

# **The spectre of socialism for the 21<sup>st</sup> century: Build it now!**



**A selection of articles by Michael A. Lebowitz**

***Author of *Beyond Capital: Marx's political economy of the working class*  
and *Build it Now: socialism for the 21<sup>st</sup> century****

***Links dossier No. 3***

---

---

---

# **Links International journal of socialist renewal**

## **Dossier No. 3**

### **The spectre of socialism for the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

Articles by Michael A. Lebowitz is professor emeritus of economics at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Canada, and the author of *Beyond Capital: Marx's Political Economy of the Working Class* and *Build It Now: Socialism for the Twenty-First Century*.

#### **Contents:**

<b>The <i>Links</i> vision</b>	<b>p 3</b>
<b>Socialism is the future: Build it now!</b>	<b>p 4</b>
<b>The spectre of socialism for the 21<sup>st</sup> century</b>	<b>p 5</b>
<b>Discussion on 'The spectre of socialism for the 21<sup>st</sup> century'</b>	<b>p 14</b>
<b>The capitalist workday, the socialist workday</b>	<b>p 21</b>
<b>Without workers' management, there is no socialism</b>	<b>p 24</b>

---

---

## The Links vision

---

*Links – International Journal of Socialist Renewal* - is a journal for the post Cold War left; a journal that rejects the Stalinist distortion of the socialist project; a journal that takes into account ecological questions; a journal that is taking steps to bring together the forces for socialism in the world today; a journal that aspires to unite Marxists from different political traditions because it discusses openly and constructively.

Inspired by the unfolding socialist revolution in Venezuela, *Links* is also a journal for 'Socialism of the 21st Century' and the discussions and debates flowing from that powerful example of socialist renewal.

*Links* seeks to promote the international exchange of information, experiences of struggle, theoretical analysis and views on strategies and tactics within the international left.

*Links* is a forum for open and constructive dialogue between active socialists from different political traditions. It seeks to bring together those in the international left opposed to neo-liberal economic and social policies, and to promote the renewal of the socialist movement in the wake of the collapse of the bureaucratic model of 'actually existing socialism' in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

*Links* is not oriented to academic Marxists, as many existing theoretical journals are, although it does have academics among its contributors. Its main contributors and readers are active socialists; those involved in the day-to-day struggles and especially in the vital tasks of building organisations and parties.

*Links* does not present a single line. It is pluralist, open and very much a discussion forum. There is no regular editorial, but there are certain parameters set by an editorial board.

*Links* develops and marks out the space for genuine socialism.

It hopes to bring together active socialists from different countries and political viewpoints, but united in our conviction of the need for: fundamental social change; a democratic, non-

authoritarian socialism; and a socialism that's green, feminist and anti-racist.

*Links* carries discussion and debate pieces, soliciting original articles from contributing editors and supporting parties, and from anyone who wishes to contribute constructively to the debates. It reprints documents and discussion pieces from different parties, as well as relevant articles from other journals.

While an English-language journal, we also need input from non-English-speaking countries, so that *Links* can reflect and participate in the debates taking place among left forces around the world. Where possible, we translate and publish important documents and articles from the socialist press in non-English speaking countries.

We invite your ideas, contributions and support for *Links* to succeed as a real discussion forum for the renewal of the socialist project around the world. Please send letters, articles and documents to [links@dsp.org.au](mailto:links@dsp.org.au)

For a free subscription to *Links* "What's New" announcement list, please visit and sign up at <http://www.feedblitz.com/f/?Sub=343373>

Visit *Links* website at [www.links.org.au](http://www.links.org.au)

**Visit *Links* International e-journal of socialist of socialist renewal for other topics and articles of interest for socialists international.**

- \* Ecology – A moment of truth *John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark, Richard York*
- \* The crisis of the global economy *Vasily Koltashov*
- \* Unity in the Venezuelan workers movement *Stalin Perez Borges*
- \* A peoples history of sport – David Zirin
- \* Analysis on Colombia, FARC, Uribe after the freeing of Ingrid Betancourt
- \* "Is Cuba done with equality?" NOT! *Fred Feldman*
- \* plus videos, audios interviews and more....

**Available at [www.links.org.au](http://www.links.org.au)**

---

---

## **Socialism is the future: build it now!<sup>1</sup>**

---

Ideas become a material force when they grasp the minds of masses. This is true not only of ideas which can support revolutionary change. It is also true of those ideas which prevent change. An obvious example is the concept of TINA -- the idea that there is no alternative, no alternative to neoliberalism, no alternative to capitalism.

