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Marxism and the ideological crisis: The socialist perspective and the collapse of the USSR

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83. Страхов-Браславский А.
Раскрепощенная женщина — строй социализм! 1926

From the USSR, 1926: “Emancipated Woman – Build Socialism!”

The following is excerpted from a document written by Fred Goldstein in April 2006. The discussion of the socialist perspective is as relevant today as when it was written.

Introduction

The destiny of the working class and all of humanity in the foreseeable future ultimately depends upon the thoroughgoing revival on a world scale of revolutionary

Marxism and on the victorious struggle for socialism and communism — the only true application of Marxist revolutionary science. Inasmuch as U.S. imperialism is the primary instigator of war and intervention, the wellspring of reaction and oppression, and the bulwark of world capitalism, in no place is it more important to fight for the revival of the struggle for socialism than in the United States. No ruling class poses such an overarching threat to humanity and to the planet as does U.S. monopoly capital.

We are mindful that this assertion is put forward in a period when the working class is on the defensive and revolutionary horizons seem distant.

Fifteen years ago (1991) a blanket of reaction fell over the planet after the collapse of the USSR and Eastern Europe. This terrible setback had been preceded by the opening up of China to foreign and domestic capital and the abandonment by the Chinese government of revolutionary internationalism. The subsequent 9/11 catastrophe gave U.S. imperialism an opening for a worldwide offensive.

The purpose of this document is to put forward a review and an analysis for discussion. The bulk of the material and arguments presented here pertain to the U.S. However, the trends outlined exist in all the imperialist countries, although in different stages of development.

Today, Washington's military offensive is stalled in the cities and towns of Iraq and in the hinterlands of Afghanistan. The U.S. government is facing numerous fronts of political and diplomatic confrontation. The fact is that U.S. imperialism is steadily losing its grip on world events in spite of its "superpower" status — a sign of decline. But, with exceptions, the world movement is still on the defensive and political reaction is still a dominant force, particularly in the imperialist heartland.

One can have no illusions as to the formidable obstacles facing the revolutionary movement. Nevertheless, the fact that the task is formidable does not make it any

less necessary or any less urgent. It is an indisputable fact that all economic, social, political and environmental evils of contemporary society are a direct outgrowth of the present-day profit system in its decadent stage, the stage of imperialism.

Socialism is the antithesis of capitalism, its only form of negation. There is no other historically possible resolution of capitalism's fundamental contradictions. The antagonistic social relations created by capitalism weigh oppressively on the vast majority of humanity.

The overriding contradiction governing all of modern society is between, on the one hand, the private ownership of the world's vast means of production by a tiny minority of fabulously wealthy corporate financiers who operate the entire system for profit and, on the other, the highly developed, interdependent, socialized global production process set in motion 24 hours a day by the labor of the world's working class under increasingly onerous conditions.

There are no depths of criminality and barbarism to which the ruling class will not go in order to perpetuate this system of exploitation. There is no act of military aggression, no form of torture, no level of grinding exploitation, no environmental threat to life on the planet that capitalism will reject. From the genocide of Indigenous peoples to the slave trade, to the holocaust, to the expulsion of whole populations, to annihilating major cities with nuclear bombs, there is nothing that the capitalist class will shrink from in its insatiable quest for profit, its thirst for surplus value, its irresistible drive to accumulate and multiply its capital.

These acts are not simply a matter of personal greed or human nature. While greed and capitalism are mutually reinforcing, it is capitalism that creates greed, not greed that creates capitalism. The maximization of profit through the exploitation of labor power and the pillage of the world's resources is the iron law of capitalism. To put an end to the operation of the laws of capitalism, society must put an end to capitalism itself. And the only significant class in modern society that has both the

social and economic power and the deeply rooted historical class interest to end capitalist exploitation is the working class.

The recognition of these fundamental propositions is the theoretical and political starting point for the rebirth of the ideological struggle for socialism.

Period of reaction and seeds of revival

Although political reaction prevails in the imperialist world and in the U.S. in particular, nevertheless, the history of capitalism in the last century is filled with both advances and setbacks for the workers and the oppressed. There have been periods of upsurge and periods of deep reaction. While it is undeniable that the collapse of the USSR transcends in its effects all previous setbacks in the history of the working-class movement, the current period of reaction, like all periods of reaction, contains within itself the seeds of its own dissolution.

The collapse of the USSR and Eastern Europe put an end to the first historic phase of the struggle for world socialism. Marxism suffered a great setback in its wake. But Marxism cannot be extinguished and it cannot be suppressed for long because it is the most effective ideological tool with which the exploited and oppressed can conduct their struggle. It expresses openly and in plain language the class truth about the workers' true condition in society and clearly outlines the road to emancipation. Imperialism in the age of the scientific revolution is expanding and deepening exploitation and oppression on an unprecedented scale.

What is referred to as "globalization" is, in fact, a process that can only be described as the expanded export of capital and the use of cutthroat trade by giant transnational corporations to pile up huge profits at the expense of the people of the world. In short, it is a phase of intensification and widening of the imperialist plunder of the globe. This process of expanded global exploitation, which is proceeding at breakneck speed due to modern high technology, has profound

consequences at home and abroad and is rapidly developing the groundwork for the next phase of the world historic struggle for socialism.

Lenin in light of the scientific-technological revolution

Lenin's analysis of imperialism must be examined anew in light of this latest phase of the scientific-technological revolution and its impact on trends in the working class. The tendency to create relative privilege among some sectors of the working class, as Lenin pointed out in 1916, certainly still applies. But alongside it a new tendency has grown up, the tendency to destroy privilege among the upper stratum of the workers. At present, this latter tendency is outstripping the former.

In other words, the fallout from the export of capital by the industrial-financial oligarchy that rules imperialism has turned into its opposite. It is still the fundamental source of fabulous superprofits, but in the course of accumulating those profits, by the manner in which finance capital has reorganized world capitalist production, it is now leveling downward the wages and standard of living of the proletariat in the imperialist countries. Instead of fortifying social stability and class peace at home, it is reinforcing the tendency toward the breakup of stability and a renewal of class warfare that was inherent in high tech in the first place.

