

What Is Socialism?

Socialists are very concerned about the injustice and social ills in the world today—hunger, poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, disease, war, the exploitation of workers, the oppression of nations, races, women, and gays, the destruction of the environment, and the threat of nuclear annihilation.

Socialists obviously don't have a monopoly on compassion, however. What distinguishes socialists from other socially concerned people is that we do not view these problems as normal, natural, eternal, or an inherent feature of the human condition. We believe that these problems are historically and socially created and that they can be solved by human beings through conscious, organized political struggle and change.

Socialist Action argues that the wealth and other advances produced by industry, technology, and science have made it possible to eliminate these problems but that these problems continue because of the dominant economic and political interests and values of society. We assert that capitalism is ultimately the main source of these problems in the United States and the world today.

Therefore, socialism is a political philosophy that advocates for social and economic democracy; instead of hostility and favourability to the few.

Capitalism and the Exploitation of Workers

Under capitalism, the chief means of production—the factories, the railroads, the mines, the banks, the public utilities, the offices, and all of the related technology—are privately owned by a super-rich minority, the capitalist class. The capitalists then compete with each other in the marketplace and run production on the basis of what will bring them the biggest profit.

This drive to successfully compete and to maximize profit leads big business to exploit workers, to pay their employees as little as possible, a mere fraction of the actual value that they produce. It also leads big business to resist the efforts of workers to unionize and to obtain increased pay, reduced working hours, and improved working conditions.

This exploitation of workers results in a gross concentration of wealth, to the benefit of the capitalists and at the expense of working people. Even in the United States, the richest country in the world, where workers admittedly have one of the highest living standards, there is nonetheless a gross concentration of wealth. According to the Federal Reserve Survey of Consumer Finances, the top 1% of American families (834,000 households) own more than the bottom 90% (84 million households).

This social inequality is aggravated by mass unemployment, which is endemic to capitalism. Because the means of production is divided up among the individual capitalists competing with each other, there is no overall coordination or planning of the economy and consequently no consideration to provide jobs to everybody who is able and willing to work.

This anarchy of production for private profit also fuels the erratic boom-and-bust cycle of the capitalist economy. Periodically, the economy experiences crises of overproduction when the capitalists inadvertently glut the market with products that they cannot sell at a profit. The result is recessions and massive layoffs of workers, which ruin lives, idle factories, and deprive society of the benefits of production.

The basic irrationality of capitalism is highlighted by the glaring gap between unmet human needs on one hand and the untapped potential of the existing human and material resources to fulfill these needs on the other. For example, when inventors or scientists or technicians develop new, advanced labor-saving technology, this should be a cause for celebration for workers because it means that the work week could be cut with no cut in weekly pay. Workers could enjoy greater leisure time without a drop in income. Instead, the capitalists use labor-saving technology to lay off workers because, of course, it only makes good sense from the business point of view to cut labor costs in order to increase profits.

In the United States, there is a great need for a massive construction of more schools, hospitals, child-care centers, and recreation centers. There is also a great need to repair the nation's deteriorating infrastructure, including its roads, bridges, mass transit, and water systems. The capital, raw materials, and labor for such development

exists, but the corporate rich do not invest in such projects because they correctly judge that it would not be profitable for them to do so. The potential, overwhelmingly working-class consumers of such services simply would not be able to afford the prices that big business would have to charge in order to make a profit.

Nor does the capitalist government finance such a massive expansion as part of a public works program, for a couple of reasons. First of all, it would raise the public's expectation, which is basically at odds with capitalist ideology, that society should be responsible to provide for its members. And secondly, it would raise the possibility that the public would force the government to tax the rich to fund such an expensive program.

The Oppression of African-Americans and Hispanics

In addition to exploiting workers, capitalism contributes to the oppression of other groups in society. White racism and the oppression of African-Americans arose with the European slave trade, but they have been perpetuated under capitalism.

After the slaves were freed during the Civil War, the capitalists used racism to justify paying less to Black employees. The capitalists also used racism to pit white workers against Black workers in order to divide the working class and weaken the organized labor movement. Despite the gains of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s, white racist discrimination in employment and in other areas of life persists.

Furthermore, the second-class status of African-Americans has been deepened by color-blind free market forces, specifically by the recent movement of industry out of the cities, where the Black community is concentrated. The resulting loss of decent-paying working-class jobs has increased Black poverty and devastated Black neighborhoods and families, fueling crime, drug addiction, and hopelessness.