Certainly we know that there have been significant changes in the terrain upon which the working class must struggle -- changes which are a challenge because of a new international division of labour and because of the role of states in delivering a passive, docile working class to international capital. It is not only changing material circumstances which affects the working class, however. It is also the loss of confidence of the working class that makes these material changes a deadly blow. Even the Korean working class that has demonstrated so clearly in the past its militancy in the struggle against capital has been affected.

But it does not have to be that way. Because things are changing. Look at Latin America where the effects of global restructuring and neoliberalism took a very heavy toll. People said ultimately -- enough! And they have said this not only to neoliberalism but, increasingly, they have moved further and say no to capitalism.

For many, it came as a great shock when Hugo Chavez, president of Venezuela, said at the World Social Forum in January of 2005 in Brazil that "we have to reinvent socialism". Capitalism, he stressed, has to be transcended if we are ever going to end the poverty of the majority of the world. "We must reclaim socialism as a thesis, a project and a path, but a new type of socialism, a humanist one, which puts humans and not machines or the state ahead of everything."

That statement, however, did not drop from the sky. It was the product of a spontaneous rejection of

neoliberalism by masses in 1989, the election of Chavez with a promise to change things in 1998 and the response to the combination of the domestic oligarchy and imperialism in their attempt to overthrow Chavez in 2002 and 2003. The embrace of this new socialism, in short, was the product of struggle.

The struggle continues. And, we can see that out of struggle comes creativity. In particular, the struggle in Venezuela has stressed the importance of a revolutionary democracy -- a process in which people transform themselves as they directly transform circumstances. Through the development of communal councils representing 200 to 400 families in urban areas and as few as 20 in the rural areas, people have begun to identify their needs and their capacities and to transform the very character of the state into one which does not stand over and above civil society but rather becomes the agency for working people themselves. "All power to the communal councils" has been the call of Chavez; "The communal councils must become the cell of the new socialist state."

Ideas can become a material force when they grasp the minds of masses. In Latin America, the idea of a socialism for the 21st century is beginning to move the masses, with its emphasis upon Karl Marx's concept of revolutionary practice - the simultaneous changing of circumstances and self-change. At its core is the concept of revolutionary democracy. In contrast to the hierarchical capitalist state and to the despotism of the capitalist workplace, the concept is one of democracy in practice, democracy as practice, democracy as protagonism. Democracy in this sense - protagonistic democracy in the workplace, protagonistic democracy in neighbourhoods, communities, communes - is the democracy of people who are transforming themselves into revolutionary subjects.

Here is an alternative to capitalism -- the concept of socialism for the 21st century with its emphasis upon struggle from below, upon solidarity and upon building the capacities of working people through their own activities. It is an idea that a working class with a tradition of struggle against capital should have no difficulty in grasping. Socialism is the future - build it now.

---

<sup>1</sup> This the Preface to the forthcoming Korean edition of *Build It Now: Socialism for the 21st century*.

---

---

## The spectre of socialism for the 21<sup>st</sup> century<sup>2</sup>

---

A spectre is haunting capitalism. It is the spectre of socialism for the 21st century. Increasingly, the characteristics of this spectre are becoming clear, and we are able to see enough to understand what it is not. The only thing that is not clear at this point is whether the spectre is real – i.e., whether it is actually an earthly presence.

Consider what this spectre is not. It is not the belief that by struggling within capitalism for reforms that it is possible to change the nature of capitalism -- i.e., that a better capitalism, a third way, can suspend the logic of capital (except momentarily). Nor is it a focus upon electing friendly governments to preside over exploitation, oppression and exclusion -- i.e., to support barbarism with a human face. Indeed, this spectre does not accept the premise that you can challenge the logic of capital without understanding it. Very simply, the spectre of socialism for the 21st century is not yesterday's liberal package -- social democracy. Further, this spectre is not a focus upon the industrial working class as the revolutionary subjects of socialism, a privileging whereby all other workers (including those in the growing informal sector) are seen as lesser workers, unproductive workers, indeed lumpenproletariat. Nor does it suggest that those industrial workers by virtue of the difference between their productivity with advanced means of production and their incomes (i.e., the extent of their exploitation) have a greater entitlement to the wealth of society than the poor and excluded.

In the conception of socialism for the 21st century, socialism is not confused with the ownership of the means of production by the state such that (a) it is thought that all that is necessary for socialism is to

nationalise and (b) that everything not nationalised is an affront. Indeed, this spectre does not emphasise the development of productive forces without regard for the nature of productive relations (such that gulags, dictatorship and indeed capitalism can all be justified because they develop the productive forces and thereby move you closer to socialism and communism).

