

Worker  
Unity  
view  
point



SOCIALISM

RUSSIA

Until some 57 years ago, socialism was no more than an idea that had been around for a long time. Idealistic thinkers had dreamed for centuries about what the perfect state might look like--a socialist society with complete freedom and equality for all. In the latter part of the 19th century, Karl Marx and others put this idea on a much more scientific basis--arguing that socialism was not only desirable but *necessary* to end the inequality and misery that the vast majority of the world's people suffer under, and arguing further that the socialist economy was the logical and inevitable outgrowth of capitalism, just as capitalism necessarily developed out of feudal economic systems. The power of these ideas led to the formation of revolutionary socialist parties all over Europe, but as yet they had succeeded nowhere.

Then in October 1917, the first successful socialist-led revolution burst into life in Russia. Amidst the chaos and disorder that the 1st World War brought upon the Russian status quo, millions of Russian industrial workers and peasant farmers made a bid for power against the Tsarist dictatorship that exploited them--and they succeeded. The first workers' state was born.

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION?

Now that the Russian revolution is more than half a century old, life in Russia seems a great deal less than satisfactory, from what we can gather. The majority of people are living decently--especially compared to what life was like before the revolution--but appear to have little control over the decision-making process in society. In Russia today a small group of people hold most of the power, and appear to make economic and political decisions free of the restraint of popular control.

On the international scene, the USSR is the other "super power" and often appears to be as much on the make as this one.

This has led many people to reject socialism, saying it doesn't work. They argue that no matter what kind of government or economic system people live under, power always gets concentrated in the hands of a few.

In our opinion, this is a one-sided view. It doesn't take into account the difficulties created by the backwardness, poverty and illiteracy in Russia when the revolution occurred, or the devastation caused by two world wars. These facts have more to do with what socialism in

Russia looks like than general political concepts of Russia's leaders. This view also doesn't take into account the greater economic wealth and the different political history of 20th century America compared to 19th century Russia. Socialism--or any other economic system--does not develop independently of the society it is a part of. The conditions of a society limit the possibilities and options for political and economic development.

For centuries, people said man would never fly. They shook their heads knowingly when the first airplane the Wright brothers built crashed. That's not what the Wright brothers did. They looked at their first attempts with a critical eye--the technology available to them improved, their design also improved. They learned from their mistakes, took advantage of improved material and they kept trying until they succeeded.

This is how we view the Russian revolution. We don't say socialism sounds good but it doesn't work. We try to look at what Russia was like, what was possible to build in Russia, and also discover errors and mistakes which caused the revolution to turn out as it did. We then try to apply this understanding to American conditions so as not to make the same errors in the socialist society we are working for.

WHAT IS A REVOLUTION?

A true revolution is one that shakes an entire society up from top to bottom. It brings about the political and economic dominance of a different class than the one before it. The new class takes power and starts running things in an entirely new way.

An example is the French capitalist revolution of 1789. Until that time, France was a feudal society, power was held by the large landowning class, the king and his lords. They based their power on the wealth they took from the peasants who worked the land owned by the nobility. But in the towns of Europe, a new class who made their money through manufacturing and trade sprang up. This was the emerging capitalist class--they operated in a completely different way from the princes and dukes. As their strength and economic power outgrew that of the feudal lords, the political restraints of the old society began to hinder further development. To overthrow this burden they had to overthrow the class that benefited from the old way of doing things and wanted to keep it that way. The capitalists made a revolu-

tion and gave the king the axe. Similar capitalist revolutions occurred throughout the world and put it on the footing we see today.

But history is a continuous process, societies are always undergoing change. Just as the forces of capitalism grew within feudalism, new forces were growing within capitalism. As capitalists employed more and more people in their shops and factories a distinct class developed, the modern working class. Marxists saw that eventually this class would need to make a socialist revolution to meet its needs--and would be large enough and strong enough to do so. This revolution would be very different from any that came before it because while all other revolutions were made by a minority of the people, the working class was the majority and could free itself only by creating the conditions for freedom for all.

THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

Russia was the first place this happened. That came as a surprise to socialists everywhere, and most of all to the Russian revolutionaries themselves. Marxists had expected revolution to occur first in modern industrial countries, where the working class had grown to large numbers and could no longer tolerate capitalist economic and political domination. But Russia was one of the most backward countries in Europe. Capitalism had just begun, and the economy was still largely feudal and based on oppression of peasant farmers. The industrial working class numbered less than 3 million, and had no history of organization or even trade union development.

Other factors came into play, however. The tsarist regime was backward and inefficient, as well as dictatorial in its rule. By the time of the 1st World War, the regime was hated by most all the people. Hardship and famine was widespread as the Russian economy was strained to the breaking point by the War, which was very unpopular with the masses of Russian people. Also, Tsarist armies were decimated by the War, so internal control of the Russian people was more difficult. Finally, there was a disciplined revolutionary organization, the Bolshevik party, which worked tirelessly to demonstrate that the reforms desired by the Russian people could only be achieved by overthrowing the Tsar.

On the eve of the revolution, industrial workers in many of the large factories had organized workers' councils, which they called soviets.

The soviets actually ran many of the factories, organizing production and paying their wages out of the proceeds, and kicking the bosses out. The Bolsheviks, other political parties and discontented elements in the army were organizing in the army against continuing in the 1st World War. Peasants were being organized against the Tsar around the slogans of "bread and land."

It was under these conditions of famine and war, massive popular discontent and the inability of the existing government to suppress the revolt or meet people's needs that the revolution took hold and power passed to the Bolshevik party.

But from the beginning, the attempt to build socialism was plagued with difficulty. Not only was the country industrially backward and suffering mass famine, but the war was still on and Russia was being invaded by Germany.

After a hasty peace was concluded with Germany, the people's red army was forced to fight a three-year bloody civil war. The remains of Russia's feudal and capitalist classes organized armies to crush the revolution. They were supported by almost all the rest of the capitalist world, who of course saw the existence of a socialist workers' state as a tremendous threat. 14 different countries helped supply parts of 22 armed contingents to fight the red army--including Great Britain, France, Italy, Japan and the U.S.

By 1921, the Bolshevik government was victorious, but the economy was in total ruin, the society in disorder with mass starvation everywhere, and with many of the best rank and file revolutionaries dead. The Russians had thought that their revolution would be only the first step of a wave of socialist revolutions throughout Europe as the working class would turn against their rulers that led them into such a senseless World War. This did not happen. Instead, the Russians faced the task of trying to build socialism alone in a war-ruined, backward economy--faced with a hostile capitalist world that would spare no effort to undermine and defeat their revolution.

The first requirement for survival was to feed and clothe the Russian people, to develop industry so the new society could be built. Over-concern for principles like democracy and freedom seemed abstract and removed faced with these tasks. This was especially true since Russia's working class was so small and inexperienced that the revolution had to use holdovers from the Tsarist regime as experts and technicians. To use these people for their skills in building Russia without allowing them to subvert the new government whose aims they basically disagreed with was a difficult task.

Concessions had to be made to the more privileged strata of peasant farmers so they would produce food. Elements of capitalist trade had to be reintroduced into the socialist economy. Because of world hostility and economic backwardness in Russia, stress had to be placed on rapid industrial and agricultural development. As a result, democracy and socialist methods, in the society as a whole and in the Bolshevik party, suffered.

With our history's eye view, we can condemn many of the excesses of Stalin and other Russian leaders, but we can't condemn the forced march under which they placed the Russian economy. If Russia had not successfully industrialized and built up its military strength in the 20 years between the World Wars, the revolution would have been defeated by the Nazis, and world history would have been very different. As it was, Russia lost more lives in World War II than all the other allies combined, and at great sacrifice was only barely able to turn back Hitler's eastern campaign--all this before the allies started the invasion at Normandy.

#### RUSSIA TODAY

Today Russia is recognized as one of the leading economic and industrial powers in the world. This has been the success of the Russian revolution. Russia was one of the weakest countries in Europe, and its people among the poorest. Now the Russians enjoy full employment, complete health care and one of the highest standards of liv-

ing in the world in an economy that continues to expand rapidly.

