

A WORLD UPSIDE DOWN? A BALANCE SHEET OF THE YEAR 1989

A Case of Political Blindness

The 7th Congress of the South African Communist Party (SACP) was convened in 1989. Delegates, according to the *African Communist* (No.118, Third Quarter 1989) were of 'political and theoretical maturity'. They were presented at conference with a revised party programme which they subjected to scrutiny 'sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph' (p.12). Readers of the *African Communist* had been primed by the previous issue to believe that there were words of profundity in this document. Govan Mbeki, Jay Naidoo, Jack Simons, and the great man himself, Oliver Tambo, had written to express their admiration for the programme that was to be submitted for adoption. Always eager to learn we read the printed programme and wondered, firstly at the ignorance of the drafters, and secondly at the nature of that scrutiny. Did delegates really believe the nonsense that appeared in their draft copies? Were they so short-sighted that they could not see through the absurdities of the document in their hands?

Adopted — after scrutiny, 'sentence by sentence' — only a few months before their world was turned upside down. The document proclaimed:

Socialist countries today represent a powerful international force. Some of them possess highly developed economies, a considerable scientific base, and a reliable military defence potential...A new way of life is taking shape in which there are neither oppressors nor the oppressed, neither exploiters nor the exploited, in which power belongs to the people.

This was not all. With barely a hint that there might be cause to doubt (despite a reference to 'extensive bureaucratic control and criminal violations of socialist justice' in the USSR) the authors of the document spoke of the 'growing might' of the socialist countries which brought changes to the forces opposing imperialism. These socialist countries, they claimed, 'inspire the working people throughout the world to struggle for social and national emancipation' and 'provide significant and many sided support to revolutionary movements throughout the world.' Yea! they proclaimed: 'Socialism has demonstrated the enormous potential for all-round progress' (pp.78-79). These were the words of wisdom acclaimed by an unknown number of delegates who were so elated that they erupted into song at the end of the conference. What inspiration, what profundity, they showed — when they declaimed:

USlovo no Tambo Makomando
[Slovo and Tambo are our commanders]

We grant that it is not given to all to predict events. We grant further that there has been so much concealment for so long that most delegates could not have guessed at what lay in store for their 'socialist countries' in eastern Europe. But they should have been warned — if they had only listened to some of the voices coming out of those countries. The people of these 'socialist' states had no cause to believe that 'socialism has demonstrated the enormous potential for all-round progress'

Benin - The Land of Make Believe

In line with the absurdity of the SACP programme we turn, for light relief, to events in a remote country in west Africa. On 9 December 1989 the government of Benin declared that the country would no longer follow the path of Marxist-Leninism, would cease to exist as a one-party state and that its economy would henceforth move closer to the western world. Few people knew where this state was, or even known it under its former name, Dahomey. Even fewer would have known that state officials had not been paid for months and that there were angry demonstrations in the streets of the capital.

There is no indication that the change caused any perceptible interest in the White House, Paris, or Whitehall and it is doubtful whether there was any more interest in Moscow or in Beijing. Yet this event underlines again, and again, that no state is an island and that the fate of the smallest country is tied to events in the capitals of the world. Set against the dramatic news from eastern Europe, announcing the virtual collapse of Stalinism, the news from this Ruritanian state has a further significance in world terms in underlining the absurd pretensions of countries such as Benin whose governments have claimed to be communist.

A few years ago there were at least fourteen states in Africa that were said to be following the 'Marxist' path to socialism: Angola, Benin, Burundi, Cape Verde, the Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Malagasy, Mozambique, Sao Tome and Principe, and Zimbabwe. In earlier days similar claims had been made by, or on behalf of: Algeria, Ghana and Tanzania (see the article on C.L.R. James in this issue). The leaders, from Ben Bella and Kwame Nkrumah to Sekou Toure sought a new place to pay their respects. Few stopped to ask what had gone wrong. They wiped away their tears, found that their one-time heroes had grave personal defects that had gone unobserved, and praised new leaders in other states who would lead humanity along the 'shining path'.

