

Has socialism failed?

the debate continues....

MIKE NEOCOSMOS* comments on three contributions to the debate on Joe Slovo's "Has Socialism Failed?"**

WOSA

The contribution from the Trotskyist WOSA is perhaps the easiest to deal with. They rehash tired old formulae concerning the 'sin' of 'socialism in one country'. They see this as the universal explanation for all the evils of Stalinism - as if socialism could occur in all countries at the same time. They trot out crude statements that a united front is 'good' while a popular front is 'bad' and that a conception of stages necessarily leads to bourgeois domination.

They need to go beyond the vulgar notion that all that exists is capitalism. For them an ideal (not to say idealistic) opposition between the working class and capitalists is the only possible contradiction. They fail to understand the simple fact that there are many different forms of capitalism,

some of which are more in the interest of the working class than others. They also forget that people in capitalist societies - as in 'actually existing socialism' - are in *reality* divided into many more classes and groups than the two they always talk about.

The result is that not only have their organisations been historically staggeringly ineffective (there has *never* been such a thing as a successful Trotskyist revolution in any country), but also that they have been guilty of the kind of sectarianism and contempt for debate with which they now smugly taint the SACP.

One would have expected a little more self-criticism from the comrades of WOSA than simply jumping on the 'let's have a bash at the SACP' bandwagon. Because WOSA gives no hint of any self-criticism of the Slovo kind, it is

very difficult to take their arguments seriously.

Pallo Jordan

Although Cde Jordan makes many important points, he is not immune from the above kind of criticism either. He accuses the SACP's publications of a "consistent pattern of praise and support for every violation of freedom perpetrated by the Soviet leadership, both before and after the death of Stalin" (p74). He also remarks that "the political culture nurtured by the SACP's leadership over the years has produced a spirit of intolerance and political dissembling which regularly emerges in the pages of party journals." (p74). These points may be correct, but one searches in vain through the publications of the ANC for a serious critique of 'actually existing

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socialism'. It is to Cde Slovo's credit that he was the first in Southern Africa to provide a thoughtful public reassessment of 'actually existing socialism', whereas leadership on this question did not come from 'non-party Marxists' within the ANC.

The crucially important point however is not just to berate communist parties (or other organisations on the Left) for their lack of democratic practices. The point is to understand the reasons for the lack of democracy in order to combat it. Centralist and anti-democratic practices generally are features of all political organisations without exception, including those of the working class. Like all political organisations, working class political organisations are products of capitalist relations. The political organisations of the bourgeoisie are themselves anything but democratic. We have to understand this and not fall into the trap of believing that undemocratic practices are the results of Marxism itself, or the results of socialism. They are the result of bourgeois relations (including a bourgeois division of labour between mental and manual labour and between state and civil society) against which no party is immune.

Communist parties may have been guilty of not struggling against such tendencies with enough strength, or of not recognising them.

However, they cannot be

held accountable for the 'muck of ages' which, as Marx said, affects the proletariat itself, born and produced as it is within the confines of capitalist oppression and exploitation.

The Dictatorship of the Proletariat

Cde Jordan's dismissal of the Marxist concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat (DOP) must also be commented upon. The dictatorship of the proletariat was abandoned as a guiding principle of the CPSU as long ago as the 1950s and thereafter by most communist parties. This principle was replaced, by the party under Krushchev, with the supposedly more correct notion of the 'state of the whole people'. A number of points need to be made here:

- The abandonment of the DOP slogan did not contribute fundamentally to the democratisation of the Soviet state. 'Statism', 'commandism' and 'violations of socialist legality' continued unabated. It is far too simplistic to blame the DOP "for the horrors perpetrated in its name" (p69). The dictatorship of the party continued in the absence of the DOP. Some, like the present writer, would argue that in reality the DOP - ie proletarian democracy - had ceased to exist long before it was officially abandoned. It is far too convenient to see the concept of the DOP itself as

an expression of Stalinist dictatorship.

