

Another side of the Berlin Wall

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November 9, 2019



Delegates from Chile at 1973 World Festival of Youth and Students in the German Democratic Republic. Socialist Germany provided a safe haven for thousands of Chilean activists after the U.S.-backed fascist coup.

Thirty years ago, a labor organization was on strike under very difficult conditions.

This workers' organization and its leadership were castigated by the corporate media. The bosses threatened, cajoled and bribed people to cross the picket line. Scabs were brought in. The heads of the international union colluded with the capitalists to undermine the strike.

Eventually, the strike was lost. But that wasn't enough for the bosses.

Not satisfied with lowering the workers' wages and benefits and breaking the union, they sent their state apparatus after the strike leaders with accusations of heinous crimes. The former president was driven into exile to escape prosecution.

The labor organization in question was Amalgamated Transit Workers Union Local 1202, which went on strike against behemoth Greyhound Bus Lines in February 1990.

But everything written above also applies to the German Democratic Republic-socialist East Germany-and the fall of the Berlin Wall a few months earlier, in November 1989. Both the capitalist class and some misinformed progressives have been crowing over the 30th anniversary of that event.



Railway workers in the GDR, 1955.

Picket line means 'Do not cross!'

Ask anyone who's been on strike if it is ever okay to cross a picket line, and you will likely hear a resounding "No!"

The Berlin Wall — so maligned and condemned by war-making imperialists and hand-wringing liberals alike — was nothing but a picket line on a much larger scale.

The wall was erected in 1961 in response to provocations from U.S. imperialism and its West German junior partner meant to destroy the attempt to build socialism in

eastern Germany. These provocations included infiltrating East Berlin with anti-communist agents, military threats and bribing specialists whose labor was need by the workers' state — the so-called “brain drain.”

The disgusting myth that the Berlin Wall was erected to destroy the freedom of Berliners, immortalized in President John F. Kennedy's famous donut speech (“Ich bin ein Berliner,” which translates as “I am a jelly donut”), is just the opposite of the truth. The capitalist powers wanted to crush the working class's freedom to build a society unchained from the profit motive.

The Berlin Wall was a world away from the apartheid wall built by Israel around Palestinian population centers, the U.S./South Korean military wall that separates family members from North Korea or the expanded U.S. wall against immigrants on the border with Mexico.

What is the difference? Those walls are aimed at repressing the workers and oppressed. The Berlin Wall, by contrast, was built in defense of the workers and oppressed.

Socialist Germany's accomplishments

The GDR wasn't the product of a classical revolutionary uprising. It was formed by an alliance of German communist, socialist and workers' movements that had resisted Nazism and survived World War II, and the Soviet Red Army that liberated the eastern part of the country, all under the military and economic pressure of the U.S.-initiated Cold War. It was only established after U.S. imperialism and its new allies in the vanquished German ruling class had begun to build up West Germany as a bulwark of aggression against the USSR and its allies.

In some ways, it was a halfway house of socialism.

But whatever its faults, the GDR was a workers' state that provided jobs, housing

and health care for all its residents. It provided aid and support, including military and medical aid, to national liberation movements throughout the world, including the struggle against apartheid in southern Africa.

The GDR provided a safe haven for refugees from fascist terror in countries like Chile and Argentina. Socialist Germany also provided jobs and education for guest workers and students from Asia, Africa and the Middle East — many of whom were terrorized or driven out of the GDR by fascist attackers in the early 1990s after reunification with imperialist West Germany.

East Germany was far ahead of any country in the world in lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights and freedoms. The gay liberation movement as we know it grew up within the German socialist and communist movements of the 19th and early 20th centuries.



East German youth in the late 1970s.

Regarding women's rights to education, jobs and housing, and especially in establishing extensive child care, the GDR made enormous strides. Much of this progress was wiped away when the GDR fell.

The German Democratic Republic had a right to defend its sovereignty from imperialism, all the more so since the border between East and West Germany was also the border between the imperialist and the pro-socialist world camps.

Those who cannot or will not defend the right of a workers' organization to defend itself — whether it is a union, a resistance movement or a workers' state — will never be able to carry out a successful revolutionary struggle.

Sincere revolutionaries have to learn this lesson, and it is incumbent on those of us who lived through those terrible setbacks to help educate new generations.