The obvious need to explore the nature of the societies that had spawned 'African socialism' went by default. There were few analyses of the political economies of these societies before they achieved political independence and

equally little attention was paid to the class structure of these states. Even more seriously, when the ideologue of the Algerian revolution, Franz Fanon (among others) rejected the working class as parasitic, few stood up to question this new theorist of revolution. It is as if the very premises of Marxism had been forgotten, even by those who professed to be disciples of Marx. Worse was to follow. When the 'socialist' leaders of the African states left the pre-colonial social and economic structures intact, there were few who dared to speak up. Yet, it was easy to see that the local appropriation of whatever wealth the society possessed remained in the hands of small cliques who controlled government office or filled privileged positions in society.

There is little need to add that the altered status of Benin will not alter the social structure of the country, will not lead to a redistribution of resources in the country, and will leave the people as impoverished as before. Even if some heads do roll the change from a 'Marxist-Leninist' to the new 'western-style' state will not lead to any basic transformation in the country. The class of expropriators — if not its incumbents — will remain unaltered.

Collapse in East Europe

What happened in Benin would have warranted little comment if it had not followed in the wake of events in eastern Europe. The fate of this African state would not even have been noticed and would not have found a place in the overcrowded pages of the media. But it is precisely because the dissolution of this 'socialist' state is so absurd that it has found a place alongside the momentous events of China, the Soviet Union and eastern Europe. The farce played out in Benin throws light on the real drama in the so-called communist states. The switch in government policy in this pocket state will not effect the course of world events, but it reflects, as in a distorting mirror, the votes in the parliaments of Poland and Hungary to scrap communist party control. At the same time the ending of one-party rule in Germany and Czechoslovakia mirrors the end of no-party rule in Benin.

It seems to us that the course of events in Europe, China and even Benin has left a trail of illusions — and disillusion — among socialists that needs urgent examination. To this end we start with a balance sheet of what has happened before seeking out the underlying dynamic of events. Firstly we must get the record straight. The demand for change in eastern Europe did not begin in 1989. The record of strikes and revolts, in the USSR, and then in its satellite states, extends back over many decades. Despite the silence surrounding many of these struggles their existence can no longer be denied. Strikes and riots in the USSR, uprisings in east Germany and Poland, like the Soviet invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia, are common knowledge. All that is new is the confessions by Soviet leaders that the use of the Soviet army to crush popular uprisings was unjustified.

It is not possible to view events in eastern Europe without looking at the developments inside the USSR. Not because everything was determined

from within the Soviet state but because the possibility of Soviet military intervention was omnipresent. In almost all the satellite countries (Yugoslavia and Albania excepted), Stalinist regimes were imposed by the Red Army at the end of the Second World War. The complete panoply of repressive agencies, perfected in the USSR were built into these states—involving secret police, judiciary and prison systems. An elaborate network of repression, ruthlessly silenced all critical thought. Some of these states were also stripped of their industries by Stalin (in the name of war reparations) and large bodies of men and women used as unskilled labourers in reconstructing the Soviet Union. Furthermore, Soviet troops were stationed in these countries, or held in readiness at the border.

The new regimes were welcomed by some sections of the population. After years of militarist or fascist control it seemed to many that a new era was in sight. However, that illusion did not last for long—despite the claims of communist parties outside eastern Europe that a new, better, society had been established. In fact the local population soon found that it had exchanged one repressive society for another. There was ample cause for resentment over the subordination to Russian demands and the presence of an arrogant occupying army. There was a deep discontent over the direction of local affairs by a bureaucracy that cravenly followed the Russian model, with its ever widening system of thought control and the familiar knock on the door at 4.0 a.m. Above all else, countries where industries had once flourished went into economic decline, the shops were emptied, farms failed to produce and social amenities declined.

There have been rumblings in many centres during the 1980s, but those that received most publicity occurred in Poland. There, against all the odds, a series of major strikes led to the formation of the trade union movement known as Solidarity. Over a decade, this union confronted the state, was illegalized, and then won back its right to exist. Now a political party with strong support from a section of the intelligentsia and the Roman Catholic hierarchy, Solidarity has taken control of the government with effects that will be discussed below.