Nor, for that matter, does it think of two post-capitalist states, socialism and communism, separated by a Chinese wall; in the concept of socialism for the 21st century, there is no separate socialist principle of "to each according to his contribution" which must be honoured. Rather, there is simply the recognition that the development of the new society is a process and that this process necessarily begins on a defective basis -- in other words, with defects such as self orientation. Precisely for this reason, this recognition of existing defects, the battle of ideas -- an ideological battle against the old world -- is central to the concept of socialism for the 21st century.

Finally, socialism for the 21st century is not based upon democracy in the classic sense. By that, I mean that it is not based upon the concept of representative democracy -- that institutional form in which rule by the people is transformed into voting periodically for those who will misrule them. All these fall into what I call yesterday's socialist package.

### **Marx and the centrality of human development**

So, if the spectre of socialism for the 21st century differs from yesterday's liberal and socialist packages, what is it?

First of all, it is a stress upon the centrality of human development. In this respect, it is a restoration of the focus of 19th century socialists. It is the vision of a society with the goal (according to Saint-Simon) of providing to its members "the greatest possible opportunity for the development of their faculties", a goal to which Louis Blanc referred as ensuring that everyone has "the power to develop and exercise his faculties in order to really be free" and of a society in which, according to Friedrich Engels, "every member of it can develop and use all his capabilities and powers in complete freedom and without thereby infringing

---

<sup>2</sup> The following article was presented as a keynote address to the annual meeting of the Society for Socialist Studies, Vancouver, June 5, 2008. It was originally titled "Building socialism for the 21st century". You can listen to an audio recording of the speech at [www.links.org.au](http://www.links.org.au).

the basic conditions of this society". This vision of human development which is central to socialism for the 21st century was unquestionably Marx's vision (Lebowitz, 2006: 53-60)

The Young Marx envisioned a "rich human being" -- one who has developed their capacities and capabilities to the point where they are able "to take gratification in a many-sided way" -- "the rich man profoundly endowed with all the senses" (Marx, 1844: 302). "In place of the wealth and poverty of political economy", he proposed, "come the rich human being and rich human need" (Marx, 1844: 304). But, it was not only a young, romantic, so-called pre-Marxist Marx who spoke so eloquently about rich human beings. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx returned explicitly to this conception of human wealth -- to a rich human being -- "as rich as possible in needs, because rich in qualities and relations"; real wealth, he understood, is the development of human capacity -- the "development of the rich individuality which is as all-sided in its production as in its consumption" (Marx, 1973: 325).

Could anything be clearer? This is what Marx's conception of socialism was all about -- the creation of a society which removes all obstacles to the full development of human beings. He looked ahead to that society of associated producers, where each individual is able to develop her full potential -- i.e., the "absolute working-out of his creative potentialities", the "complete working out of the human content", the "development of all human powers as such the end in itself" (Marx, 1973: 488, 541, 708). In contrast to capitalist society in which we are the means to expand the wealth of capital, Marx in his book *Capital* pointed to that alternative society, "the inverse situation in which objective wealth is there to satisfy the worker's own need for development" (Marx, 1977: 772).

The workers' own need for development -- there is the spectre, there is the impulse for a new society. In his *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, Marx projected that in the cooperative society based upon the common ownership of the means of production, the productive forces would have "increased with the all-round development of the individual, and all the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly" (Marx, 1875: 24). As he described it in

the *Communist Manifesto*, our goal is "an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all" (Lebowitz, 2003: 202-5). Our goal, in short, cannot be a society in which some people are able to develop their capabilities and others are not; we are interdependent, we are all members of a human family. Thus our goal must be the full development of all human potential.

### **'These ideas live today'**

There's more here than a 19th century view. That these ideas live today can be seen very clearly in the Bolivarian Constitution of Venezuela. In its explicit recognition (in Article 299) that the goal of a human society must be that of "ensuring overall human development", in the declaration of Article 20 that "everyone has the right to the free development of his or her own personality" and the focus of Article 102 upon "developing the creative potential of every human being and the full exercise of his or her personality in a democratic society" -- this theme of human development pervades the Bolivarian Constitution.

Further, there is something there that you don't find in the liberal conceptions of human development underlying the UN Human Development Index. This constitution also focuses upon the question of how people develop their capacities and capabilities -- i.e., how overall human development occurs. Article 62 of the Bolivarian Constitution declares that participation by people in "forming, carrying out and controlling the management of public affairs is the necessary way of achieving the involvement to ensure their complete development, both individual and collective". The necessary way. And, the same emphasis upon a democratic, participatory and protagonistic society is present in the economic sphere, which is why Article 70 stresses "self-management, co-management, cooperatives in all forms" and why Article 102's goal of "developing the creative potential of every human being" emphasises "active, conscious and joint participation".