What began as a technologically based restructuring of industry, largely within national or regional boundaries of the imperialist countries in order to destroy high-wage occupations, has now spread internationally. It has expanded the most ruthless forms of capitalist exploitation into every corner of the globe and is also expanding the proletariat worldwide. This will compel the working class to struggle for its own liberation.

The more finance capital develops the productive forces and the more it socializes production, bringing larger groups of workers into connection with one another on an international scale, the more it also lays the basis for international solidarity as

the antidote to the vicious competition among workers—and the more the system of production comes into conflict with private ownership.

Collapse of the USSR and abandonment of socialist perspective

Despite the present dominance of capital in all political, social and economic spheres in the imperialist countries, there is no question of the eventual reemergence of the class struggle. The revival of the class struggle and social upheaval is as certain as the future of intensified exploitation and crisis under capitalism.

All the accumulating economic and demographic data available to the general public through the capitalist media confirm the Marxist prognosis of impending crisis. It is impossible to tell at what stage capitalism is on the road to that crisis. It is impossible to tell whether or not the ruling class will turn to an escalated war crisis before it arrives at an economic crisis. What is clear is that the discernible trends in the capitalist economic system, i.e., the ruthless orientation of the ruling class to decimate previous concessions to the working class and the oppressed as well as the increasing propensity toward military adventure, both lead in the direction of social upheaval and thus give additional confirmation to Marxist theory. We will come back to this later.

Overcoming ideological crisis is key

For the moment, let us concentrate on the ideological problem—i.e., overcoming the

ideological crisis—which is the fundamental historic problem to be tackled in anticipation of the future struggles. Nothing could be more crucial for the ultimate destiny of the movement and of the workers' struggle than the revival of revolutionary Marxism. Without it, bourgeois ideology and bourgeois politics in one form or another—social democracy or reformism of some type, military authoritarianism or fascism—will allow the ruling class to navigate their crisis and survive the storms that must surely come.

Ideological deterioration longstanding

The revision of Marxism in the international communist movement, particularly in the U.S., Europe and Japan, occurred long before the period leading up to the collapse of the USSR. The ability of capitalism in Europe to revive itself after the Bolshevik revolution and the subsequent victory of fascism had a deleterious influence on the Soviet leadership and the communist parties of the world. After the victory of Hitler, the communist parties largely abandoned the struggle for the socialist revolution and confined themselves to the struggle against fascism and the right-wing and for the preservation of capitalist democracy.

Removing socialist revolution from the immediate agenda was a fundamental revision of Marxism. It was a retreat to reformism.

This orientation was predominant in the world communist movement, save for the period when it was challenged by the Chinese Communist Party under Mao Zedong in the late 1950s and the early 1960s.

The complexities and evolution of the struggle between China and the USSR require an extended treatment and we will touch upon it later. For present purposes it is important to emphasize that the Soviet leadership both collaborated with and competed with imperialism (although on a pragmatic rather than a revolutionary basis) in the struggle between socialism and capitalism on the world arena.

But whatever their policy, the Soviet leaders were the guardians and administrators of the most powerful socialist country. As long as they continued to defend socialism and give assistance to the world struggle, they could never escape the implacable class hostility of the imperialists in the global struggle between the two class camps.

No matter how many times they promoted disarmament and appealed for world peace, no matter how many times they offered to destroy all their nuclear weapons if the West would destroy theirs, they could never make a dent in the aggressive militarism of the Pentagon and the anti-Sovietism of Washington and Wall Street. If there were brief periods of “détente,” they were always in the nature of imperialist maneuvers that would easily be discarded for a return to open hostility.

All the communist parties that followed the policies of the Soviet CP were, like the Soviet CP itself, in a contradictory position with regard to the imperialist bourgeoisie. Just as the Soviet leadership both collaborated with and competed with imperialism, these CPs had a conciliatory reformist attitude toward their own bourgeoisies at home and weak foreign policies in general. But as representatives of the ranks of communist and pro-communist sections of the working class, and as allies of the USSR, they could never escape the hostility of their own ruling classes.

Furthermore, their fundamental connection to the world socialist camp remained precisely in their commitment to defend the USSR, which was perpetually confronted by imperialism during various crises in the global class war against socialism. The defense of the USSR was their remaining, much-diluted connection to the Bolshevik revolution, even though the revolutionary legacy of Leninism had long ago been abandoned.

They might have carried out this defense in a pacifist or other nonrevolutionary way. As followers of the Soviet leadership, they engaged in apologetics for false policies. But at the same time they had to stand up to vicious, unrelenting bourgeois and

social democratic red-baiting during anti-Soviet campaigns. The defense of the USSR against imperialism became a world dividing line between those allied with the socialist camp in some way and those who lined up with imperialism in an anti-Soviet crisis.

Eurocommunism

By the 1970s, this tension between right-wing reformist politics and defense of the socialist camp came to a head in the three largest European CPs — in Italy, France and Spain. The leadership of the Spanish CP propounded the concept of Eurocommunism, an alliance of the European CPs that would no longer have to defend the USSR. The Italian CP called for a “historic compromise” between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat and for entering into the bourgeois government. While all three parties moved sharply to the right, the Italian and Spanish CPs openly abandoned their defense of the socialist camp and turned toward anti-Sovietism. This was a final and complete rupture of their last connection to communism and a defection to imperialism.

The evolution of this development and its significance for the working class movement was analyzed and elaborated in the very important compilation of articles by Sam Marcy entitled [“Eurocommunism: A New Form of Reformism,”](#) written in 1975-1977 and published in 1978 and available on the Marxist Internet Archive.

The basic significance of this development was “the transformation of the CPs from social reformist parties into social chauvinist parties with an anti-Soviet orientation. This is what is new. This is what is truly alarming.”

Marcy described the immediate events leading up to this historic shift to the right and then put it in its broader context:

“It is the fierce and unrelenting pressure of [U.S.] imperialism in full collaboration

with the European ruling class to enlist all sections of the population in an anti-communist crusade against the Soviet Union. This is the most important, the key central fact of the contemporary world struggle.”