The confrontation in Poland took place over a decade and received widespread publicity. Except for Romania, at the end of 1989, confrontations in other eastern European states were less dramatic. In several centres groups were formed to campaign for human rights under the Helsinki Charter. They were not dissimilar to the protests organized by Sakharov and others in the USSR, and leading dissidents achieved prominence in the west when they were arrested and imprisoned. But there were few signs of large scale protest, or of large followings for these campaigners. Furthermore the protesters seemed to be drawn from a limited group of people, mainly intellectuals, with no perceptible large scale following.

The focus of protest switched to China in May and June 1989. Starting as a student call for democratic reforms demonstrators were joined by workers in Beijing, Shanghai and other major cities of China. There was little coherence in a movement that mushroomed into a massive display of dis-

satisfaction. The students rallied millions in a melange of demands that ranged from calls for greater democracy to support for members of the Chinese Communist Party who wanted to open the economy to market forces. The one common factor was the disaffection of the population and the demand that privileges (for the elite) be abandoned. When it seemed that the student's led movement might prevail, at least in the cities, and an independent trade union was started, the army was called in to crush the protest. Nothing we say can bring back to life those killed by the armed forces or executed by the state. No sympathy for their fate can undo the fact that there was no real hope for a movement that was not backed by a revolutionary movement able to rally the workers and peasants on a programme and thus overthrow the existing government. Yet, despite the defeat, and despite the buckets of tears shed by the right, socialists everywhere were heartened by the spectacle of men and women in revolt.

While China shook there were struggles and strikes in the USSR, the very centre of the 'communist' world. Despite the one-time claim that socialism had been finally built, the news from the USSR indicated that there was deep discontent over the course of events. There was massive dissatisfaction, concealed behind obvious grief: after a series of man-made catastrophes: over the atomic plant in Chernobyl, the oil-pipe explosion and the train crash in central Russia, the collapse of poorly built houses in Armenia following the earthquake. There were demands for food and there were bread riots, calls for the end of privileges for the few, attacks on corruption at the centre of the party. Arising alongside these complaints, and growing out of the miserable conditions inside the USSR, there were ethnic riots, nationalist irredentism, religious rivalries. Despite all previous claims that such matters had been peacefully settled (by the beneficent Stalin, of course), the so-called land of socialism has spawned racism and a virulent anti-semitism, religious intolerance, and inter-ethnic chauvinism.

It is against the backdrop of chronic food shortages, industrial mismanagement, faltering social services and bureaucratic inefficiency that the miner's strikes of July 1989 must be viewed. The miners declared their opposition to private enterprise, the introduction of market forces and privileges for the elite. They demanded better working conditions, more consumer goods, workers' committees, a change in personnel of Soviet and party committees and improved workers' conditions both at work and at home. These were conceded, but on condition that there would be no political demands. So successful was the regime that it was able to ban strikes in the energy industry (among others), without fulfilling most of its promises. Despite the return of the miners to work, their demands have not been honoured. There has certainly not been any transformation of the social system in the USSR even though the name Stalin has become a term of abuse in the Soviet press. The name has been condemned in order to continue the system under new management.

After this, Solidarity in Poland acquired a new-momentum and protest movements in the satellite states seemed to take fire. In turn, the crowds

moved into the streets and squares of the cities of Hungary, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and then Bulgaria and Romania. People were rallied in the name of civil liberty and the church offered a focus around which organization could take place.

The only existing party in each country — all moulded in the Stalinist fashion — produced new figureheads who postured as ‘reformists’ and in some cases, saved many of the old state institutions. There were local variations. In Hungary the Communist Party effectively surrendered power — although its personnel continued to occupy the centre stage. In east Germany the protest took the form, initially, of a massive escape to west Germany, made possible by Hungary opening its borders and encouraging the migration. Here too, a ‘reformed’ hierarchy has stayed in control. In Czechoslovakia the Communist Party surrendered its leading role while its second tier leaders sought new areas in which to entrench themselves. In Bulgaria a series of changes inside the ruling party has temporarily maintained it as the leading force in the state.