This focus upon practice as essential for human development was, of course, Marx's central insight into how people change. It's not a matter simply of spending more on education, health and social services. Remember Marx's early comment on

Robert Owen's conception that what was needed to change people was to change the circumstances in which they exist. Marx (1845) emphatically rejected the idea that we can give people a gift, that if we just change the circumstances in which they exist they will be themselves different people. You are forgetting, he pointed out, that it is human beings who change circumstances. The idea that we can create new circumstances for people and thereby change them, he insisted, in fact divides society into two parts -- one part of which is deemed superior to society. It is the same perspective that Paulo Freire (2006: 72) subsequently rejected in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* -- the concept that "knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing".

In contrast, Marx introduced the concept of revolutionary practice -- "the coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change" -- the red thread that runs throughout his work. He talked, for example, of how people develop through their own struggles -- how this is the only way the working class can "succeed in ridding itself of the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew". And he told workers that they would have to go through as much as 50 years of struggles "not only to bring about a change in society but also to change yourselves, and prepare yourselves for the exercise of political power". And, again, after the Paris Commune in 1871, over a quarter of a century after he first began to explore this theme, he commented that workers know "they will have to pass through long struggles, through a series of historical processes, transforming circumstances and men" (Lebowitz, 2003: 179-84).

Always the same point -- we change ourselves through our activity. This idea of the simultaneous change in circumstances and self-change, however, is not limited to class struggle itself. It is present in all activities of people -- i.e., every process of activity has two products -- i.e., joint products -- the change in circumstances and the change in the actor. This obviously applies in the sphere of production as well. As Marx commented in the *Grundrisse*, in production "the producers change, too, in that they bring out new qualities in themselves, develop themselves in production, transform themselves, develop new powers and ideas, ...new needs and

new language". Here, indeed, is the essence of the cooperative society based upon common ownership of the means of production -- "when the worker cooperates in a planned way with others, he strips off the fetters of his individuality, and develops the capabilities of his species".

How far, of course, this is from the idea that what you have to do is build up the productive forces and thereby transform the conditions in which people exist, transforming their being and their consciousness! But what other inferences flow from these principles -- the focus upon human development and upon revolutionary practice, that simultaneous changing of circumstances and self-change? Let me suggest that these two principles constitute the "key link", the key link we need to grasp (in Lenin's words) if we are to understand the concept of socialism for the 21st century.

Consider, for example, what this means for the process of production. If people are prevented from using their minds within the workplace but instead follow directions from above, you have what Marx described as the crippling of body and mind, producers who are fragmented, degraded, alienated from "the intellectual potentialities of the labour process". There's no surprise that Marx looked forward to the re-combining of head and hand, the uniting of mental and physical labour -- i.e., to a time when the individual worker can call "his own muscles into play under the control of his own brain". But, more than a simple combination of mental and manual labour within the sphere of production is needed. Without "intelligent direction of production" by workers, without production "under their conscious and planned control", workers cannot develop their potential as human beings because their own power becomes a power over them (Marx, 1977: 450, 173).

### **'Protagonistic' democracy**

What kind of productive relations, then, can provide the conditions for the full development of human capacities? Only those in which there is conscious cooperation among associated producers; only those in which the goal of production is that of the workers themselves. Clearly, though, this requires more than worker-management in individual workplaces. They must be the goals of workers in society, too -- workers in their communities.

After all, what is production? It's not something that occurs only in a factory or in what we traditionally identify as a workplace. When we understand the goal as that of human development, we recognise that production should not be confused with production of specific use-values; rather, as Marx noted, all specific products and activities are mere moments in a process of producing human beings, who are the real result of social production. And, that points to the importance of making each moment a site for the collective decision making and variety of activity that develops human capacities.

Implicit in the emphasis of the concept of socialism for the 21st century upon human development and how that development can occur only through practice is our need to be able to develop through democratic, participatory and protagonistic activity in every aspect of our lives. Through revolutionary practice in our communities, our workplaces and in all our social institutions, we produce ourselves as 'rich human beings' -- rich in capacities and needs - - in contrast to the impoverished and crippled human beings that capitalism produces.