- Krushchev's slogan of the 'state of the whole people' may sound more democratic (after all the term dictatorship does sound nasty!), but the slogan had more in common with bourgeois ideology than with the views of Marx, Engels and Lenin, for whom all states implied class rule. This slogan therefore contributed to confusing the masses by asserting that a 'classless state' could exist. After Krushchev, 'statism', 'commandism', and the dictatorship of the party were justified, no longer in terms of the need to maintain a 'class dictatorship' as before, but in terms of 'defending the gains of socialism against imperialist aggression'. Thus the DOP is not a necessary precondition for the dictatorship of the party. How the DOP came under Stalin to be equated with the dictatorship of the party, is (partly) a theoretical question which has still to be adequately resolved.
- Jordan's assertion that the DOP "owes more to French revolutionary practice than to Marx and Engels" (p69) is not supported by evidence. On the contrary, evidence shows the opposite. Marx himself writes to his friend Weydemeyer in New York (March 5, 1852) that he himself did

not discover the class struggle, which had been described by bourgeois economists long ago. Rather Marx says he proved that the existence of classes was linked to the development of production, that "the class struggle necessarily leads to the *dictatorship of the proletariat* ... (and) that this dictatorship itself only constitutes the transition to the *abolition of all classes* and to a *classless society* ..." (Marx and Engels, *Selected Works* 1 vol.:669, emphasis in original). There is nothing here, of course, regarding the dictatorship of a political party.

Opportunism

Cde Jordan may be correct, and Marx might have been wrong in his estimation of his own work. The point however is that his dismissal of the DOP shows a lack of seriousness towards theory, a failure to produce evidence and a pandering to the same opportunistic tendencies with which the majority of communist parties - 'encouraged' from Moscow - 'abandoned' the notion themselves (accompanied by a greater or lesser degree of soul-searching of course).

This may sound harsh, but how else are we to understand the fact that the communist parties - and Jordan - forget that the DOP was meant - for classical Marxism - to imply a greater form of democracy - a proletarian form - which

bourgeois society never experienced and can never produce. This concept was meant to refer to *objective reality* and not to a slogan which could be adopted or abandoned by party decree. It has a similar status to that of the party's leading role, which as Cde Slovo correctly points out, has to be proven through an objective analysis of the party's political practice rather than simply asserted. Abandoning the DOP is similar to abandoning the class struggle. The class struggle exists objectively whether one likes it or not. To 'abandon' it would however, indicate that the party has failed to recognize that objective reality.

In fact Cde Slovo himself is less than convincing (and seems less than convinced) that it was a correct decision for the SACP to abandon the DOP, noting that "the word 'dictatorship'....opens the way to ambiguities and distortions" (*Labour Bulletin* Vol 14 No 6, p20). Unfortunately too much time has been spent considering the word itself rather than the content of the historical period which the term was meant to refer to.

There is only one short step from abandoning the DOP to asserting that the 'class struggle' is an unfortunate term which is 'out of place in the present world' or 'out of date' as it is 'incompatible with democracy'. While the SACP has fortunately not taken this step, other com-

munist parties, such as those dominated by 'Eurocommunism', have.

Von Holdt

Karl Von Holdt, whose interventions are often politically stimulating, asserts that Lenin did not "develop a theory of the state, politics and democracy . . ." (p96). However, he makes this pronouncement without providing evidence for his assertion. According to his own account, he comes to conclusions such as this on the basis of a reading of only two of Lenin's works, *What is to be Done?* and *State and Revolution*, (and of four other secondary sources); whereas 45 volumes of Lenin's work have been published in English, arguably over 60% of which was devoted to the issue of democracy. This is especially true of his writings on the Agrarian and National Questions which for Lenin were the most important democratic issues of the day.

