goal of the second type is a package of reforms that, valuable as they are, amount to humanized capitalism. These people are called social democrats, democratic socialists, reformist socialists, and similar terms.

How can we get to communism and leave exploitation behind forever? History shows that the two big challenges are first, revolution to achieve state power, and second, traversing the entire road to communism. Since nearly the entire world lives under capitalism today, we must deal with the job of revolution. But we can learn something useful for it if we study the second challenge, too.

Karl Marx discovered the inner structure of modes of production, such as capitalism: their forces of production and relations of production.

The forces are about our action on the physical, chemical, and biological world and our resources for production - the raw materials, the tools and machines we operate, the techniques we have figured out, and the skills we put to work.

The relations of production are the relations among persons and groups of persons within which we organize production and economic activity generally. The most important of these relations is one's relation to the means of production. In pre-class societies known to anthropologists, everyone had the same relation, which is therefore a non-class relation. In a class society, there is a fundamental polarized relation to the means of production. In capitalism, for example, the workers do the work operating means of production they do not own. Capitalists as a class own the means of production, hire workers, and get the profit.

Income is largely a consequence of the class relation, not the definition of class. A relation defines class.

There are other, secondary relations of production, under which we also include differences that arise out of production. The authority relation

between managers and managed is an example, as are relations that form within larger or smaller work units. People are shaped differently depending on whether they do mental work or manual labor; work more with things, people, or computers; work in a factory, office, on a bulldozer, in a classroom, and so on.

The secondary relations are inevitably shaped and colored by the basic class relation. A socialist regime can abolish the capitalist class relation and its exploitation. That is not, however, the end of the story. Until the class character of the secondary relations of production is revolutionized, the daily workings of authority, of "higher" mental versus "ordinary" manual work, and so on embody capitalist ways of doing things. They dangle the lure of the capitalist class relation. This is one reason why socialism either advances toward communism or falls back to capitalism.

Fully developed communism will be a mode of production, too. It abolishes the exploitive relation between capitalists and workers. Workers do not labor for the profit of the capitalist. They use all the fruits of labor, some of it consumed individually and allowing no rich and no poor, more of it used collectively for social tasks. They organize their work. They map out where their economy must go.

A long list of social welfare reforms in health care, education, housing, livable cities, healthy food, and so on are typically the first achievements of socialist revolution, which to date have occurred in non-industrialized societies. Capitalism industrialized with monstrous sweatshops and child labor, going through inevitable cycles of economic depression and desperate unemployment. It need not be that way. The Soviet Union carried out socialist industrialization with none of those evils.

Social democrats are happy with the reforms. In Sweden, Britain and other countries they achieved a lot of them. For them, socialism is really humanized capitalism. But a bitter lesson of history is that steps toward humanized capitalism are never complete, nor do they last. Class struggle achieves them, but capitalist counter-struggle erodes and reverses them, turning the workers' struggle into a defensive one.

If we are to reach communism, we must carry out a series of advances in the relations of production: how we all get the things we need and some

of what we want;² how we all participate in various types of work; how we manage the organization and our particular workplace; and more.

No society can transform all the relations of production the day after a socialist revolution and probably not within one generation. Lenin, after leading the Soviet Union for two and half years, concluded, “It will take many years, decades, to create ... new forms of social ties between people, and new forms and methods of drawing people into labor.”³

Instead, we must poke around a big problem, find where to take the first slice and how big it could be, then the next slice, and so on. Such is a lesson of the Soviet and Chinese socialist eras. They each marched forward for 25 to 35 years. Then they fell back to capitalist relations of production and capitalist rule. Who can expect complete success on the first one or two tries?

Projects in the Soviet Union

After years of debate in the middle 1920s, Soviet communists resolved on socialist industrialization. Their first five-year plan began in 1928. Its goals are often stated as production targets: the tons of steel to be produced, electrical generating capacity, chemicals, machine tools, and so on. The pace of industrialization was indeed faster than any capitalist country had logged. But this is not the essence of what they did.

A coordinated plan was arranged so that the output of each industry fulfilled the input needs of all industries. The very fact of a plan signaled that the country’s industrial means of production were deployed as a single effort, not run for the profit of capitalists. This was a development of the relations of production. Working-class ownership surpassed capitalist property relations.