In contrast to the hierarchical capitalist state (which Marx understood as an "engine of class despotism") and to the despotism of the capitalist workplace, only a revolutionary democracy can create the conditions in which we can invent ourselves daily as rich human beings. This concept is one of democracy in practice, democracy as practice, democracy as protagonism. Democracy in this sense -- protagonistic democracy in the workplace, protagonistic democracy in neighbourhoods, communities, communes -- is the democracy of people who are transforming themselves into revolutionary subjects.

How else but through protagonistic democracy in production can we ensure that the process of producing is one which enriches people and expands their capacities rather than crippling and impoverishing them? How else but through protagonistic democracy in society can we ensure that what is produced is what is needed to foster the realisation of our potential?

If there is to be democratic production for the needs of society, however, there is an essential precondition: there cannot be a monopolisation of

the products of human labour by individuals, groups or the state. In other words, the precondition is social ownership of the means of production: this is the first side of what President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela has called the "elementary triangle" of socialism: (a) social ownership of the means of production, which is a basis for (b) social production organised by workers in order to (c) satisfy communal needs and communal purposes.

Let us consider each element in this particular combination of distribution-production-consumption.

#### *A. Social ownership of the means of production*

Social ownership of the means of production is critical because it is the only way to ensure that our communal, social productivity is directed to the free development of all rather than used to satisfy the private goals of capitalists, groups of individuals or state bureaucrats. Social ownership is not, however, the same as state ownership. Social ownership implies a profound democracy -- one in which people function as subjects, both as producers and as members of society, in determining the use of the results of our social labour.

#### *B. Production organised by workers*

Production organised by workers builds new relations among producers -- relations of cooperation and solidarity. As long as workers are prevented from developing their capacities by combining thinking and doing in the workplace, they remain alienated and fragmented human beings whose enjoyment consists in possessing and consuming things. And, if workers don't make decisions in the workplace and develop their capacities, we can be certain that someone else will. Protagonistic democracy in the workplace is an essential condition for the full development of the producers.

#### *C. Satisfaction of communal needs and purposes*

Satisfaction of communal needs and purposes focuses upon the importance of basing our productive activity upon the recognition of our common humanity and our needs as members of the human family. Thus, it stresses the importance of going beyond self-interest to think of our community and society. As long we produce only

for our private gain, how do we look at other people? As competitors or as customers -- i.e., as enemies or as means to our own ends; thus, we remain alienated, fragmented and crippled. Rather than relating to others through an exchange relation (and, thus, trying to get the best deal possible for ourselves), this third element of the elementary triangle of socialism has as its goal building a relation to others characterised by our unity based upon recognition of difference; through our activity, then, we both build solidarity among people and at the same time produce ourselves differently.

And, this concept of solidarity is central because it is saying that all human beings, all parts of the collective worker, are entitled to draw upon our "communal, social productivity". The premise is not at all that we have the individual right to consume things without limit but, rather, that we recognise the centrality of "the worker's own need for development". Further, our claim upon the accumulated fruits of social brain and hand is not based upon exploitation. It is not because you have been exploited that you are entitled to share in the fruits of social labour. Rather, it is because you are a human being in a human society -- and because, like all of us, you have the right to the opportunity to develop all your potential.

At the same time as a human being in a human society you also have the obligation to other members of this human family -- to make certain that they also have this opportunity, that they too can develop their potential. As a member of this family you are called upon to do your share -- a concept also present in the Bolivarian Constitution: Article 135 notes "the obligations which by virtue of solidarity, social responsibility and humanitarian assistance, are incumbent upon individuals according to their abilities".

Look at the direction that this key link -- human development and the simultaneous changing of circumstance and self-change takes us:

- to democratic decision making in the workplace and the community
- to a focus upon building solidarity and new socialist human beings rather than relying upon exchange relations and material self-interest (which

Che Guevara -- whose 80<sup>th</sup> birthday would have been today -- warned us leads to a blind alley)

- to a new conception of the state as one which is not over and above civil society (i.e., a state of the Paris Commune-type) -- i.e., a state which Marx wrote is our own "living force", our own power, rather than a power used against us

- and, for that matter, this key link of human development and revolutionary practice leads us to recognise the need for a political instrument which respects the creative energy and revolutionary practice of masses rather than substitutes its own wisdom. In short, a political instrument which embraces the revolutionary pedagogy of Rosa Luxemburg when she argued: "The working class demands the right to make its mistakes and learn in the dialectic of history. Let us speak plainly. Historically, the errors committed by a truly revolutionary movement are infinitely more fruitful than the infallibility of the cleverest Central Committee."

### **Is the spectre real? Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution**

The outlines of the spectre, socialism for the 21st century, become increasingly clear. The question remains, however, is the spectre real? Does it have an earthly presence? Especially, since this vision of the spectre draws so much upon the discourse of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, it is important to ask what the reality is there.