The issue is not whether von Holdt is correct or not. The essential point is that his mode of argument is based purely on assertion without reference to any evidence, and that an extremely important theoretical contribution by a major socialist writer is dismissed out of hand. The point is not that writers in the *Labour Bulletin* should adopt academic styles of writing (academics often confuse rather than clarify issues with their multitudinous

references). It is rather that unsubstantiated theoretical assertions are precisely a feature of the Stalinism which Von Holdt and Jordan are concerned to criticise.

Such crude assertive contents are characteristic of the various texts on the so-called "Fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism" churned out in millions of copies by Progress Publishers through which countless dedicated activists had their first contact with 'Marxist theory'. Unfortunately 'Marxist theory' as practised in the USSR never scaled any new heights, nor did it give rise to any important contributions which revolutionised our thought. It could not do so in an atmosphere where vulgarity in theory became the general line of the CPSU and where Stalin's famous book *A History of the CPSU* (short course) for long had the status of a bible. The most important contributions to the development of Marxist-Leninist theory in recent times have emanated from Western Europe and the Third World.

Theoretical work should be serious

Unfortunately none of the above three contributions to the debate on socialism in the *Labour Bulletin* really seem to approach theoretical work with the seriousness it requires. Their assertive form of argumentation and their (conscious or unconscious) ignorance of evidence is misleading. It denotes, at the

level of theory, a kind of fear of contestation. This fear corresponds objectively, in all essential respects, to the fear of democracy which 'commandism' and 'statism' show at the level of practice.

Intellectuals have a duty not to belittle theoretical work. They should be prepared to struggle against their own limitations - as well as against bourgeois ideological practices - in the same way that the working class and the masses have so gallantly struggled and continue to struggle against oppression. Anything else is a negation of their responsibilities and of their duty to the oppressed.

In the absence of a struggle for democratic practices in theoretical work (which includes rigorous standards of argumentation) there is the real danger that Von Holdt's laudable call to intellectuals to "reinvigorate the theory and practice of social transformation" (p96), will remain an empty platitude, and that the debate on the future of socialism in South Africa will be still-born. ❖

References

SA Labour Bulletin, Vol 14 No 6 and Vol 15 No3, 1990.
Marx & Engels, *Selected works in one volume*, Progress, Moscow

WOSA replies to 'a perturbing contribution by Cde Neocosmos'

On reading Cde Neocosmos' response to the debate generated by Cde Slovo's article in the *South African Labour Bulletin* (Vol 15 No 3), we were struck not by the theoretical contributions he made (if any) but by the form and nature of his response. Neocosmos accuses us, Cde Jordan, and Cde Von Holdt of belittling intellectual work. Yet it is he who is guilty of this. The tone of his response goes against the spirit of Cde Slovo's paper. It is an example of that tendency Cde Slovo warns against, which substitutes name calling and jargon for healthy debate with non-party activists. In fact, the tone of Neocosmos' response creates the conditions for the embattled ghosts of Stalinist practices to rear their heads again.

Despite these characteristics of Neocosmos' contribution we will respond, starting with two points of clarification. The first charge by Neocosmos that needs to be answered is that our initial contribution was an attempt to join the "let's have a

go at the SACP bandwagon". This is an unfair charge. It was actually Cde Slovo who called for and prompted the debate on the future of socialism. Our article in the Labour Bulletin clearly stated that our response was intended as a comradely contribution to a debate initiated by a comrade organisation.

Trotskyism and 'permanent revolution'

The second point of clarification concerns Neocosmos' charge that there has never been a successful "Trotskyist revolution". We must respond to this not because we wish to defend WOSA as a Trotskyist organisation. We reject this label as it is misleading. Rather we wish to defend revolutionary Marxism which Neocosmos attacks under the guise of Trotskyism. Furthermore, his use of the term "Trotskyist revolution" is misleading in another way. We are aware of national liberation, working class and even socialist revolutions, but we have never heard of an attempt to launch a "Trotskyist revolution".