Another big project was the creation of collective farms. Kulak (rich peasant) possession of land, work animals, farm tools, mills, and village political power was destroyed. It took bitter struggle to do it. Individual peasants, who had toiled in serfdom on feudal estates for centuries, and who possessed the use of small family plots after 1917, gathered into the collective farms. The communists led these class struggles in the countryside. They made mistakes; the mix of persuasion and force might have been better if time had permitted. Nevertheless, the overall

achievement was monumental. Collectivization ended the regular famines that had plagued Russia for centuries. Increased productiveness allowed young farmers to become workers en masse – literate, cultured masters of new skills.

Nazi Germany had only a superficial notion of what was going on in the Soviet Union. The Nazis invaded and tried to destroy Soviet socialism, but instead the people of the Soviet Union destroyed German fascism. The British and U.S. imperialists schemed and delayed, but they finally had to fight the monster they had nurtured. The Soviet Union bore the heaviest casualties of World War Two and did the bulk of the hard and brilliant fighting.

When we list the Soviet advances in the relations of production in the 1930s, we should also observe that not all relations were transformed in a communist direction. A marked wage scale remained. Some workers did manual work, more or less skilled, while other workers did mental work, also ranging from grinding clerical labor to elite managerial, professional, and scientific careers. To the best of this writer's knowledge, there was no major discussion of how to erode the link between work and wage, nor of people rotating through two or three occupations during their working years. You cannot do it all at once. The socialist train must go from one station to the next on the track to communism.

The country rebuilt its destroyed forces of production remarkably quickly after World War Two. Part of the economic advance was delivered to people by annual reductions of consumer goods prices. The increase in prosperity is a good thing. This method, though, increases the weight of one's money wage in comparison with one's free social benefits. How can we enrich consumption without strengthening a relation of production that we actually want to dismantle? No easy answer pops to mind, and the whole problem was apparently not tackled.

Absence of a project

Communist theoretician A.A. Zhdanov had said in 1934, we must "unite a thoroughly business-like and practical spirit with broad vision, with a constant urge forward, with a struggle for the building of communist society."⁴ Zhdanov, who led Leningrad through the Nazi siege from

September 8, 1941 to January 27, 1944, was prominent again after World War Two. He and the Communist Party called for a stronger ideological worldview among party members, intellectuals, and the people as a whole. The poster-children topics of the campaign were philosophy, literature, and music. In Marxist terminology, these are regions in the superstructure that a mode of production generates.⁵

The Soviet Union did not seriously tackle further revolutionization of relations of production themselves from the end of World War Two to 1956. Then Khrushchev openly abandoned the communist program, slandered the history of Soviet socialism, and – deliberately, we must assume – threw the world communist movement into chaos and disintegration.⁶

Joseph Stalin – the beloved leader during the times just discussed, a student of Marxism in all spheres of life, a man who lived modestly almost to the point of asceticism – did include a section on “Abolition of the Antithesis Between Town and Country, and Between Mental and Physical Labor, and Elimination of Distinctions Between Them” in his final essay, *Economic Problems of Socialism in the U.S.S.R.* He did not directly address the wage relation and what to do about it on the path to communism. The remarks have a complacent tone; they do not tackle the three issues as questions of how to revolutionize the relations of production.

The Soviet people knew what their project was during the Five-Year Plans before World War Two, and they fulfilled it with mountains of labor, study, and invention. They knew the fascist threat to their existence, and they beat it back; their ferocious combat, no matter how futile a particular battle, stunned Nazi soldiers. What was the project after the basic economic rebuilding of the late 1940s? The communists did not find the next project of advance in the relations of production.

Many Soviet youth, given no communist project, were attracted to Western consumer culture in the 1950s. Denim blue jeans, often smuggled into the country, became a symbol of their fascination, which swelled during the Brezhnev era. With no collective social task defined, the lure of individualistic consumption and an empty cultural radicalism is no surprise.

China from Communist to “Communist”

After nearly 25 years of people’s war, China was liberated in 1949. The Chinese communists promptly set to work on the relations of production. The peasants had individual plots of land, the landlords being eliminated as a class in the late 1940s and first years after 1949. The communists encouraged increasing levels of cooperation, from a few families to larger units. They shared the harvest at first according to both labor and the animals and tools contributed, then more by labor alone.