Certainly, socialism for the 21st century has been explicitly on the agenda in Venezuela since Chavez's closing speech at the January 2005 World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil, when he surprised many people by saying, "We have to reinvent socialism." At that time, Chavez emphasised that "It can't be the kind of socialism that we saw in the Soviet Union, but it will emerge as we develop new systems that are built on cooperation, not competition." Capitalism has to be transcended, he argued, if we are ever going to end the poverty of the majority of the world. "But we cannot resort to state capitalism, which would be the same perversion of the Soviet Union. We must reclaim socialism as a thesis, a project and a path, but a new type of socialism, a humanist one, which puts

humans and not machines or the state ahead of everything.”

Without question, there has been progress in this direction. Starting in 2004, oil revenues from the newly recaptured state oil company were directed to new missions which have been providing people with basic prerequisites for human development -- education, health care, adequate and affordable food. Important steps, too, have been taken to develop each side of the elementary socialist triangle:

*Social property:* There has been an expansion of state property, which can be a threshold to socialist property (because it is possible to direct state property to satisfy social needs). In addition to the expansion of state sectors in oil and basic industry, to last year's acquisition of strategic sectors such as communications, electric power and the recovery of the dominant position for the state in the heavy oil fields has been added this year so far a major dairy company and most recently the steel company (SIDOR) that had been privatised by a previous government. Further, the offensive against the *latifundia* has resumed with several land seizures (or "recoveries"), and new state companies (including joint ventures with state firms from countries such as Iran) have been created to produce means of production like tractors.

*Social production:* While the government has continued to seek ways to encourage worker-management, in particular by supporting cooperatives and recovered factories, this side of the triangle is the least developed so far. In part, this is because of opposition within the state to worker-management in strategic sectors such as oil and energy, and in part because of opposition from traditional trade unions to co-management structures and workers' councils. What has been happening is a continued search for forms, and the government has moved from exploring cooperatives as the desired form, to EPS, companies of social production (which made commitments to workers and communities), and now to the exploration of the concept of socialist companies. Everyday, I hear of new ideas in this direction. At this point, this aspect is a work in process. However, it does appear that a previous model of 51% state ownership and 49% ownership by a workers' cooperative is being

replaced by focus upon 100% state ownership with workers' control. Progress in this area, unfortunately, has been held up by the chaos and intense battles between Chavist trade union currents, and that has been a source of incredible frustration for many -- including Chavez. In this process, Chavez continues to exhort the working class to play a leadership role. After this year's takeover of the dairy producer Los Andes, he argued that "workers' committees must be created, socialist committees, in order to transform the factory from inside. The workers must know what is happening in the company, participate in decision-making in the firm." And, after the decision to nationalise SIDOR, he announced that the government was a government of the working class. At this very point, the nationalisation of SIDOR after major struggles by the steel workers has re-animated the organised working class; and our institute (Centro Internacional Miranda) has organised roundtables between tendencies and currents that would not have been possible several months ago.

*Production for social needs:* Throughout the country, there are many experiments attempting to link producers and consumers directly -- especially in the sphere of agricultural products and in local trading with local currencies. To be able to identify social needs, though, continuing social institutions are required; and the most significant advance that has occurred is the development in 2006 of the new communal councils which are able to identify the needs of their communities. These councils are an extraordinary experiment in bringing power to people in their neighbourhoods -- creating an institutional form in which they can diagnose their needs collectively and determine the priorities for their communities. Of course, the idea of participatory diagnosis and budgeting is not unique to Venezuela; that is occurring in a number of communities elsewhere (and the most famous example is Porto Alegre in Brazil). But what is unique in Venezuela is the size of the units in question. Communal councils are formed to represent in urban areas 200-400 families (which can be 1000 people) and in rural areas as few as 20 families. It means that the councils are choosing not distant representatives but, rather, their neighbours, people they know well -- and not as representatives

but as *voceros*, spokespersons for the ultimate decision-making body, the general assembly (which, of course, meets in the neighbourhood, thus allowing everyone to participate). In the communal councils you have the embryo for a new state from below. And that was recognised explicitly by Chavez last year when he proclaimed "All Power to the Communal Councils". Now, of course, the communal councils are small, and the problems of society go well beyond those that can be resolved at the neighbourhood level. That is understood, and Chavez has called the councils themselves the cell of a new socialist state. They are seen as the building blocks -- essential because they are allowing people to develop confidence and capacities in dealing with problems they understand. (Observing the sense of pride in these communities is very moving.) However, it is obviously necessary to begin to combine the communal councils into larger associations in order to deal with larger problems. And that is precisely what is happening now with the creation of pilot projects to combine some of the more advanced groups of councils into socialist communes. The process envisioned is very clearly one of trying to build a new state from below.