The oppression of Hispanics in the United States is similar to that of African-Americans in that it is based on widespread racist discrimination, combined with a decline in the number of available decent-paying jobs. The Anglo suppression of

various aspects of Latin culture and identity worsens the plight of Hispanics in this country.

The Oppression of Women and GLBT

While the oppression of women predated the establishment of capitalism, the private profit system has perpetuated their subordination to men. The main basis of women's oppression in capitalist society is the segregation of women in lower paying jobs in the labor market and the relegation of women to unequally shared child care and housework in the family.

These two spheres of women's oppression—the labor market and the family—are mutually reinforcing. So long as women are unduly burdened by child care and housework, they will not be able to gain equality with men in employment. So long as women bring home a smaller paycheck, they will not be able to get their male partners to share domestic responsibilities equally.

These unequal labor relations between men and women sustain the sexist ideology that justifies different and unequal gender roles and the rigid, polarized norms for males and females in all aspects of life.

The oppression of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people is largely derived from this sexist ideology. GLBT people are stigmatized because they defy the norm of exclusive heterosexuality and because they do not conform to conventional standards of masculinity and femininity.

Imperialism and U.S. Foreign Policy

On an international level, capitalism has led to the development of imperialism. Since the nineteenth century, the corporate rich of the advanced industrialized capitalist nations of Western Europe, the United States, and Japan have invested capital and exploited cheap labor and natural resources in the colonial world of Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

The economic domination of the imperialist nations has distorted the development of the Third World nations, condemning the masses of their populations to poverty and misery. The rivalry between the imperialist nations has also led to military conflicts, including two world wars, as they competed for new world markets and carved up the world. Since the Second World War, the imperialist nations have been forced to grant most of their former colonies formal political independence, but their economic domination continues.

Since its victory in World War II, the United States has been the leading imperialist power. At various points over the past fifty years, the U.S. government has defended American corporate interests abroad by supporting such repressive, undemocratic governments as the fascist dictatorship of General Francisco Franco in Spain, the apartheid regime in South Africa, the shah of Iran, the Marcos dictatorship of the Philippines, and the recently deposed Suharto dictatorship in Indonesia.

The U.S. government has also gone to war or used other forms of military intervention to defend big business interests, such as in Korea in the '50s, Cuba in the '60s, Vietnam in the '60s and '70s, Nicaragua in the '80s, and Iraq in the '90s. The U.S. imperialists have also overthrown democratically elected reform governments that encroached on U.S. corporate privilege, such as in Iran in 1953, Guatemala in 1954, the Dominican Republic in 1965, and Chile in 1973.

Additionally, the United States dropped the atom bomb in World War II and launched the arms race with the Soviet Union—all to intimidate the Soviet Union and to deter the people of the colonial world from challenging imperialist domination and going the route of socialist revolution.

The Socialist Solution

Socialist Action argues that the problems of exploitation and oppression in the world today can ultimately be solved by first replacing the capitalist system with a socialist system. The chief means of production should be socialized, that is, taken out of the

private hands of the capitalists and put under public ownership, that is, government ownership.

The economy should then be run by councils of democratically elected representatives of workers and consumers at all levels of the economy. Instead of being run on the basis of what will maximize profit for a super-rich minority, the economy should be planned to meet the needs of the people—in employment, education, nutrition, health care, housing, transportation, leisure, and cultural development.

A socialist government could raise the minimum wage to union levels, cut the work week with no cut in weekly pay, and spread around the newly available work to the unemployed. A public works program, such as the one mentioned earlier, could be launched to provide yet more jobs and offer sorely needed social services. The government could provide free health care, from cradle to grave, and free education, from nursery school to graduate school.

A socialist government could also address the special needs and interests of the oppressed. Existing anti-discrimination legislation in employment could be strongly enforced, and pay equity and affirmative action for women and racial minorities could be expanded. Blacks and Hispanics could be granted community control of their respective communities. The racist, class-biased death penalty could be abolished.

The establishment of flexible working hours, paid parental leave, and child-care facilities, as well as the defense of safe, legal and accessible abortion, would provide women with alternatives to sacrificing work for the sake of their children and because of unwanted pregnancies, respectively. Same-sex marriage could be legalized, and a massive program, like the space program or the Manhattan Project, could be financed to find a vaccine and a cure for AIDS.