Marcy pointed out that Foreign Affairs, a central organ of ruling class strategic thought, “raised the perspective of ‘the exporting of what has come to be known as Eurocommunism from West to East, signifying a historic shift in the direction of world communism.’ [Their emphasis.] By this is meant,” continued Marcy, “the export by the imperialists and their willing tools of counterrevolutionary theories and influence into Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.”

Gorbachev intensifies the crisis

It was only a decade later, in 1985, that this current did move from “West to East” and surfaced dramatically in the Soviet Union with the coming of the regime of Mikhail Gorbachev. In effect, Gorbachev abandoned the world socialist perspective and began the demolition of socialism in the USSR under the slogans of glasnost (openness) and perestroika (reconstruction). Instead of “openness” for proletarian democracy and “reconstruction” of socialist industry, his domestic policies gave the green light to the nascent bourgeoisie in politics and economics.

He and the grouping of technocrats and bourgeois-oriented financial experts around him adopted a foreign policy version of the Italian CP’s “historic compromise,” which was really a code word for surrender. Full-scale collaboration with imperialism was their fundamental orientation. Gorbachev agreed to allow the imperialists a free hand in Eastern Europe and offered not only to deepen collaboration with imperialism, but, most importantly, to end the competition between socialism and capitalism — that is, abandon the support for socialist countries and national liberation movements and disavow the world socialist perspective. This, of course, led to the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe.

Gorbachev, backed by a new bourgeois social layer, turned out to be a transitional figure on the road to capitalist counterrevolution. He began to break down the monopoly on foreign trade, opened up the right to exploit labor, began to undermine the planned economy by putting enterprises on a profit-making basis, denounced “wage leveling” and increased the salary gap between the lower-paid workers and the higher-paid, even further rewarding the already privileged managers and the technical and scientific intelligentsia. In short, he made an open assault on the fundamental institutions of the socialist economy, using a distortion and misapplication of Lenin’s New Economic Policy as a cover.

This threw the world movement into confusion, creating ideological chaos and further splits to the right.

At the same time, the great Chinese socialist revolution had exhausted its revolutionary momentum, both internally and on the world arena. The left had been defeated. The Deng Xiaoping leadership, which was committed to market reforms, had taken over. Thus, there was no revolutionary ideological alternative for the broad communist and socialist movement.

Collapse precipitates broad retreat

The collapse of the USSR and the emergence of triumphal imperialism precipitated the abandonment of the socialist perspective and of Marxism on a broad front.

The USSR was the embodiment of astounding achievements of socialist construction, science and social welfare for the workers. At the same time, the very leaders who presided over socialist construction had an inglorious record that included the abandonment of fundamental socialist norms of proletarian internationalism in foreign policy and proletarian democracy in domestic policy. It was a contradictory phenomenon, but nevertheless most class-conscious workers, revolutionaries and progressives, whether they adhered to the line of the Soviet leaders or were opposed

to it, all took the permanence of the USSR for granted and regarded it as the material fortress of socialism, the most durable attempt to build socialism in the world, with all its errors, defects and deficiencies.

Even those in the movement who had vilified the USSR and declared that capitalist counterrevolution had occurred long ago, either as far back as Kronstadt in 1921 or with the advent of Stalin or with the ascendancy of Khrushchev in 1956, were in shock when the real capitalist counterrevolution came.

Marxism and the collapse

Does collapse invalidate Marxism and socialism?

The fundamental question is whether or not this historic setback refutes or invalidates the science of Marxism and all its revolutionary implications and prognostications. Do these setbacks demand a fundamental modification of the revolutionary socialist perspective in its classical Marxist form?

In the struggle to revive the revolutionary socialist perspective, it is necessary to deal with Marxism, with Leninism, and with the question of the meaning of the collapse of the USSR. We intend to show that the collapse of the USSR is in no way a disqualification of socialism, nor was it the result of flaws in socialism. It does not require any revision of or abandonment of Marx — or of Lenin, who developed Marxism for the age of imperialism.

Marxism — the science of society

With respect to Marxist theory in general, Marx put the study of society on a scientific basis. He uncovered the laws of social development and studied in-depth the laws of capitalism. He worked in the middle of the 19th century, yet his works are the basis for understanding all subsequent development of modern society up

until today. Indeed, the capitalist world economy, with its anarchy of production, overproduction and race to develop the means of production, all with the exploitation of labor power as its driving force, operates today in much the same manner as that described in the “Communist Manifesto” and subsequently analyzed in “Capital.”

No bourgeois theorist of the 19th century, or the 20th for that matter, has either refuted Marx or given any effective alternative theory. Before the collapse of the USSR, bourgeois economists and political scientists were reduced to vulgarization and vilification of Marx as life confirmed his ideas. They would go silent every time their economy went into a periodic crisis of overproduction, creating havoc for millions of workers. It would be the height of folly to abandon such a powerful, explanatory theory — on purely scientific grounds alone.

Marxism a tool for liberation of a billion people

But more to the point, Marxist theory is a revolutionary science of the working class. Implemented in practice by revolutionary leaders like Lenin, Mao, Kim Il Sung, Ho Chi Minh, Clara Zetkin, Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, Celia Sánchez, Vilma Espín, Agostinho Neto, Amílcar Cabral, Samora Machel, Jiang Qing, and others, along with millions of their followers, Marxism was a guiding light in the liberation of a billion workers and peasants from capitalist wage slavery and imperialism in the 20th century. What is more, the anti-imperialist spirit of Marxism and Leninism inspired many more millions who threw off the yoke of colonialism and achieved national independence.

Before the Bolshevik revolution, almost every square mile of the planet was directly under the domination of one imperialist power or another. Capitalist wage slavery and colonial superexploitation were evils that afflicted most of the world’s population. The socialist revolutions of China, Korea and Vietnam contributed directly to the liberation of what was then one-fourth of the human race.

These great historic accomplishments, whatever setbacks have occurred, should be cause enough to fight tirelessly to hold onto revolutionary Marxism and to fight for its revival.

A historic setback, not defeat of system

What occurred in the USSR and Eastern Europe constituted grave and historic setbacks to the cause of socialism, the workers and the oppressed all over the world. But these setbacks must be understood for what they represent qualitatively — for what they are and what they are not. They were defeats in the class struggle between two hostile and irreconcilable class camps. The defeats resulted in a drastic change in the relationship of forces between the workers and the oppressed peoples on the one hand, and imperialism on the other.