So, is this spectre of socialism for the 21st century, with its focus upon human development and practice, real? Clearly, it is not just words. There is truly an attempt to make socialism for the 21st century real. But, can it succeed?

### **Can socialism for the 21st century succeed?**

You might wonder, why am I even posing this question -- given evidence that the desire is there and knowledge that the great oil revenues available provide the means!

Three years ago, I gave a talk in Venezuela called "Socialism doesn't drop from the sky", which has been very widely circulated in Venezuela (largely because Chavez has talked about it a number of times on television); it is also a chapter in my book, *Build it Now: Socialism for the 21st Century*. One aspect of the title of that essay refers to the obvious point that socialism obviously is necessarily rooted in particular societies -- which is to say that it must be developed in societies with particular histories. To understand the possibilities for success in

Venezuela, you have to know something about the nature of that society.

Now, I can't give you a complete, balanced account of Venezuela in the time left. So, I'll just stress just some of the characteristics which suggest significant obstacles to building socialism for the 21st century in Venezuela.

When you talk about Venezuela, you have to begin with oil. Not only the effect of oil exports upon the hollowing-out of the economy such that local manufacturing and agriculture effectively disappeared as the result of an exchange rate which made it much cheaper to import everything rather than to produce it domestically. It's an extreme example of what is called the "Dutch disease": despite rich agricultural land, Venezuela was importing 70% of its food. So, massive migration from the countryside to live in the cities, e.g., in the hills surrounding Caracas -- 80% of the population is urban, maybe 10% engaged in agriculture. And as for industry, it was largely import processing -- processing food, assembling cars and assorted other import-related sectors. Oil production itself doesn't generate many jobs, so we have to think about unemployment, an informal sector (about 50% of the working class) and poverty -- extreme social debt and inequality.

Add to that economic effect, the effect upon state and society. Unlike the classic picture of a state resting upon civil society, upon the social classes, in Venezuela, civil society rests upon the state. Contrary to Engels' sneers at Tkachev, in Venezuela the state indeed has been suspended in mid-air -- or, more precisely, suspended upon an oil geyser. Thus, the state has been the supreme object of desire -- or, more precisely, access to the state for the purpose of gaining access to oil rents has been a national preoccupation. And, in this orgy of rent seeking within a poverty-stricken society -- a culture of corruption and clientalism, parasitic capitalists who don't invest, a labour aristocracy with trade union leaders who sell jobs, a party system which functions as an alternating transmission belt for elections and access to state jobs, a state which mostly does not work because it is filled with incompetent sinecurists but, when it does, is completely top-down. These are just a few characteristics worth mentioning.

All of this was present in Venezuela when Chavez was elected in 1998. And, you would have to be truly naïve to think that it disappeared when Chávez came to office. On the contrary, it pervades *Chavism* -- the corruption, the clientalism, the nature of the state, the nature of the party (including the new party – PSUV -- currently being built), the gap between the organised working class and the poor in the informal sector -- it's all there! And, you will recognise that it is entirely contrary to everything in the concept of socialism for the 21st century.

Socialism doesn't drop from the sky. It is necessarily rooted in particular societies. And, these two souls which currently beat in the breast of Venezuela are clearly at war. Chavez often cites [Italian Marxist Antonio] Gramsci about how the old is dying and the new cannot yet be born (although he leaves out the part about how a great many morbid symptoms appear at that time). Precisely because of these two opposed tendencies, when I write about Venezuela, I always stress the internal struggle within Chavism as the main obstacle to the success of the Bolivarian Revolution. Obviously, it is not the only obstacle -- there is the existing oligarchy, the *latifundists* (who are the most reactionary and violent part of the opposition), the existing capitalists in their enclaves of import processing, finance and the media (which has been their main weapon) and, of course, US imperialism. Not only was the US complicit in the 2002 coup which briefly removed Chavez and in the oil lockout and sabotage later that year, but it also funds and trains the opposition, orchestrates the international media blitz against Venezuela (currently with the assistance of magical laptop computers produced by its Colombian clients), and it is in the process of bringing the US navy back to patrol the waters off Venezuela.