Money currently spent on the military could be spent instead on cleaning up the country's air and waterways and developing environmentally safe technology. A socialist government of the United States would end this country's oppression of Third

World nations because it would not be defending corporate profit there but would be encouraging the workers and peasants of those countries to follow suit and make their own socialist revolutions.

The socialist system that Socialist Action advocates would be a multiparty system, with all of the democratic rights won and enjoyed in the most democratic capitalist nations, including freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of association, freedom of assembly, and freedom of religion. A genuinely socialist system would be far more democratic than the most democratic capitalist system because in a socialist economy the common working people would democratically decide what should be produced and how it should be produced.

Social Democracy and Stalinism

Many people often ask Socialist Action if we support the model of socialism offered by the social democratic parties and government administrations in Western European nations. We say “no.”

In those countries, the Labor, Social Democratic, and Socialist parties have helped their working-class constituencies to win important progressive reforms, such as universal suffrage, the eight-hour day, old-age pensions, free health care and education, and social services more extensive than those here in the United States. However, these parties and the trade unions affiliated with them have secured these reforms within the capitalist framework, which they have never fundamentally challenged or sought to replace with socialism. Therefore, the capitalists’ rule of the economy, their exploitation of the working class, and the resulting concentration of wealth continue.

People also ask us if the so-called Communist countries of the former Soviet bloc represented the model of socialism that we support. Again, as with the Social Democrats, our answer is “no.”

In the former Soviet bloc, the capitalist class was expropriated, and the economies were socialized. These socialized economies made possible great progress in raising the living standards of the masses of workers and peasants in the areas of employment, health care, education, and nutrition, and in upgrading the status of women. However, these countries were ruled through the Communist parties by privileged bureaucratic elites that denied socialist democracy and imposed repressive, totalitarian political systems on the people. These dictatorial governments not only violated basic democratic and human rights but mismanaged the planned economies, being responsible for inefficiency, waste, corruption, and stagnation.

The origins of these dictatorial bureaucratic regimes lie with the degeneration of the Russian Revolution in the 1920s and 1930s. One of the two leaders of the Bolshevik Revolution, Leon Trotsky, argued that the Bolshevik model of socialist democracy was never fully implemented and then was completely destroyed under the Stalin dictatorship because of a combination of factors. These factors included the failure of the socialist revolutions to triumph in Europe after the First World War, the resulting isolation of the Russian Revolution, the military attacks on the young Soviet republic by the imperialist nations, the devastation caused by the First World War and the Civil War that followed the revolution, the lack of democratic traditions in czarist Russia, and the general low educational and cultural levels of the masses of workers and peasants.

Currently, in the former Soviet bloc nations, the ruling Stalinist bureaucracies, allied with the Western imperialists and native capitalist “wannabes,” are trying to restore capitalism. So far, the introduction of the free market into the Soviet bloc has resulted in a gigantic drop in productivity and in the living standards of common working people, with increasing unemployment, poverty, and social inequality.

This right-wing attempt to restore capitalism and the corresponding attacks on social services and entitlements, such as free health care and full employment, in the former Soviet bloc have also made it easier for the capitalist governments of Western Europe

to attack the various reforms and social services that the labor movements and social democratic parties of those countries have won over the past decades.

Socialist Action hailed the collapse of the repressive Communist Party regimes of the Soviet bloc, but we oppose the restoration of capitalism there. Instead, we call for a defense of the socialized economies and for the workers and their allies to overthrow the ruling Stalinist bureaucracies and establish socialist democracy in their place.

Socialism and Human Nature

Many critics say that socialism is a great idea in theory but that it is completely unrealistic and utopian because it goes against basic human nature. The critics claim that human beings are just too selfish, too greedy, too competitive, and too aggressive to create and sustain a cooperative and egalitarian society.

Socialists recognize that individual self-interest has always existed and will always exist in human beings. We also acknowledge that there will never be a perfect harmony between the individual and society.

But we argue that individual self-interest need not be the ruling principle of society. History and cross-cultural research suggest that basic human nature consists of many different, divergent, but co-existing capacities, and that human personality and behavior are largely shaped by the social institutions, practices, and ruling ideology of the given society.

The critics of socialism correctly perceive the hyper-individualism of people in capitalist society, but then they incorrectly generalize this historically specific characteristic to human beings across time and place. They cannot imagine or understand that a reorganization of society along socialist lines would elicit, facilitate, and reinforce the basic human capacities for cooperation and solidarity.

