

Taking up the debate stimulated by Joe Slovo's "Has Socialism Failed", ALAN FINE argues that it is not "democratic socialism" but social democracy that South Africa needs ... and is already beginning to implement.

The extensive debate on the history and future of socialism that has occurred, since the publication of Joe Slovo's "Has Socialism Failed?" in February 1990, has focused almost exclusively on political questions (see *Labour Bulletin* Vol 14 No 6, Vol 15 Nos 3 and 7).



ment to civil liberties the logical conclusions about socialist economics. The reason for their silence lies, it would seem, in the fact that a commitment to civil liberties requires a fundamental revision of socialist economic thought by those who call themselves democratic social-

Democratic socialism or social democracy?

The debate hinges on

- the extent to which (if at all) the absence of democratic political structures and practices contributed to the collapse of eastern bloc socialist regimes, and
- whether future forms of socialism in South Africa and elsewhere are sustainable if not based on traditional liberal democratic political systems, including multiparty elections and safeguards for individual human rights.

But participants in the debate have been conspicuously silent about drawing from this commit-

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ists. This article does not attempt to engage with those - like Harry Gwala and David Kitson for example - who reject the idea that there is a need to democratise socialism. As will become apparent, this article also disputes the majority SACP view that socialism is inherently democratic.

It is not only political theory which demands the transformation of socialist economic thought. Any attempt seriously to get to grips with the potential and limits of economic transformation in South Africa leads to the conclusion that the

most realistic goal is far closer to the system traditionally described as social democracy, than to any form of socialism compatible with orthodox Marxist thought.

Arguments for democratic socialism

In his paper Slovo eloquently spelled out a set of political goals and the means for achieving them: "A post-apartheid state which will guarantee all citizens the basic rights and freedoms of organisation, speech, thought, press, movement, residence, conscience and religion; full trade union rights for all workers including the right to strike, and one person one vote in free democratic elections... Because experience has shown that an institutionalised one-party state has a strong propensity for authoritarianism, a multi-party post-apartheid democracy, both in the national democratic and socialist phases, is desirable."

Having stated this, it is insufficient for Slovo (and many others, including non-SACP socialists, like Pallo Jordan, and socialists formerly hostile to the SACP who are now members, such as Moses Mayekiso), to argue that socialism did not fail but was distorted by the (undemocratic) methods used to implement it. None attempt to debate whether "democratic socialism" can be attained through democratic means.

In his conclusion, Slovo

spelled out four broad fundamentals of socialism as he sees it:

- "Humankind can never attain real freedom until a society has been built in which no person has the freedom to exploit another person;
- the bulk of humanity's resources will never be used for the good of humanity until they are in public ownership and under democratic control;
- the ultimate aim of socialism, to eliminate all class inequalities, occupies a prime place in the body of civilised ethics even before Marx;
- the all-round development of the individual ... can only find expression in a society which dedicates itself to people rather than profit."

Questions

What he and other democratic socialists now have to do (if they are to merit the label 'democratic') is to examine these fundamentals and ask whether they can be attained democratically.

The most basic question is: How is the "bulk of humanity's resources" to be brought into public ownership while simultaneously retaining multiparty democracy? Can democratic socialists explain how relations of production are to be altered without resort by the state to the full might of its security apparatus - the resources of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat', a concept

glibly abandoned by the SACP, among others?

How would a hypothetical elected SACP government convince the owners of productive property to hand over their assets? Will the owners yield merely because the majority of voters has voted that they should? Or will they be convinced that it would be in the national interest? Most unlikely.

Alternatively, will they be offered 'fair compensation' for these productive assets? This may be a possibility if the target is only a small part of the country's productive capacity. It could be argued that certain strategic state-owned enterprises are necessary to the process of economic development. But that is a far cry from Marxist socialism.

The same question applies, obviously, to other basics of socialism. The Marxist concept is that wage labour is, by definition, exploitative, and that class struggle can and must be resolved by total victory over and elimination of the capitalist class. Democratic socialists have a duty to explain how this is to be achieved through the liberal political structures and instruments outlined by Slovo and others.

It is true - to return to Slovo's third and fourth points - that class inequalities (not to mention society as a whole) came closest to elimination in a place like Cambodia. But democratic methods were abandoned, to

put it mildly, and society left little room for the "all-round development of the individual".

Debating socialism for South Africa

The most methodical attempt so far to begin debating socialist economic structures for a future South Africa has been carried out by Rob Davies (*African Communist*/2nd Quarter 1991), in which he criticises Eastern Bloc (and Yugoslav) economic structures and suggests adjustments which would be advisable in SA.

In brief, he argues that :

1. Socialisation means far more than state ownership of the means of production. It "implies social processes in which working people assume powers of economic ownership....the power to organise and control the actual labour process".