Marxism and the socialist perspective do not anywhere state or even imply that such defeats cannot take place. These defeats are not in any way in contradiction to Marxist theory or historical experience. The “Communist Manifesto” opens by stating that the driving force of history is the class struggle. Nowhere does it posit the victory of socialism and communism worldwide on a utopian conception that there will be no great and even historic setbacks along the road. On the contrary, only Marxism itself can scientifically explain those defeats and draw the necessary lessons from them.

Collapse of the Second International

In 1914, on the eve of the first great inter-imperialist war, almost the entire leadership of the European socialist movement in the Second International supported the war efforts of their own imperialist powers. These socialist leaders thus betrayed their pledge to oppose their own ruling classes and to turn the war into a civil war for proletarian revolution.

It was a stunning collapse of the leadership of a mighty working class socialist movement built up over a period of 50 years of struggle — comparable in impact at the time to the collapse of the USSR. It suddenly left millions of workers without leadership in the midst of a war crisis and at the mercy of their respective ruling classes, who plunged them into fire and blood. Tens of millions were killed and maimed before revolution and rebellion put an end to the war. Polemics by Lenin documented the historic magnitude of this betrayal. He, together with Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg of the German Social Democratic Party and the leaders of the Serbian socialist party, not only opposed the war but also called for the defeat of their own ruling classes.

The working-class movement was rescued from this historic setback by the Bolshevik revolution three years later, which turned the entire international situation around, from disaster to revolutionary upsurge. In the wake of the revolution, the collapse seemed to fade because its effects were overcome by subsequent events. But it is a demonstration that setbacks of the greatest magnitude are part and parcel of the long struggle against capitalism and for the socialist revolution.

Imperialism and the collapse of the USSR

Peaceful collapse of USSR and bourgeois distortions

What made the collapse of the USSR such a great ideological setback for Marxism was that it took place without an internal struggle by the workers or any discernible assault by imperialism. If the counterrevolution had triumphed by a civil war, openly fomented and backed by an invasion, and the USSR had perished in battle after resistance by the workers, as happened with the Paris Commune of 1871, the effect on the world struggle would have been entirely different.

But the collapse without a battle by the workers to defend the socialist system against capitalist counterrevolution opened the floodgates to bourgeois ideologists and propagandists to preach the end of socialism in history and to declare it fundamentally flawed and disqualified as a social system. By extension, Marxism was declared obsolete.

It was the absence of open battle by the workers under the leadership of sections of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in defense of socialist property that must be explained. This factor is supposed to be the ultimate “strong point” in the bourgeois argument that socialism is fatally flawed. But these so-called “strong points” are based upon several great bourgeois lies.

The role of imperialism

The first lie is that the imperialists were innocent bystanders. They simply sat back and watched as socialism “imploded,” as they put it, from a self-generated internal crisis. In their celebration of the so-called failure of socialism, bourgeois pundits omit mention of the fact that imperialism never gave the USSR one moment’s respite from an unrelenting campaign of counterrevolutionary sabotage for the entire 74 years of its existence.

They neglect the traumatic effects of the extraordinary external pressure that the Soviet government faced from imperialism, beginning with the early military intervention of 14 imperialist armies after the revolution to the protracted interwar imperialist encirclement and blockade. They gloss over the fact that Western imperialism encouraged Hitler to march to the East and did little to impede the Nazi invasion of the USSR, in which 20 million people died and 25 million were left homeless, not to speak of the devastation of the entire western section of the country. The effects of 45 years of so-called Cold War are also discounted as a factor in the bourgeois analysis of the collapse.

U.S. imperialism emerged from World War II to galvanize Western and Japanese imperialism for an all-out struggle against the USSR and China. U.S. imperialism engaged in nuclear terror and the continuous development of new and more deadly weapons systems. It imposed an economic and technological blockade, carried on political and diplomatic warfare, employed the CIA and every means of sabotage and dirty trick in order to bring down Soviet socialism. These were the predominant factors in the collapse of the USSR. To declare socialism a failure in the face of an all-out attempt to destroy it before it could even begin to function properly is a contradiction on the face of it.

Technological blockade a crucial factor

The second lie is that socialism was defeated in an equal competition. It is impossible to overestimate the detrimental effect on socialist development of the technological blockade of the socialist camp, organized and enforced by U.S. imperialism during the Cold War. The long-run success of socialist construction depended upon raising the productivity of labor. Under socialism, unlike under capitalism, the increase in the per capita production of society is used to raise the standard of living of the masses. The imperialists compiled obscene wealth based upon the plunder of the entire world and used their advantage to promote the development of science and technology, first and foremost for military advantage, but also for industrial technology in the quest for increased rates of exploitation of the working class.

The U.S. organized an informal but stringent front of all the capitalist countries, with headquarters in Paris, by which thousands of items of technology were declared banned for shipment to the socialist camp. It was called COCOM and operated in secrecy. Violations of its prohibitions were punished by fines and the ban was enforced. In the struggle between the two social systems, imperialism did all in its power to retard the free economic development of the USSR and all the socialist

countries.

Imperialism did not dare permit a genuine competition between the planned economy and the capitalist market. It deliberately deprived the socialist camp, the USSR in particular, of access to what should have been universally available human knowledge. Only on that basis would it have been possible to test the power and efficiency of the two social systems. What the capitalists knew was that even with all their advantages and with all the disadvantages faced by the USSR, and in spite of the blockade and immense burden of military spending, the Soviet economic and scientific accomplishments were formidable. The imperialists knew that permitting the Soviet Union to compete economically under anything resembling fair and equal conditions, with free access to world markets and technology, would end up demonstrating the superiority of the planned economy and nationalized property.

USSR and imperialism in relation to workers and oppressed

The capitalist version of the struggle between the USSR and imperialism is that there were two equal “superpowers,” one based on socialism and one based on capitalism. And capitalism won out. But nothing could be further from the truth.