Events in Romania took a more dramatic turn. In this case a regime that had been isolated inside the Warsaw pact alliance had few friends in the eastern European bloc. Its hard-line leadership (once beholden to Mao and the discredited cultural revolution and then to the ‘conquerors’ of Beijing) tried to stop the protests by emulating the Chinese leadership. Its utter inflexibility, and its efforts to brazen out change by the use of armed force might have worked in a different climate. However, the change that was sweeping through eastern Europe was unstoppable and the government folded when the army joined the protests. There are conflicting stories, some alleging that the revolution was in effect a coup — or at least, not quite as spontaneous as early commentators suggested. What is clear is that with the discrediting of the security police, and the shoot-out in the major cities, this has left the army in effective control of the country today

There can be little doubt that the system was rotten-ripe for change. The old leadership was corrupt; the political process was restricted to a privileged minority; the cultural and intellectual life had atrophied — or been destroyed; and the economic gap between the elite (in army, police and party and their servile followers) and the rest of the population had outstripped that in the western world.

However, the speed with which this has all happened and the glee with which the events have been greeted in the west calls for reflection. There are too many factors that do not make sense. Why, after all these decades of suppression, did the Soviet army not act? In fact, the Soviet army stationed in east Germany was told to stay in its barracks. In the same way the leadership in the USSR gave its nod to a Solidarity government in Poland, and has obviously had a hand in generating the changes in the rest of its satellite states. Was it really a sheep that assumed the shape of a wolf in days gone by? Had the Soviet army (and the dreaded secret police) suddenly discovered its humanity? Had the heirs of Stalin been converted? In the light of the ‘Gorby’ mania that swept through eastern European states, is it possible that the communist parties have been transformed?

Where is the USSR Going?

In seeking an answer to the questions that every socialist has been asking about events in the USSR we turned to the editorial (written by Hillel Ticktin) in the latest issue of *Critique*. In questioning the stories coming out of the USSR of a collapsing economy and of massive inflation Ticktin points out that the elite has found it useful to present this view of society in order to urge restraint on the working class and reduce subsidies on food, rent and transport. The malaise in the system does not lie in some financial crisis but in the exploitative system that is threatened by a new working class militancy. It is this that is the real crisis in the Soviet state.

Gorbachev's task is to protect the elite, satisfy their needs (for videos, computers and so on), protect the party functionaries with

...their summer houses, special shops, sanatoria, palatial party offices, health facilities... Gorbachev demands that the workers work harder and accept a still greater differentiation in income. The regime rails against levelling (or egalitarianism), which has never been so strong in popular consciousness as today. The reformers demand *an end* to forms of equality in pay. They demand a *differentiation* between workers and the right of the manager to manage. The workers have elected their own officials in various towns and clearly show that they want a democratic form of control over the system, which is not just cosmetic. Hitherto all concessions to workers...have been minimal, designed to incorporate rather than give control. It can now be seen why the regime needs a crisis. It needs an apparently uncontrollable problem as an enemy to be tamed by the nation as a whole.

Continuing an analysis that has been unique to *Critique*, Ticktin maintains that the elite in the USSR has few available alternatives. It cannot rule in the old way and the west cannot provide the economic aid required to pull the Soviet economy out of the quagmire. One solution is political repression while political polarisation proceeds apace. He quotes the well known Soviet socialist Kagarlitskii who writes in his 'Dialectic of Change' (*New Left Review*, No.169), of a bloc between elements of 'the technocracy' and the Stalinists who opposes democracy. At the same time they support workers against the imposition of the market. It also uses workers in its battle with nationalist or reformist forces of the centre, depending on the context. On the left, social democratic forces are trying to gain support from the workers. The reformist apparatus has based itself on the intelligentsia but finds it too vacillating. Unable to extend itself to the working class, which it has attacked almost without pause since 1985, it has a limited degree of support.

A coalition now appears to be emerging between market reformers and authoritarian Slavophiles. Such a bloc formation is problematical, but the intelligentsia is, in general, anti-democratic with a programme which is either for the market or for something akin to fascism, in the shape of the organisa-

tion, Pamiat. The Soviet elite, on the other hand, cannot fulfil the aspirations of either the workers or the intelligentsia and because it cannot work we can expect a period of repression, with a clampdown on workers' action. The elite cannot defeat the workers, but will not surrender power. The period of discontent can only intensify, with the standard of living coming under pressure and civil rights withdrawn.