If, however, Neocosmos uses the term "Trotskyist revolution" to suggest that the theory of permanent revolution is not applicable to revolutionary struggles, then he does not understand the history of the Russian, Chinese, Cuban, Vietnamese, and other revolutionary processes. In each of the above cases, the liberation organisations analysed the balance of social forces, and concluded that, for

the national aims of their struggle to be successfully achieved, they had to transcend capitalist relations of production. And that is indeed what happened in these countries. Because of the balance of social forces nationally and internationally, these revolutions developed from their national democratic beginnings to proletarian results. This process was described by Trotsky as the "permanent revolution"¹.

WOSA on national and class oppression

Our main response, however, is to the substance of Neocosmos' charge that we are "idealistic" because we view "the opposition between the working class and capitalists as the only possible contradiction in society." This is a gross misrepresentation of our position. WOSA's political programme states that "in our country, for reasons connected with the technical problems of diamond and gold mining, racism, racial discrimination, racial oppression and segregation became, for the last quarter of the nineteenth century, a necessary aspect of the production of profit and thus of the capitalist system."² The WOSA programme then goes on to note the racial division between black and white which serves as a vertical scissor to divide all classes within society. Our programme clearly insists and explains how the black working class in our society labours under both national oppression and class

exploitation.

These positions on national oppression do not, however, lessen our critique of the "two stage theory" on the South African struggle. To the contrary, it enhances it. National oppression facilitated the development of capitalism in South Africa. This historical legacy makes the disentanglement of capitalism and racism extremely unlikely. It is extremely difficult to envisage the establishment of a non-racial capitalist society in South Africa³. The theory of permanent revolution has a real application to South African historical and social conditions. Thus, our conclusion is that the national liberation struggle can only culminate in victory if it transcends capitalist relations of production.

Lenin and 'socialism in one country'

Neocosmos' other charge is that we view "the sin of 'socialism in one country' as the universal explanation for all the evils of Stalinism - as if socialism could occur in all countries at once." Two points need to be made here. The first is that Lenin, and subsequently the Left Opposition, always maintained that, in the face of international capitalism, it was impossible to establish a fully developed socialist society in the Soviet Union. This, however, does not necessarily lead us to the conclusion that socialism must occur in all countries at once. Since revolutions are largely influenced by the dialectic of contradictions within

national boundaries, they are bound to occur in different countries at different periods. However, such revolutions are limited to transcending capitalist relations of production. They will not be able to realise a fully developed socialist society within the confines of their national boundaries.

The second point that needs to be made is that it is striking that at a time when most committed socialists, including Cde Slovo, are rejecting the theory of 'socialism in one country' Neocosmos' letter borders on a half-hearted defence of it. Once again, he seems to be trapped in a time warp of past theories and practices.

This response to Neocosmos' letter is not intended to convince him of the correct-

ness of our position, nor to engage in debate with him. Our response is aimed at clarifying for the worker leadership of this country, which is the *Labour Bulletin's* main readership, the misrepresentations contained in Neocosmos' letter. ❖

NOTES

(1) For a fuller explanation of this thesis see M. Lowy "The Politics of Combined and Uneven Development: The Theory of Permanent Revolution" Verso 1981

(2) See Political Programme of the Workers Organisation for Socialist Action p5

(3) For a fuller explanation of the argument that leads to this conclusion see Programme of the Workers Organisation for Socialist Action p4-13. A similar conclusion is contained in H. Wolpe's latest book "Race Class and the Apartheid State", UNESCO Press 1988

from three sources - German Philosophy, English Political Economy and French Revolutionary practice.

Not least among the concepts Marx and Engels borrowed from this tradition is the dictatorship of the proletariat. In their own writings, they employ it in only a few places - the letter to Weydemeyer, referred to by Neocosmos, the Critique of the Gotha Programme, Engels' introduction to the Civil War in France. When I pose the possibility that the concept might bear some responsibility for the crimes perpetrated in its name, it is because of an awareness that use of the term 'dictatorship' indeed planted in many minds the notion of absolute power.