While U.S. imperialism and the other imperialist powers were plundering the oppressed peoples of Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Latin America and getting wealthier and wealthier from their exploits, the USSR and the socialist countries were diverting precious funds from socialist construction to give aid to liberation struggles, socialist countries and nationalist regimes throughout the world. From Vietnam to Angola to Cuba to southern Africa, relations between the USSR and the oppressed peoples were a cost to socialist construction borne for the sake of international solidarity in the struggle against imperialism. Imperialism, on the other hand, operated in the underdeveloped world to garner superprofits.

In addition, each act of assistance to an embattled socialist country or a national

liberation movement brought the Soviet government into conflict with U.S. imperialism in the global class struggle. The most dramatic was the Cuban missile crisis, in which the Pentagon was a step away from launching a nuclear attack. Conflict brought new threats of war and greater military spending, also to the detriment of socialist construction. The military-industrial complex in the U.S. thrived on war, which was also an artificial means of stimulating the capitalist economy, while the working class paid the bills. In the USSR, military spending was antithetical to socialist construction. It disrupted economic planning and was a constant diversion from civilian spending in an economy that was struggling to overcome its initial underdevelopment and was, at its height, only one-third the size of the U.S. economy.

Furthermore, under capitalism the entire goal of the system is to keep the working class in a permanent state of subsistence living in order to increase the profits of the capitalists. The ruling class will only give the working class what it has won in struggle — and then will try to take it back. Only the organized workers have any protection at all and they are a minority of the working class. The bourgeoisie has no responsibility to see to the needs of the workers.

The USSR and the socialist countries, on the other hand, were responsible for the workers. They had to contend with imperialist militarism and economic sabotage while trying to build socialism and while carrying the basic responsibility to meet the social and economic needs of the workers. Wall Street and the Pentagon were not burdened with having to provide free health care, free education, vacations, pensions, early retirement, low-cost housing, etc., to the entire working class. But the USSR provided all those benefits.

The competition between the two social systems was completely lopsided in favor of imperialism, from a purely economic point of view, because the systems were based on irreconcilable class differences.

Marxist theory and Soviet contradictions

Marxism and the historical prerequisites for socialism

The other big lie is that the internal crisis that finally led to counterrevolution was the result of characteristics inherent in the socialist system. All serious so-called “sovietologists,” the bourgeois “experts” on the USSR, studied Marx and Marxism as a prerequisite for waging ideological war against socialism.

Every one of them knew full well that its economic and cultural underdevelopment, its numerically weak proletariat in a vast peasant country such as tsarist Russia, was an unfavorable social and historical foundation upon which to build socialism.

Having studied Marx and the Russian Revolution, they were aware that socialism can only develop properly on the basis of a high degree of development of the productive forces and a numerically strong, culturally developed working class. Marxist theory posits these conditions as essential economic prerequisites to the healthy, normal building of socialism.

The first task, of course, is for the working class to seize political power and liberate the means of production from the capitalist possessing class. Only under conditions of highly developed production, already achieved by advanced capitalism, can it then rapidly develop the economy to achieve a level of abundance and begin to distribute the ample social wealth among the masses. Under these conditions the socialist revolution can immediately reduce the atmosphere of social tension created by poverty and material scarcity, eliminate the struggle for survival that plagues and dominates the life of the masses under capitalism, insure a sense of material security for all the workers and the non exploiting population in general, and begin to establish socialist relations on the basis of nationalized property and social and economic planning to meet human need.

It is a fundamental premise of Marxism that capitalism is the transition to a higher social system after thousands of years of class societies. Ancient Greek and Roman slavery and then feudalism were based on land and agriculture. Relatively primitive instruments of production were mainly suited to the individual and the productivity of labor was low. The social surplus above what it took society to survive was limited and was seized by the slave-owning and serf-owning landed ruling classes, who had gained political control over society and created the state. The class struggle under slavery and feudalism was over that limited social surplus.

Once capitalism developed and applied science to nature and production, it created gigantic means of production and the modern working class. It developed the productivity of labor to such heights that the material basis for a vast social surplus undreamt of in all previous epochs was created. Once set free from the restrictions of private property and the profit system, the workers using this developed technology could produce an abundance of goods and services sufficient to allow all humanity to reach a level where all people could be supplied with whatever they needed to live a decent life.

With socialism, the pressuring of workers to spend their whole lives condemned to being cogs in a wheel of one exploiting capitalist enterprise or another would end. Labor would be contributed to society for the benefit of society, not for the sake of enhancing the wealth of the bourgeoisie. Science would be used to ease the burden of labor rather than increase it, as under capitalism. Classes along with class exploitation would be abolished and the basis of oppression and domination would have evaporated. Human history would truly begin.

Thus the objective role of capitalism in history was to raise the level of productivity of labor of society to the point of abundance, which would be the basis for communism, and to create the working class, which would overthrow the bourgeoisie and take possession of the means of production for all of society.

The Bolshevik revolution and the evolution of Soviet society can only be understood within this framework of a scientific Marxist analysis of the role of capitalism in history and the overall conditions for the advancement of socialism.

Marx on transition to communism

Karl Marx laid the basis for a materialist analysis of the problems facing Soviet socialism in his famous work “Critique of the Gotha Program,” written in 1875. In one section of this work he was developing the concept of the transition from capitalism to communism. Without being schematic and without going beyond what could be known at the time, Marx tried to anticipate the broad development of the revolution from its early stages, after the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat, to the stage of fully developed communism.

What is most instructive is his analysis of the period after the seizure of power, which we today call socialism and Marx termed the first stage of communism.

“What we have to deal with here is a communist society, not as it has developed on its own foundation but, on the contrary, just as it emerges from capitalist society; which is thus in every respect, economically, morally and intellectually, **still stamped with the birthmarks of the old society from whose womb it emerges** (emphasis F.G.).”

Marx explained that a socialist revolution would require a considerable effort at the outset to overcome the backwardness and economic limitations imposed by capitalism — even a revolution achieved under the most favorable conditions of taking over a highly developed capitalist economy, which was his assumption at the time of writing.

Internal contradictions and the collapse

Legacy of feudalism and capitalism

At the time of the Russian Revolution, tsarist Russia was the poorest capitalist country in the world, just emerging from feudalism. The Bolsheviks inherited an underdeveloped country. Society was stamped with the “birthmarks” not of highly advanced capitalism but with those of feudalism and recently developed capitalism. The population was largely illiterate and culturally backward. The revolutionary government was immediately besieged by an imperialist encirclement. It had to build the basis for socialism while lifting the country up in a matter of years to an economic and cultural level that the developed capitalist countries had taken centuries to accomplish.