If the workers do support one of the opposition groups, or found their own party, the regime will be on the verge of revolution. Ticktin writes:

Sporadic strikes have indeed re-appeared and workers committees have established themselves in miners' areas. But the regime is now hell bent on accelerating the pace of the market reform. Something has to give.

However there are other possibilities. The USSR has already withdrawn its support and assistance to so-called national liberatory organisations and regimes. The resources that have been saved can be diverted to internal uses. In return, a grateful United States has altered its cold war rhetoric and gives verbal support to Gorbachev. In this altered climate, the USSR call for the market provided the lead to which communist parties in eastern Europe responded. They either surrendered power or made way for an alternative elite that can and will implement the market.

In Poland the Solidarity-led government has introduced measures for privatisation allowing the Polish elite and a section of the intelligentsia to acquire property and establish themselves as a capitalist class, while maintaining austerity for the working class. It will now be Solidarity's historic task to axe subsidies, supervise bankruptcies and unemployment, and stop workers organizing against unpopular measures. Social democrats in the west still have something to learn from their friends in Warsaw.

The same path has been adopted by the Hungarians, not under the aegis of another party, but through the instrument of a 'reformed' communist party. In its wake the other eastern European governments have accepted the need to take the same path – even to the extent of calling for the end to the old system where the former leadership did not move fast enough. What a remarkable scene: Hungary demanding the end to the communist regime in east Germany and opening its borders to Germans who wished to decamp; East Germany (having seen the 'light') urging the Czech leaders to follow suit; and all these states baying for the end of the control by the old-style Romanian leaders.

Of course, a huge popular groundswell led to the mass demonstrations in the streets of Leipzig, Berlin, Dresden, Prague and Bucharest. Nonetheless, even though the full story has yet to emerge, we emphasize: *the deposition of the old leaders was welcomed by those very forces that previously supported the now departed leaders.* Gorbachev has blessed the action – alongside Bush, Thatcher, Kohl and the leaders of the capitalist west. Who then has gained most from the dramatic events of 1989?

The Winners and the Losers

'What a wonderful Christmas present for the people of Romania' said Mr Kinnock in response to the news from Bucharest, thereby echoing Mrs Thatcher. Stretching in a human chain from Washington to the furthest reach of Siberia there are congratulations over the changes in Europe. From Bush, through the leaders of west Europe to the Pope in Rome and the Patriarchs of the Orthodox Church; from Lech Walesa in Poland to the trade union leaders of Great Britain; and from Ministers in the South African government who have rushed to eastern Europe to recruit skilled workers, there are mutual congratulations over the fall of the so-called communist regimes.

For these western leaders the prize seems obvious. With the departure of the old Stalinist leaders there might in some cases be an incentive for capital investment and for trade with the citizens of the 'liberated' territories. We are sceptical, but we leave it to our readers to imagine all the goodies that can be made, packed, transported and sold in the hinterland of Europe. Imagine the use to which cheap labour can be used in eastern Europe if capitalism can be made to work, and profits can be extracted for foreign investors! Precisely how the populations of the liberated states will bear the importation of western capital, western factories, western goods and food is not yet clear. But it is not hard to see more indebtedness, more inflation, more unemployment, more poverty. That is 'a wonderful Christmas present for the people.'

There is also a prize for Mr Gorbachev if these changes can only be made to work. He will have allied states who have moved into the market and this will act as a half-way house for his own tentative moves in that direction. At the same time this will act as a deterrent to different sections of the Soviet population. For some there will be a warning that they must make some movement along the road he has laid down: for others a warning that movement that is too precipitous can end by sweeping them all away. And Gorbachev's moves to welcome the changes can only assist businessmen who have not yet taken firm decisions that the USSR is safe for investment.

At a stroke, Gorbachev has overseen the removal of the apparatus in eastern Europe that might have sustained his adverseries in the *nomenklatura* in the USSR. But that is if it works. If on the other hand the events of 1989 spark off fresh discontent in the USSR, a new wave of strikes, ethnic conflict and nationalist demands will destabilize the regime. At that stage will Bush and Thatcher, Kohl and Kinnock, and perhaps the Pope, rush in to prop up 'comrade' Gorbachev?