But there have been many failures of the revolution, too. In the struggle for survival and industrialization, political power became more centralized. Decision-making authority became concentrated in specialists in the Bolshevik party and the state machinery--with only minimal accountability to the population as a whole. Although that may have been necessary at certain times in Russia's development, now it holds back the full development of the power and control of the citizenry as a whole. Unchecked by popular control, the ruling bureaucracy of Russia has developed interests that it protects jealously as its own preserve. This centralization of authority has created many of the problems of political corruption and abuses of power that we have in our own country.

In 1917, the Russian working class started out to build socialism, and they built something less. Yet they moved much closer to the economic basis of the socialist society we want to build--the Russian people are free from the fear of depression and unemployment, and can count on adequate food, housing and health care all their lives.

## THE GREAT CALF KILL



One of the charges socialists hurl at capitalism is that it is an *irrational* economic system. By that we mean unreasoning and unplanned on the whole and capable of chaotic shifts and rapid turnarounds.

This is true even though each individual capitalist may be the most rational of planners. The problem is that the economy *as a whole* is unplanned--there is no process whereby people collectively decide on their needs, review the resources available to meet those needs, and plan production accordingly. Instead, each capitalist owner decides what to produce and how much on the basis of what he thinks will maximize his individual profit.

This process of individual decision making is called "rule of the market." It can lead to very strange results. Take for example the recent slaughter of 700-odd calves in Curtis, Wisconsin. The "rule of market" has caused the price of feed grain to jump sky-high, mostly because of expected shortages in this year's corn harvest, but also because of recent excessive exports of grain. At the same time for different

## SOCIALISM IN THE U.S.

A working class revolution in the U.S. will start with many advantages the Russians didn't have.

Capitalism is fully developed here, and it has brought an advanced industrial economy. It has also brought an increasingly bankrupt capitalist leadership that cannot solve the problems of inflation, unemployment and periodic depression.

Working people in the U.S. are beginning to realize this bankruptcy, and that the present capitalist government is no longer fit to rule in spite of its achievements in the past. We are a majority of the people in this country, and one of the most advanced and experienced working classes in the world. As such, we are much more capable of holding political power than the Russian working class.

And we have the lessons of all the revolutions that came before us--their strengths and mistakes--to learn from. Although it is impossible to say exactly what socialist America will look like, it is clear that the opportunity exists to build a genuinely democratic society free of the problems of fear and economic want.

reasons, the price of veal plummeted--from \$90-\$125 a head to \$17 a head in just a few months. From the producers' point of view, what else to do but kill the calves? They were going broke by feeding and tending them. And so long as the calves had to go, the producers might as well get as much publicity as possible from the kill--perhaps this might shock "somebody" into "doing something".

The kill demonstrates a primary law of capitalist economics. If you can't produce for a profit, you cannot produce at all or your costs will bankrupt you.

But this is absurd. Meat prices are outrageous at the supermarket. People want meat, but can't afford it. Poor people are actually starving--in this country by the hundreds, in Bangladesh, India and sub-Saharan Africa by the hundreds of thousands. And yet calves are slaughtered and buried where they fall, milk is poured into the streets, fields are plowed under. This is what we mean when we say capitalist production is irrational.

#### NEEDED: ECONOMIC PLANNING

Socialist production would change this. Grain growers, cattle producers--all agricultural workers would receive wages based on the amount and quality of their labor. This means guaranteed payment based on work performed even in times when bad weather conditions or other factors restrict the amount actually produced. The fear of hunger, loss of livelihood or bankruptcy would be erased.

Prices of grain and meat would be controlled--and they would be based on the actual usefulness of these goods to society as a whole. If a disaster cut production back in a particular year, shortages would be allocated and the product rationed fairly throughout the population as a whole. Everyone might share a slight loss in case of shortage, but no one would starve.

As we know, in our present economic system, if a product is in short supply, its price simply shoots up. This "rationing" the product so that only the wealthy can obtain it! The rich eat as well as before . . . but the poor barely eat at all.