Far from a relatively relaxed economic and social atmosphere in which the struggle for survival is drastically diminished by socialist distribution of abundant goods, the USSR was beset on all sides, attempting to build up a socialist economy under conditions of extreme scarcity and imperialist pressure. None of the Bolshevik leaders anticipated having to build socialism under such primitive conditions. Once the revolution was defeated in Europe and the USSR was isolated, there was a desperate struggle to raise production.

Production could not be developed in a leisurely, experimental manner. Forced development was regarded as a matter of survival, given the economic isolation and the military preparations in the imperialist countries, particularly once the rearmament of German imperialism got underway.

Departure from socialist norms after Lenin

Even during the darkest times in the early years of the revolution, when Lenin was still at the helm, the party carried out open and fierce debates on matters of foreign

and domestic policy, what amounted to matters of life and death. Proletarian democracy was practiced as best as it could be under those dire circumstances.

In Marx's study of the Paris Commune, "The Civil War in France," he dealt in detail with the workings of the first living dictatorship of the proletariat. Marx declared:

"Its true secret was this: It was essentially a working-class government, the product of the struggle of the producing against the appropriating class, the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of labor. ...

"The first decree of the Commune ... was the suppression of the standing army, and the substitution for it of the armed people.

"The Commune was formed of the municipal councilors, chosen by universal suffrage in various wards of the town, responsible and revocable at short terms. The majority of its members were naturally working men, or acknowledged representatives of the working class. The Commune was to be a working body, not a parliamentary body, executive and legislative at the same time."

In other words, the representatives were not only responsible for enacting decrees but for carrying them out.

The police and all other officials in the entire administration were also subject to immediate recall and directly responsible to the Commune. But most importantly, from the point of view of preventing the government from becoming a source of privilege and eroding the class essence of the Commune,

"From the members of the Commune downwards, the public service had to be done at workman's wage. The vested interests and the representation allowances of the high dignitaries of state disappeared along with the high dignitaries themselves."

Lenin paid the closest attention to all of Marx's findings about the Commune, and

applied them to carrying through the revolutionary seizure of power. From a proletarian point of view, the Commune was the most democratic form of government in history. Lenin tried to adhere to the revolutionary democratic standards established in 1871 as closely as possible and particularly the law about party members and officials getting paid no higher than the wages of higher-paid workers.

Under the extreme conditions of cultural and economic poverty, even Lenin had to concede that it was necessary to give some privileges to “experts” to hold on to them during the period of consolidation of the revolution, when the most elementary functions of administration, engineering and so on had to be carried out and the working class had yet to be able to take over these functions.

But as regarded the party and the government, the early Bolsheviks adhered to the “law of the maximum,” meaning no one could place their rewards above those of the workers.

None of the Bolshevik leaders at the time thought that they would have to live with such tension between the aspirations to build socialism and dire material deprivation. They all expected that the German revolution and the revolution in Europe would come to their rescue. According to Marxist theory, their task would be next to impossible if the Soviet Union could not obtain material assistance to support the building of socialism.

But the revolution in Europe was defeated by 1923. Lenin died in 1924. After he died, the socialist norms of the Commune were gradually abandoned, including the law of the maximum. What began as material incentives to foster production grew to become institutionalized, excessive privileges for the upper stratum of society. A differentiation among the workers was promoted. Socialist social relations were subordinated to the development of production. Privilege grew side by side with socialist construction and military development.

These bourgeois tendencies were nourished by the ever-present imperialist military threat and economic blockade. They distorted and eroded the normal operations of socialist institutions, especially proletarian democracy and the direct involvement of the workers in the building of socialism. This permanent war of imperialism against Soviet attempts to build socialism on a drastically insufficient material foundation induced the gradual degeneration of the political leadership and socialist institutions and social relations among the population. The long-term exclusion of the workers from politics led to their alienation and ultimately left them unprepared to recognize, let alone resist, the capitalist counterrevolution when it finally came.

Thus the fundamental defects in Soviet society were not attributable to socialism, to socialist property, to socialist planning, or to working class rule. On the contrary, it was the **departure from socialism** and the insidious progress of the poisonous legacy of capitalism, bourgeois selfishness and opportunism arising on the foundations of a scarcity enforced by world capitalism that undermined the attempt to build socialism. It was the re-emergence of the bourgeois struggle for individual advantage that fostered privilege and undermined the collective, cooperative spirit necessary to build socialist society.

This inheritance from capitalism, nurtured by imperialism, inserted itself gradually into the party, the government and the planning process and eventually eroded the fundamental pillars upon which socialism could be constructed — particularly the most important pillar, the revolutionary enthusiasm and allegiance of a class-conscious working class.

Despite the extraordinary material and scientific accomplishments of the socialist planned economy, the abandonment of the struggle for socialist equality and direct workers' rule proved fatal. A privileged sector rose above the working class, retained a monopoly on statecraft, acted as surrogates for the workers in building socialism and became, over time, a breeding ground for bourgeois

counterrevolution. But even with all its material disadvantages, the USSR could have overcome these reactionary tendencies had it not had to deal with the overwhelming pressure of imperialism — i.e., if it had been free to develop socialism

Sino-Soviet split

It is impossible to fully understand the collapse of the USSR without reference to the split between China and the Soviet Union. This split, fostered and nurtured by U.S. imperialism, ultimately weakened both China and the USSR. It helped lead to the retreat by China from proletarian internationalism and toward unprincipled alliances with imperialism and, eventually, to the introduction of the capitalist market on a massive scale.

This split was one of the greatest strategic achievements of imperialism in its struggle against socialism. To grasp this it is only necessary to use one's imagination and conceive of how different world history would be had the People's Republic of China, the most populous socialist country, and the Soviet Union, the most powerful socialist country, been able to form a rock-solid socialist alliance of mutual aid and solidarity and stand shoulder to shoulder against imperialism in the post-war period.