(ii) Neocosmos misses the essence of my article, which is that in the socialist countries, material conditions of economic backwardness, compounded by the options chosen by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union when confronted with the crisis of legitimacy it faced after Kronstadt, and the objective need for a bureaucracy to supervise both the state and the economy, resulted in what Bahro called "despotic industrialization". What Krushchev chose to call it is neither here nor there. Our concern is the content of the political institutions not the labels stuck on them.

I insist too that Stalinism is neither the inevitable outcome of Marxism-Leninism nor a

A reply to Neocosmos

by PALLO JORDAN

I shall refrain from the sterile trading of quotations from Marx or Engels which M. Neocosmos seems to relish and merely recap the issues I tried to address in my review of Slovo's "Has Socialism Failed?"

(i) I do not dismiss the dictatorship of the proletariat nor did I imply this in my article. It is nonetheless historical fact that the concept - the dictatorship of the proletariat - comes from the practice of the French revolutionary socialists beginning with Gracchus Babeuf and the Conspiracy of the Equals during 1795, and Phillipe Bournarotti, who was a participant in that movement. The term was first explicitly employed by Auguste Blanqui, Bournarotti's most famous disciple, during the 1840s. Marx and Engels admit their debt to these pioneer revolutionary socialists, which is why Marxism is referred to as deriving

product of the "muck of ages" but rather the result of the uncanny synchronization of a number of objective factors - such as economic backwardness, capitalist encirclement, the war of intervention and the devastation that caused; and subjective factors - the war-weariness of the people, the decimation of the best working class cadres during the civil war, the crisis of legitimacy of 1921.

(iii) My purpose in giving such a long exposition of the views of various Marxist critics of Stalinism was neither to score points nor to berate the Communist parties. I proceeded from the premise that only by understanding the material basis of a system can we hope to change or prevent it. I fear Neocosmos prefers to ignore this and seeks refuge in vacuous generalities.

He, in my view, has avoided dealing with the issues. The issue today is how to rescue socialism and its revolutionary democratic content from the muck and mire through which Stalinism has dragged it.

(iv) However there are one or two points which one should take up.

The crude Trotskyist baiting Neocosmos resorts to can only be described as puerile. Really, how many arguments does Neocosmos hope to win in this fashion? It betrays an unwillingness to make the much needed admission that the Marxist critics of Stalin and the Stalinised-CPSU were right all along and that it is time that

South African communists re-examined the work of these critics.

The only reason why such an admission assumes any importance is because the SACP invariably joined in the chorus of vicious lies, calumnies and slanders, orchestrated in Moscow, every time a critical voice was raised. If its publications were to be believed, the makers of the Russian Revolution (with the exception of Lenin, Krupskaya, Svedlov and Stalin) were all traitors! (Until they were judicially rehabilitated in Moscow during the late 1980s!)

The leader of the Yugoslav partisans was an agent of imperialism (until Krushchev re-established links with Yugoslavia after the death of Stalin!). Wladyslaw Gomulka was, in succession, first a vicious spy in the employ of imperialism, then a brave working class leader (after he was released from prison!), then an incompetent leader (after he fell from grace!). Matyas Rakosi used to be the intrepid leader of the Hungarian proletariat until 1956 when (after Janos Kadar came into office!) he was transformed, by edict, into a monstrous brute who had tyrannised his people. In like fashion, the leadership of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, previously regarded as the brave offspring of Julius Fucik, were in 1968 branded as, at best, dangerous revisionists deserving to be overthrown by

military force from without!

Both the slanders and their retractions make a mockery of Marxism. They would test the credulity of even the most gullible. Yet people who were otherwise very rational, decent, honest, generous and brave repeated them like a catechism.