Agrarian advances in the relations of production seemed like the Soviet path. This changed with the Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s. The Leap was badly done, partly because of mistakes by Party cadre, and, according to William Hinton, because the capitalist-roaders in the Party rammed it to exaggeration.⁷ The Communist Party of China during its long armed liberation struggle had attracted a number of sons of well-to-do people. They helped liberate the country from imperialism and landlord oppression. After 1949 they expected to ride at the top of a big modernization project.

Nonetheless, the Great Leap Forward earned eternal credit in history for creating the people’s communes. In its final form, the commune was a three-tier organization: the commune as a whole, the production brigade, and the production team. They roughly encompassed what had been, respectively, the market area around a sizable town, a group of several villages, and a village. Within this structure, the activities and rewards of production could be averaged over larger organizational units and made more egalitarian as conditions permitted. The communes also launched workshops and industries. A peasant might farm part of the year and work in a factory part of the year. The prospect was that the rural-urban divide and the difference between peasant and worker could be narrowed.

The last big effort to push socialism forward in the People’s Republic was the Cultural Revolution. This is not the place to review it as a whole, and much of what actually happened is unknown to us. We do know that imperialist ideologues and bitter people from landlord and elite intellectual families tell many lies about it.

One slur is that the Cultural Revolution was an economic disaster. In fact, in many rural areas the economy developed faster than before.⁸ Peasants spoke up, exercised collective supervision over local officials, and came up with measures to increase production and the general welfare of commune members. This was working people's democracy in action. But it needs explicit projects that not only increase production but also advance relations of production.

How much did the Cultural Revolution take up projects to revolutionize the relations of production? A campaign to expose the oppressive nature of Confucian ideology cannot substitute for such projects. A campaign to repudiate the misuse of Beethoven in China is no substitute. It is idealist to believe that political agitation and mass discussion of communist ideas and values can by themselves create communist-minded people. People who live and work within changed relations *do* change.

In matters of theory, a 1969 article illustrates the problem. The author says,

China had by 1956 basically completed the socialist transformation of the ownership of the means production and this greatly promoted the development of the productive forces. However, there is contradiction as well as harmony between the relations of production and the productive forces and between superstructure and the economic base. Class struggle is far from over and the question of political power remains the focus of the struggle.⁹

Indeed China had introduced socialist ownership, but the relations of production encompass more than ownership. Although the writer accepts that there are contradictions between relations and forces of production, he emphasizes political power and class struggle for power. How many movies, how many episodes of history show us that the struggle for power often means power for a certain clique, and sometimes even becomes its own goal? To remain principled, we need to ask ourselves: power to do *what* in the economy? To do *what* that will improve people's lives?

The reversal of Chinese socialism

It is one thing to run into problems and make mistakes on the socialist road to communism. It is another thing to leave the socialist track, which is what China did in 1978. Deng Xiaoping, most top military officers, and a number of government officials in high position turned to the capitalist road. They had at their disposal the vast material advances of the socialist era in literacy and education; in terraced farmland and laboriously dug canals to irrigate it; in the first big factories and oil fields; and in basic health care for the masses.

The capitalist roaders began by destroying socialist relations of production. The communes were broken into more independent small units and finally dismantled outright. Savvy officials saw a green light to grab factories. Small businesses sprung up everywhere, and the most ambitious probed and pushed to hire more and more workers in enterprises that operated in gray areas outside state planning.

China no longer allocated investment according to a unified plan. The state simply retained regulatory, fiscal, and monetary powers, much like Japan, France, and even the U.S.

There was a theoretical justification for all this. It directly opposes the method of finding the next move toward communist relations of production, of organizing and carrying out one project (with inevitable modifications and improvements) then another.

This opposite is the theory of productive forces. The Mensheviks in tsarist Russia and in exile after 1917 insisted that a socialist regime must accept the inevitable development of capitalism to a high level of industrial productiveness before socialism and its equalities can be introduced. They said a socialist regime could only supervise and regulate the process. The Soviet Union proved them wrong.

When Deng tore apart socialism in China, the main socio-economic doctrine of the transformed "Communist Party" of China became an explicit theory of productive forces. Xi Jinping laid it out on a major speech July 1, 2021:

We established the Party's basic line for the primary stage of socialism ... This enabled China to transform itself from a highly centralized planned economy to a socialist market economy...It also enabled China to achieve the historic leap from a country with relatively backward productive forces to the world's second largest economy.¹⁰

By his silence President Xi denies that socialism is in its essence the destruction of everything exploitive and the construction of durable communism. The rulers of China manage development of productive forces by the capitalist methods of a "socialist market economy."¹¹ The families of powerful officials and princelings grab huge fortunes.