But it was precisely to prevent such a development that imperialism left no stone unturned to forestall and break up what would have been a natural alliance between two class allies, facing the same class enemy.

The complexities in the evolution of this split require extensive treatment beyond the scope of this document. No summary treatment can do justice to those complexities; nevertheless, some basic outlines can be noted.

China shakes the world

The triumph of the Chinese Revolution in 1949 shook the world on both sides of the class barricades. On the one hand it meant the liberation of one-fourth of humanity

from colonial slavery, feudalism and comprador capitalism. On the other hand, it constituted a great setback to the historic ambitions and aspirations of Wall Street to dominate China, with its vast potential markets and resources. Washington had to watch as the Chinese Red Army chased the U.S. puppet forces of Chiang Kai-shek off the mainland onto the island province of Taiwan.

The U.S. was engaged in a Cold War confrontation with the USSR in Germany and Eastern Europe. Without letting up one iota on its pressure on the USSR, the Pentagon began to menace China with the Seventh Fleet in the Pacific. It then launched a massive invasion of Korea and marched north toward the Chinese border. With its revolution only two years old, the Chinese Red Army came to the aid of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and helped repel the U.S. military back to the 38th parallel.

Ideological debate

The U.S. kept the People's Republic of China from taking its seat in the United Nations Security Council and pursued a hard line against the PRC while keeping military (including nuclear) pressure on both countries, China and the USSR. As they were being put under this kind of relentless pressure by imperialism, an ideological struggle broke out between the leadership of the Chinese and Soviet parties over what orientation to adopt in the struggle. The Chinese leadership emphasized a Leninist approach of not relying on accommodations to keep the imperialists from going to war. They also emphasized support for national liberation struggles and promoted the classical Marxist conception that socialism could not be achieved by peaceful means.

The Soviet leaders, on the other hand, were promoting the concept of fighting for peaceful coexistence with imperialism. Their position was that the existence of nuclear weapons changed the equation and that world politics, including the support for national liberation struggles, had to be subordinated to what they considered to

be a struggle against nuclear confrontation and for world peace. While not excluding revolution, the Soviet leadership left a big ideological loophole for reformism by claiming that the peaceful transition to socialism was one viable option for the proletariat.

State-to-state struggle

In the midst of this debate, the imperialists began to stir troubled waters. While keeping China under the gun, they began to maneuver with the Soviet leadership, whom they correctly perceived as “soft.” The Soviet leaders began to take the ideological struggle with China to a state-to-state level. Khrushchev went to meet with Eisenhower at Camp David in 1959 for talks on a so-called thaw in the Cold War. But the Soviet leadership never consulted with China on the visit. In 1960, the USSR withdrew all its material aid to China and in 1963 the USSR signed the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty with the Kennedy administration, again without any agreement or prior consultation with China.

The Chinese leadership regarded this break of solidarity as an act of betrayal directed against them. This escalation by the Soviet leaders of the ideological split into a rupture in state-to-state relations was soon reciprocated by China. The Chinese leadership went overboard and falsely characterized the Soviet Union as “social-imperialist,” thus laying the ideological basis for an eventual anti-Soviet alliance and the abandonment of proletarian internationalism — which was what the ideological struggle had been about in the first place. China’s support for the U.S.-backed UNITA against the MPLA in Angola, which was allied with the USSR, was just one tragic consequence of the split.

China was a completely underdeveloped country, needing significant material support for the development of a socialist base. Being cut off from the USSR, it eventually turned to capitalist methods and an open door policy to Western capital. Once the alliance was in tatters and both states were in conflict, U.S. imperialism

tore up the so-called détente with the USSR and began its anti-Soviet “full court press.”

Bourgeois propagandists/analysts exclude any account of this monumental, long-term Machiavellian campaign by imperialism to bring about this horrific split when they try to indoctrinate people with their version of the so-called failure of socialism. The bourgeois interpretation of the collapse is one of the greatest mutilations of history.

Achievements concealed

In addition to suppressing the real causes for the collapse of the USSR, the bourgeoisie is silent on its achievements. The revolution took a backward, rural country from the status of underdevelopment to become the second-greatest industrial power in the world. The socialist planned economy never had a single year of declining production (save during World War II)—not a single recession or depression. It largely defeated the Nazis. It launched the space age with Sputnik. It carried out the largest construction projects in history. It provided the first universal program of free or low-cost social benefits to the entire working class while maintaining guaranteed employment.

It was the first government to establish a national legislative body based upon representation of the various nationalities. It instituted a vast affirmative action program for formerly oppressed peoples. It granted suffrage to women before that right was won in the United States. In its early years, before the departure from socialist norms, it established the right of women to divorce on demand, to abortion on demand, and in general tried to overcome the patriarchal system it inherited. It declared sexual preference to be a private matter, striking down all the old anti-gay laws.

And it did all this without bosses, without capitalist exploitation. It showed the way

to the future.

The Soviet Union after Gorbachev was broken up into a fragmented array of smaller capitalist states taking the place of the federated republics. The descent of these former Soviet republics socially and economically after the triumph of capitalism gives a scientific demonstration of how much the USSR, with all its defects, had represented a social system superior to capitalism, from the point of view of the workers and the oppressed.

Despite the fragmentation, this new array of capitalist societies exists on the same land mass, has the same productive forces, the same geographical features, the same historical and cultural conditions, stretching over one-sixth of the earth's surface, as did the USSR which preceded it. The capitalist counterrevolution affords a truly rare instance where two societies can be subjected to a scientific comparison.

Unemployment, poverty, homelessness, prostitution, the social and economic degradation of women, destruction of social insurance of all types, capitalist-style inequality with billionaires growing out of the plunder of state resources, rampant crime, national antagonism and racism are among the most prominent social and economic evils that have reappeared since the undoing of three-quarters of a century of Soviet rule. The United Nations has documented the plummeting of life expectancy, the rise in infant mortality and other indices of social decline. These afflictions, so characteristic of capitalism, had been either entirely eliminated or greatly mitigated during the Soviet period.

In Eastern Europe, which has been colonized by the transnational banks and corporations, women and children are sold into sex slavery and prostitution in the West. Millions of workers have had to emigrate just to find jobs.