Communism and South Africa

The editors of *Searchlight South Africa* have insisted from its inception that there was no socialism in the USSR, in eastern Europe or in China. In taking this position we had no illusion that this would be widely accepted. Our viewpoint placed us in a minority—apparently isolated from popular opinion,

and seemingly unable to join with the forces of progress, not only in South Africa but across the world.

The fact that world wide events have shown us to be correct does not bring us pleasure. Every defeat, real or apparent, acts against the people's struggle for socialism and devalues the ideals of humankind. We must expect that in the coming period there will be a retreat from the very idea of socialism and that communism will be, for many, a dirty word.

Yet, despite the inevitable swing in public opinion after the massacres in China and Romania, the abdication of the communist parties of Poland and Hungary, and the collapse of the governments in east Germany, Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria, there is one positive gain: the myths of Stalinism and of Maoism have been exploded. They are known to have been monstrous lies imposed on the working class movement. The question must now be faced by every member of the ANC and the Communist Party in South Africa: are they prepared to cast aside the Stalinism that has haunted the left for nearly 70 years? By the same token, is the PAC (and its associated movements) prepared to shed the discredited conception of one-party statism that it inherited via Stalinism from the ideologues of Pan-Africanism? And will those groups that are associated with, or grew out of, the Unity Movement recognize that past acceptance of events in eastern Europe or Asia rendered them equally guilty in relation to the states they endorsed?

We are not only asking a question — but calling on every thinking person to decide now how they believe their organization must respond to the shattering events of 1989. In making this declaration they must also grasp the fact that the struggle in Southern Africa is not isolated from events elsewhere in the world. The SACP always carried a commitment to the policies of the USSR — despite the fact that they did not argue as internationalists. Similarly, other political movements have always linked their struggles to events elsewhere, whether it was in Africa, in the so-called Third World, the Non-Aligned countries, or any other alliance of states.

While we write we notice the posturing of Mr Mugabe in Zimbabwe. Despite the crumbling of his ideas about him he still talks of a one-party state, of a Marxist-Leninist state. Citizens in his state still use the title 'Comrade' as a personal-handle in communication. All this in a land of gross inequality and widespread poverty. Are there no persons in this country able to stand up and challenge this farce before it too crumbles and brings further disillusionment to the people of Zimbabwe?

It will take time and it will take courage for socialists to face up to the lessons that must be drawn from the debacle of Stalinism.. It will also be difficult for people in the former colonial states, in Africa, Latin America and Asia, to stand up and say that the model, copied by their movements and their leaders from the USSR, was wrong. It might take an even longer time before such movements can meet and remove every sign of authoritarian control — but this is the message that must be drawn from the events of 1989. The martyrdom of so many thousands of people, in whatever part of the world, must be taken as the price that has been paid by humanity to secure a new

international movement, dedicated to the construction of democratic socialism.

For those who wish to draw a positive message from the events of 1989 there will have to be much serious thinking. There will have to be a reassessment of their understanding of the nature of the Soviet Union and/or China. For those who have stayed loyal to the Soviet regime – and none have been more loyal than the South African Communist Party – there must be an end to the brainless chanting of slogans and repetition of stupid lies. The eulogies to leaders must be replaced with critical appraisal of what has been done, and what achieved. The history of the left must be rediscovered and hidden pages exposed for all to see and there must be a serious reconsideration of political principles. It is not enough to ‘rehabilitate’ those who were killed or driven to their death as was done to S.P. Bunting, Lazar Bach and the Richter brothers. In fact the very thought of such rehabilitation is sickening. If past crimes are to be wiped out there must be a reconsideration of what went wrong and why members of the Communist Party allowed such activities to go unanswered. Until that is done there can be no understanding of what went wrong in the USSR, in eastern Europe and China.

The illusion that a socialist society can emerge without such searching must become a thing of the past. It is the task of the revolutionary movement to examine and re-examine every step taken in the struggle for socialism. This is a mighty project which will demand the labour of workers, peasants and intellectuals everywhere.

Stalinism and Maoism are dead. Their shrouds must be buried.