The CPC today fully accepts what Deng Xiaoping said in 1984:

Socialism is the primary stage of communism and at the advanced stage the principle of from each according to his ability and to each according to his needs will be applied. This calls for highly developed productive forces and an overwhelming abundance of material wealth. Therefore, the fundamental task for the socialist stage is to develop the productive forces.¹²

Certainly, the country industrialized rapidly. The people got refrigerators and apartments or condos, and no one should want to deny that to them. Industrialization proceeded in full capitalist mode, opening vast gaps in income between big capitalists and the people; between technical and professional workers, office workers, and migrant construction and factory workers; between city dwellers and hundreds of millions in hinterland villages and small towns. Deng had promised, "If we ... apply the principle of distribution to each according to his work, there will not be excessive disparities in wealth. Consequently, no polarization will occur as our productive forces become developed over the next 20 to 30 years." In fact, the Gini coefficient of income inequality in China today is just under the Gini for the United States.¹³

The country lost the communist inspiration of the Mao Zedong era. To be sure, when material progress is rapid, mass discontent rarely bursts out. By 2010, however, the tempo of GDP growth tapered off. When this happens, a new questioning stirs. The absence of a common social vision leads to alienation. The capitalist roaders have kept it under control with modern authoritarianism. They have encouraged nationalism ready to

turn into imperialist jingoism. China is well equipped to buy influence with elites in other countries provided they accept its suzerainty; it is no longer a beacon to the masses of the world.

Socialism is a series of communist projects

When socialism begins, it is full of capitalism. The new regime enacts laws and launches campaigns to turn capitalist institutions upside down into socialist organizations. The defeated exploiting classes do all they can to resist the changes, slow them down, and distort them.

Even after resistance by the defeated exploiters has been wiped out, society still operates with heavy doses of capitalist relations, ways of doing things, and standards of right and wrong. They exert their influence on communist cadre and the people as a whole. Not only must these influences be resisted. They must be destroyed, and this cannot be done at once. Socialism is a series of communist projects.

Each project aims to transform some of the relations of production, which might be the forms of property, laws of employment, the management of firms, and more. In addition to the relations of production strictly understood, a communist project might reconstruct other social-material relations. It might rewrite the rules of income distribution; change the flow of people through primary, secondary and higher education; and create pathways through which the individual can develop herself through several occupations, one after another, in a lifetime of work.

The projects are not campaigns to change how people think, to criticize bourgeois ideology and spell out communist ideas. A basic lesson of historical materialism – the science that communists practice – is that ideas gain a broad foothold when they reflect problems and contradictions in economic and social relations. We must reconstruct the relations as communism needs them to be. Campaigns for communist ideas cannot succeed in and of themselves.

To be sure, society evolves spontaneously or by conscious understanding and choice. Communist projects are the latter kind of change. They certainly need ideological and political work so that communists and the masses can take the project as their own. People act when they know

why the project matters, what it takes to succeed, and how to get started. They act when they can contribute improvements in what to do and how to do it.

But first, program and revolution in the major capitalist countries

Reformist socialists in the major capitalist countries aim not for communism, not for socialism that carries out a series of communist projects, but for humanized capitalism, which they dress in one or another "socialist" costume.

The job of communists in the major capitalist countries is the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. Study of the first two great socialist countries and their experience on the road to communism, a study framed in the basic concept of a mode of production, teaches that socialism is a series of communist projects. But what does this conclusion teach us about communists' work in capitalist society?

Communists cannot launch projects for big changes in material relations within capitalist society. Look at the tremendous, decades-long struggle to modify bargaining over wages and working conditions – the struggle for industrial trade unions. The working class turned lopsided negotiation between the employer and the individual worker into the union's collective bargaining with the employer. It was a big reform, and the sacrifice that workers poured into it should teach us that we really need socialism, valuable as the trade unions are. But no reform achieved in capitalist society is bedrock solid. Unions peaked in the 1950s in the United States and are now a remnant of what they were.

Working people need their own state power to carry out communist projects. Communists in the capitalist countries need a program that the masses will take up. A defect of the communist movement in the United States is that the party programs are often little more than gauzy images of solving all problems of society. They rely on a long list of bulleted positions on the economy, race and a host of other democratic issues, health care, the environmental crisis, the school system, and on and on.