(v) The Communist Parties in Eastern Europe (with the exception of Yugoslavia and Albania) did not make revolutions but came to power on the bayonets of the Red Army. There can be no denying though that they bear responsibility for the revolution that has swept socialism from the face of Europe for at least another decade! It was the crimes and corruption of the Communist Party-led governments that so disgusted the working class as to make it the ideological prey of explicitly right wing bourgeois parties (like Kohl's Christian Democrats in Germany).

After the triumph of fascism in Germany during the 1930s, the events of 1989 will probably be recorded as the second greatest defeat sustained by the working class in Europe during this century. As such it merits serious attention which I feel Slovo's pamphlet fell short of because of its silences. I sought also to draw attention to an intellectual tradition within Marxism that has been consistently opposed to Stalinism and therefore deserves the critical appraisal of those who are looking for alternatives to Stalinism. ♦

Von Holdt replies

Neocosmos attacks my article for being based "purely on assertion without reference to any evidence". The only evidence he provides for *his* assertion is that I did not read 45 volumes of Lenin's work. My article is in fact a reasoned analysis of the evidence provided by two of Lenin's most important works and by historical accounts of Bolshevik practice in four secondary texts.

The references at the end of my brief article indicate the texts which are referred to in the article. They do not list every work by Lenin that I may have read. The fact that 45 volumes of Lenin's work have been published in English is totally irrelevant, unless it can be demonstrated that in these works Lenin wrote something which disproves my argument. Neocosmos does not bother to do this. He does refer to Lenin's writings on the Agrarian and National Questions - but in these Lenin discusses the *strategic tasks* of the democratic revolution, *not* the theory and practice of democracy in organisations and in the state, which is the subject of my article.

Neocosmos accuses me of making unsubstantiated assertions, and claims that this betrays a fear of contestation and therefore a fear of democracy and therefore is tantamount to Stalinism! Even if my argument were unsubstantiated, this seems a dubious line of reasoning. But since my argument *is* substantiated, his accusation is nonsense.

Neocosmos should perhaps reflect on his own polemical style, which is scholastic, sec-

tarian, arrogant and bullying. Of course, Lenin himself often used a similar style, so it must be progressive and democratic!

Apart from his spurious comments on my mode of argument, Neocosmos makes two substantive points I would like to comment on.

The first is that undemocratic practices are inevitable because they are the results of "bourgeois relations". Communist parties cannot be held accountable, he argues, for this 'muck of ages' which affects the proletariat itself.

With this one comment Neocosmos negates the whole of Slovo's courageous attempt to take responsibility - as a communist - for Stalinism's brutal assault on democracy, and his attempt to understand how this happened.

I still believe that socialists need to critically examine the works of Marx and Lenin in order to establish the extent to which theoretical weaknesses facilitated the rise of Stalinism under specific historical circumstances. Theory also needs to take responsibility for practice!

The second comment I would like to make is on the 'dictatorship of the proleta-

riat'. Neocosmos believes abandoning this concept is similar to abandoning the class struggle. I would like to suggest that this concept may be the single greatest obstacle to achieving socialism - and not just because the word 'dictatorship' has nasty implications, as Slovo and Jordan argue.

The concept 'dictatorship of the proletariat' is linked to its opposite, the idea that the state in all capitalist societies is also a dictatorship - a 'dictatorship of the bourgeoisie'. This concept has created enormous confusion in communist ranks, since it does not allow a distinction between bourgeois democracy and various forms of undemocratic bourgeois rule, such as fascism, military dictatorship, colonial rule, etc. Nor does it allow analysis of different kinds of bourgeois democracy - say the difference between Swedish social democracy and Thatcherism.

The two concepts - dictatorship of the bourgeoisie and its 'antithesis', dictatorship of the proletariat - are reductive and mechanistic. They leave no space for an analysis of the role of hegemony and the relation between hegemony and coercion. This has had disastrous strategic, tactical and organisational consequences, both in the struggle against capitalism and in the struggle to build socialism.

Even a careful reading of all of Lenin's works, in English and Russian, will not solve this problem. We had better start reading other books too! ☆