2. More attention must be given to the establishment of co-operatives and other forms of "collective production."

3. There must be a greater say for organs of civil society. He makes a criticism of centralised economic planning.

4. Since socialism is but a transitional stage between capitalism and communism, there is no need to abolish markets. Rather, interventions by the state and other organisations like unions can be used to influence markets.

Further questions

That, for Davies, is an outline of our socialist future, a

future which itself is merely a step towards a higher goal. There is just one problem. He has spelled out, in more detail than any other South African democratic socialist, ideas about socialist economic structures. However, he too has not attempted to explain how the transition to socialism - including the nationalisation and/or socialisation of property - can occur through the use of democratic political instruments, assuming he believes this to be desirable.

Furthermore, socialism is not a precondition for the establishment of co-operatives. Many in SA came into existence under the most repressive phase of National Party rule. Their long term viability depends now, as in future, on whether they are able to compete with other parts of the private sector.

And interventions in the market by governments, labour organisations and other elements of civil society are common to any market economy - not just transitional socialist ones.

Would it be tendentious to assume that it is slowly beginning to dawn on those socialists who are serious about their commitment to democracy that there are no satisfactory answers to these questions, and that the only way for them to remain socialists is drastically to transform the very meaning of the term?

This is all quite apart from the fundamental economic questions related to the sus-

tainability of a Marxist socialist national economy (whether democratic or otherwise) in a modern, high tech, competitive international economy.

The question becomes even more stark when the inevitable destabilisation of the economy and society that accompanies socialist transformation is brought into the equation.

Even though it is difficult to jettison the faith of a lifetime, the germs of this transformation are there. Davies himself, while continuing to pay homage to a reformed form of socialism, also takes a look at the real world and asks what is to be done in the "immediate post apartheid period" when the emphasis will be on the national democratic struggle. He talks of

- redistribution and the provision of basic social needs for the poor;
- the acceptance, even in broader society, of an effective though limited state sector;
- workers' right to organise, and the establishment of democratic decision-making bodies to deal with aspects of economic policy at various levels.

Social democratic project in SA

Strangely enough, these tentative suggestions are wholly compatible with what one could call - dare one say it? - a social democratic project. Even more strange is the fact that this entire agenda is

already in operation. Large parts of it have been a focus of the work, particularly, of organised labour, and also of community organisations, since the second half of the eighties.

The entire Labour Relations Act issue, culminating in the tripartite agreement of September 1990, was just the most dramatic sign of the emergence of a more democratic economic system. A critical part of that agreement was the undertaking by parties to it to establish a forum where all labour issues could be negotiated (see Geoff Schreiner - 'Restructuring the NMC', *SA Labour Bulletin*, July/August 1991).

While it may take time, there is little doubt that this body (or a mutually acceptable substitute) will eventually become the forum for negotiations on economic strategy in its broadest sense. The establishment of an economic negotiating forum, as demanded by COSATU, is now merely a matter of time. It has the support of influential sections of organised business and even of some cabinet ministers. Details over appropriate participants and structures are the issues still to be negotiated.

One weighty question that all parties still have seriously to confront is : who will represent the interests of the unorganised, largely unemployed, marginalised members of society? This aside, though, redistribution questions are already being addressed through, for

example, the Independent Development Trust, and the Development Bank.

Once an interim government and an economic negotiating forum are established, any shortcomings in consultation and accountability in the operations of these projects can be addressed, and new ones established if and where this is considered necessary.

Advances

At a less centralised level, debate and negotiation on micro economic issues are almost as old as modern day trade unionism itself. The early nineties have, however, seen substantial advances and more are promised. Last year's job security and training agreements in the metal and motor sectors, and the social and union rights agreement in the mining industry are examples.

The recent clothing and textile sector agreement on industrial policy, in which the South African Clothing and Textile Workers Union played a central role, is another highly sophisticated example of the potential that exists for labour's participation in schemes designed to enhance economic growth and job creation.

Bilateral agreements of this sort are not the limit of what can be achieved in a social democracy, of course. Worker participation in the firm's decision making can occur through decentralised agreement or it can be legislated for. This is the meaning

of the term 'worker control' in these circumstances - as close to 'socialisation' of the means of production that social democracy can achieve.

It is a lot less than traditional socialists would want. It assumes the continued existence of the private sector. It certainly does not mean the end of conflict between management and labour. In the most advanced social democracies - where there is an underlying acceptance of the status quo - industrial and social conflict is fought out over complex shifts in balances of power and advantage, either through mass mobilisation, the legal system or the legislature, or a combination of these.

South African socialists have, at this stage, given the absence of any credible socialist model anywhere in the world, little realistic option but to pursue, in the short to medium term, what amounts to a social democratic agenda. As much of the eighties in Europe - as well as recent events in Sweden - show, social democracy itself has to undergo a serious re-examination of its priorities, limits and goals.

The irony is that - as the experience of western and northern Europe shows - the more comprehensively these goals are achieved, the more will wither on the vine of improved quality of life the revolutionary consciousness of the working class on which the socialist revolution depends. ☆