Communism is a comprehensive, coherent project. Communists and the masses should be able to imagine how they will embark on it from day one of the revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist regime. A program

fuses a vision of the liberation waiting in socialism with a brief statement of how a new economy can begin.

Every year revolution seems just as far away as it did ten years ago. But then it happens, and where is the communist program sought by masses who are now determined to get out of capitalist hell?

No Rich, No Poor

1. Eliminate rich and poor, and move to a common prosperity wage for all. Abolish dividend, interest, and capital gains income derived from large private ownership. Over time, raise the wages of all jobs that pay below average, qualify people for improved jobs, and cap the highest salaries. Converge toward wage equality.
2. Institute the inalienable right to a job. Full employment is something we have known how to do since the 1930s. Raising wages for the mass of employees increases the incentive to automate production processes. Full employment means there are new jobs ready for people released from outmoded work.
3. Change corporations from profit machines into institutions of genuine economic service. Convert them into organizations that produce and compete on a breakeven basis. In an economy of such corporations, society-wide investment can be allocated according to social goals and plan.¹⁴

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¹ This discussion is about communism as a movement and also as a stage of society. When a group calls itself a Communist Party, that does not automatically enroll it in the communist movement. Many such groups are not in the least communist, whether from their beginning or in betrayal of their

history. It will be seen below how this applies in particular to the Communist Party of China.

² This is usually stated, "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need."

³ V.I. Lenin, "From the Destruction of the Old Social System to the Creation of the New," April 8, 1920.

⁴ A. A. Zhdanov, "Soviet Literature—the Richest in Ideas, the Most Advanced Literature," August 1934, in *Problems of Soviet Literature: Reports and Speeches at the First Soviet Writers' Congress*. New York: International Publishers, 1935. <http://soviethistory.msu.edu/1934-2/writers-congress/writers-congress-texts/zhdanov-soviet-literature-the-richest-in-ideas/>

⁵ The Communist Party apparently was unable to relate the Zhdanovshchina campaign to socialist advance in real life. "Complicated articles in the press with quotations they had never read left most non-intelligentsia youth bewildered. The response among workers and kolkhozniki was primarily one of general indifference. The archival records of meetings in factories and kolkhozes show little evidence that the campaign was discussed in any more detail than a cursory reference at the opening of an assembly. Life on a collective farm or at a conveyor belt was far removed from the world that was under attack in the Zhdanovshchina." Juliane Fürst, *Stalin's Last Generation – Soviet Post-War Youth and the Emergence of Mature Socialism*, Oxford, 2010, p. 77.

⁶ Grover Furr, *Khrushchev Lied*, Erythros Press and Media, Kettering, Ohio, 2011.

⁷ William Hinton, *The Great Reversal: The Privatization of China, 1978-1989*, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1990, <http://www.marx2mao.com/Other/TGR90.html>

⁸ Dongping Han, *The Unknown Cultural Revolution: Life and Change in a Chinese Village*, Monthly Review Press, 2008.

⁹ Hung Hsueh-ping, "Revolutionary Mass Criticism: The Essence of 'Theory of Productive Forces' Is to Oppose Proletarian Revolution," *Beijing Review*, vol. 12, no. 38, 1969 September 19, pp. 5-8.

¹⁰ "Full text of Xi Jinping's speech on the CCP's 100th anniversary," July 1, 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Full-text-of-Xi-Jinping-s-speech-on-the-CCP-s-100th-anniversary>

¹¹ The U.S. and other Western capitalist economies have a smaller state sector. Although the proportion of state and private capital is of interest, this ratio does *not* give us a dividing line between capitalism and socialism. One capitalist country may have a "free market economy" while another has state-owned enterprises and heavy regulation of selected industries. Profit guides the bulk of investment in both sorts of capitalism; in both countries workers and capitalists

have opposed interests; and when they are large, developed countries, both export capital and follow it up with military expansion.

¹² “Building A Socialism With A Specifically Chinese Character,” *People's Daily*, June 30, 1984 <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/dengxp/vol3/text/c1220.html>

¹³ Frederick Solt, *Income Inequality & Its Consequences*, *Comparative Political Behavior*, and *Dynamic Comparative Public Opinion: The Standardized World Income Inequality Database*, website at <https://fsolt.org/swiid/>

¹⁴ For more on the three points, see Charles Andrews, *No Rich, No Poor*, Needle Press, 2009.