The Revolutionary Potential of Workers & the Oppressed

Still, the point about self-interest as a motivating factor for human behavior is an important one. Socialists believe that many people of conscience from different classes and backgrounds can be won to a socialist perspective through appeals to reason, morality, and political idealism. However, we believe that the main impetus for a socialist movement to sustain itself and successfully transform society must be collective self-interest and power.

We believe that the working class is the only social force that has both the necessary self-interest and power to lead the struggle for socialism. Socialism is in the interests of the working class because it will allow the workers to reclaim the wealth that they produced but which the capitalists appropriated from them through exploitation. The working class also has the power to overturn capitalism because of its strategic location at the point of production and its corresponding ability to shut down production by simply withdrawing its labor. Thus, a mass socialist movement can only grow out of a revitalized and radicalized labor movement, based on the trade unions and other organizations of the working class.

Similarly, we believe that only the oppressed possess sufficient self-interest to lead the struggles for their own liberation. Therefore, we support the autonomous movements of the oppressed—the Black movement, the Hispanic movement, the women's movement, and the gay and lesbian movement—to insure that their respective needs and demands are met.

However, we do not believe that the oppressed by themselves possess sufficient power to fully achieve their liberation since their oppression is at least partly rooted in the capitalist system. Because only the organized working class possesses sufficient power to abolish capitalism and its concomitant forms of oppression, the oppressed must win the organized working class to support their respective struggles, as well as ultimately ally themselves with the working class in the struggle for socialism.

Independent Mass Action

Socialist Action does not believe that socialism can be voted into power through free elections. History has repeatedly shown that when workers and their allies try to use the existing democratic process to advance their interests and replace capitalism with a socialist system, the capitalist class and the armed forces of the capitalist state will smash democracy to save capitalism, as happened, for example, in Chile twenty-five years ago this month.

Socialist Action points out that progressive social change has been made in this country through mass action, not by voting in certain politicians or by working within the system.

American independence from England was gained through a revolution. The passage of the Bill of Rights was prompted by a rebellion of poor farmers. The abolition of slavery and the extension of suffrage to Black men was accomplished through a second revolution, the Civil War. Women won the vote through the women's suffrage movement.

The labor movement won the twelve-hour day, then the eight-hour day, the right to strike, the right to form unions and bargain collectively, the minimum wage, unemployment compensation, worker's disability. Social Security, welfare, and increased wages and benefits for union members.

The civil rights movement overthrew the segregationist "Jim Crow" laws of the South and forced the government to outlaw racist discrimination in employment and housing and to implement affirmative action.

The anti-war movement helped force the U.S. to end its imperialist war against the Vietnamese in their just struggle for self-determination.

The feminist movement won anti-discrimination legislation, affirmative action, pay equity in some public institutions, and the legalization of abortion.

The gay and lesbian movement, too, has secured anti-discrimination legislation and greater funding of AIDS research and patient care.

Additionally, the environmental and consumer protection movements have won important reforms that moderate big business's destruction of the planet and manufacture of unsafe commodities in its relentless pursuit of profits.

Socialist Action advocates the independent political action of the workers and the oppressed to bring about further progressive change. We call for and build mass demonstrations, rallies, pickets, and strikes.

We counter-pose such mass action to reliance on the American two-party system, electoral campaigns, and behind-the-scenes lobbying of capitalist politicians. The logic of working within the two-party system of the capitalist political establishment is to subordinate the needs, demands, and priorities of the workers and the oppressed to what is acceptable to the rulers of this country. The inevitable result is the demobilization and cooptation of the struggle for change.

We point out that the impetus for progressive social change has never come from the Democratic and Republican parties but that they can be forced by mass action to implement progressive policies and reforms, at least up to certain limits. However, we argue that socialism can only be achieved by a revolutionary culmination of mass action of the workers and their allies in opposition to the capitalist state and capitalist political parties.

Socialist Action aspires to play a leading role in building a popular mass socialist movement in this country. Our members have participated in the labor movement, the civil rights movement, the anti-Vietnam War movement, the women's movement, the gay and lesbian movement, the environmental movement, the Central America solidarity movement, and the movement against the Gulf War, among others.

If you want to fight for a society and a world free of all forms of exploitation, oppression, and social injustice, become socialist. More at <https://socialistaction.org>.