Lessons on first phase of struggle for socialism

The political movement must extract from the Soviet experience those universal features that were responsible for the enormous progress of the working class and for society as a whole. They began with the establishment of the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat, the expropriation of the ruling class, the nationalization of the means of production, the monopoly of foreign trade and central planning based upon human need. These progressive social features, which brought the extraordinary success of the USSR, must be clearly distinguished from the retrogressive legacy of the old society that contributed to the demise of socialism. Whatever distortions, misuse, misapplication, etc., of these socialist measures may have taken place, they will, properly handled, be fundamental to building socialism in the future.

The first seizure of power by the working class took place in Paris in March 1871 with the establishment of the Paris Commune. The Commune broke up the capitalist state, abolished the standing army, put in its place the popular National Guard, legislated on behalf of the workers and the middle class, and created a revolutionary proletarian dictatorship that was the most democratic government of the people in history. It was crushed before it could begin its real work of social transformation. The Commune lasted 68 days before it was overwhelmed by the forces of the French bourgeoisie and drowned in blood.

It was 46 years later, in the midst of an imperialist war, that the working class finally succeeded in not only seizing power, but holding it in Russia in 1917. The Bolshevik revolution, led by the party of Lenin, thus began the first true phase of the struggle to build socialism in the world.

Lenin and the Bolsheviks never expected to be able to hold power in Russia on a long-term basis. They felt they would succeed if they could hold out long enough for the revolution in the big, developed capitalist powers in Europe. But the revolutionary impulse given by the Russian Revolution was pushed back by the

counterrevolution in Europe. The revolution then spread east, culminating in the victory of the Chinese Revolution in 1949. It also spread to the Korean peninsula, then to Southeast Asia, Cuba and Africa. But the imperialists after World War II were able to stabilize their rule at home and keep the socialist revolution on the periphery.

The exception was the revolutionary uprising of 1974 in Portugal, which was forced back by the threat of NATO intervention. But Portugal was the poorest of the European powers, drained by a colonial war in Africa, and the Portuguese bourgeoisie was so poor, relative to the rest of Western Europe, that it had been unable to stabilize its rule.

In retrospect, without diminishing the mistakes and betrayals of leaders, the overriding historical fact is that the first phase of the struggle was fought out on the most unfavorable terrain for the sustained success of the socialist revolution, on the terrain of underdevelopment. Marx's prognosis that developed capitalism was the historical basis for successfully building socialism has been borne out in the global class struggle. The ability of the material strongholds of world capitalism to revive and develop, and the inability of the working class in the imperialist countries to come to the aid of the socialist camp by overthrowing their own bourgeoisie, allowed imperialism to split the socialist camp and to finally overwhelm the material bastion of socialism, the USSR. What the collapse of the USSR showed is that socialism cannot be permanently secure on the globe until it spreads throughout the world and imperialism is destroyed.

The collapse of the USSR ended the first phase of the struggle for socialism in the world. Cuba, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Vietnam and China (with all its contradictions), represent that first historic phase that began in 1917. Whatever concessions they have made, even China with its dangerous opening to capitalism, they have held out so far and have not succumbed to capitalist

counterrevolution.

The revolutions led by Fidel Castro, Kim Il Sung, Ho Chi Minh and Mao Zedong accomplished the overthrow of imperialism by the merging of the national liberation struggle and the proletarian revolution. Each revolution was uniquely created and adapted to the national culture, the historic traditions and the class conditions of each country. At the same time, each has its roots in the Bolshevik revolution.

What is needed to permanently secure their revolutions is for the working class in the imperialist countries to rise and take its proper place in history, consummating the next phase of the struggle through the proletarian revolution.

The collapse of the USSR was followed by the longest (but not the strongest) capitalist upturn in the century. The bourgeoisie, the U.S. imperialists in particular, were delirious. They thought they had escaped their fate forever. The capitalist system had triumphed over socialism. The specter of communism that Marx wrote about in the Manifesto had been exorcised once and for all. The world was all theirs for the taking.

Ideologists were writing about “the end of history.” Economists were writing about the “new economy” that had finally overcome the boom-and-bust business cycle.

The Clinton administration stepped up its attacks on the workers and oppressed at home, balancing the budget on the backs of the workers. In the most outrageous violation of international law and all previous norms of international conduct, Clinton rained missiles on Afghanistan and Sudan, exercising the new, post-Soviet superpower arrogance. He carried out a brutal bombing campaign against Serbia, bombing Belgrade and other civilian targets with Nazi-like callousness. Gen. Wesley Clark, the NATO commander of the war, sent a shot across the bow to the Chinese government by bombing its embassy in Belgrade. U.S. forces had a brief but sharp military confrontation with the Russians. All this was carried out to the cheers of the

capitalist establishment. U.S. imperialism began to flex its muscles in all directions.

But then came the crash of 2000, with massive layoffs followed by a jobless recovery, and the laws of capitalism began to reassert themselves. Washington went from being an open advocate of empire to prisoner of the quagmire in Iraq. It has to face the fact that the independent countries of the world refuse to bow down and surrender their sovereignty and right to self-determination and self- defense.

The world is too big for the U.S. to conquer. The masses of people in the 21st century, having passed through almost a century of revolution and national liberation struggles, are on a far higher cultural, technical and technological level than were the masses of the 19th and early 20th centuries, when imperialism first triumphed and divided up the world. In the course of globalization, i.e., of expanding its exploitation, capitalism has not only brought into existence a vast new working class but has necessarily supplied it with technological and military knowhow. The very means of exploitation will be turned against the bourgeoisie and become the means of liberation.

The more it attempts to conquer the world, the more its fundamental strategic weakness, its "feet of clay," will become apparent. To prepare for the crises and opportunities ahead, the movement must go back to Marx and Lenin, must arm itself ideologically, so that it can intervene and help guide the coming struggle of the workers and oppressed to class victory.

The collapse of the USSR did not abolish the fundamental contradictions of capitalism that gave rise to the Bolshevik revolution in the first place. In an irony of history, the collapse of the USSR, by removing many barriers to a new phase in the global development of capitalism and imperialism, has accelerated the globalization of imperialism, which is rapidly laying the material and social basis for the next phase in the struggle for world socialism.