Imperialism is no paper tiger. And, clearly, solidarity with the Bolivarian process is essential by those outside the country who value the concepts and developments I have described. However, I stress the internal obstacles to socialism within Chavism -- the emerging new capitalists (the "bolibourgeoisie"), the high officials (both from military and vanguardist traditions -- it is difficult to see the distinction) who are opposed to power from below in workplaces and communities (and, thus

opposed, in this respect, to human development and revolutionary practice), the party functionaries and nomenclatura. Why do I stress this? Because I consider this the ultimate contradiction of the revolution; and, I think the struggle between this "endogenous right" (the right from within) and the masses who have been mobilised is the ultimate conflict which will determine the fate of the Bolivarian Revolution.

### Who will win?

Who will win? I have to tell you honestly that I don't know. My daily mantra in Venezuela is "pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will". I can tell you that Venezuela is no place for a revolutionary who suffers from bipolar disorder. There are the days of depression and despair; there are the days of manic exultation. In the end, it will all depend upon struggle, class struggle, and when it comes to class struggle, there are no guarantees.

But let's assume a worse-case scenario -- that the process in Venezuela degenerates, that it proceeds to demoralise its supporters, is defeated in one way or another by defectors, domestic capitalists, the military or imperialism. Let's assume, in other words, that this particular earthly manifestation of the spectre of socialism for the 21st century is no more.

What will be left? A spectre -- but one with much more substance than Marx and Engels could write about in the *Communist Manifesto* in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. A spectre -- but one which is capable of becoming a material force by grasping the minds of masses. A spectre -- but one which is absolutely essential to our survival because of another spectre.

Think about this concept of socialism for the 21st century. About the focus upon human development as the goal, upon a democratic, participatory, protagonistic society as the necessary way for the complete development of people, individually and collectively. Think about the idea of communal councils in which people can collectively decide upon their needs, where they simultaneously change circumstances and themselves. Think about democracy in the workplace, about ending the divide between thinking and doing and being able to draw upon the tacit knowledge of workers to be able to produce better. Think in general about this

concept of revolutionary democracy which is central to the concept of socialism for the 21st century.

This is not a concept just for Venezuela or Latin America or for the poor of the South. Why is this not a spectre that can appeal to Canadians in their communities and workplaces? Why is there not the potential for a political instrument here that can focus upon these aspects, that can put forward a vision and that can be a medium for coordinating these struggles from below?

I suggest that this is not just a nice wish -- it is a necessity. Because there is another spectre out there -- a spectre which is haunting humanity, the spectre of barbarism.

Think about capitalism. Its very essence is the drive to expand capital. The picture is one of capital constantly generating more surplus value in the form of commodities which must be sold, constantly trying to create new needs in order to make real that surplus value in the form of money. That constant generation of new needs, Marx noted already in the mid 19th century, is the basis of the contemporary power of capital.

Thus, a growing circle -- a spiral of growing alienated production, growing needs and growing consumption. But how long can that continue? Everyone knows that the high levels of consumption achieved in certain parts of the world cannot be copied in the parts of the world which capital has newly incorporated into the world capitalist economy. Very simply, the Earth cannot sustain this -- as we can already see with the clear evidence of global warming and the growing shortages which reflect rising demands for particular products in the new capitalist centers. Sooner or later, that circle will reach its limits. Its ultimate limit is given by the limits of nature, the limits of the Earth to sustain more and more consumption of commodities, more and more consumption of the Earth's resources.

But well before we reach the ultimate limits of the vicious circle of capitalism, there inevitably will arise the question of who is entitled to command those increasingly limited resources. To whom will go the oil, the metals, the water -- all those requirements of modern life? Will it be the currently rich countries of capitalism, those that have been able to develop because others have not? In other

words, will they be able to maintain the vast advantages they have in terms of consumption of things and resources -- and to use their power to grab the resources located in other countries? Will newly emerging capitalist countries (and, indeed, those not emerging at all) be able to capture a "fair share"? Will the impoverished producers of the world -- producers well aware of the standards of consumption elsewhere as the result of the mass media -- accept that they are not entitled to the fruits of civilisation? How will this be resolved?

The spectre of barbarism is haunting humanity. And, what is the alternative to it? Yesterday's liberalism -- social democracy -- has never understood the nature of capital and offers, accordingly, only barbarism with a human face. And, yesterday's socialist package, with its promise of more rapid development of productive forces, its privileging of industrial workers and, its premise of a stage based upon a principle that we all must get in accordance with our contribution -- this is no alternative to the crisis humanity faces.

Whatever the ultimate fate of the Bolivarian Revolution of Venezuela, its principal contribution has been to restore hope; it has done this by revealing that there is an alternative to neoliberalism and the logic of capital. The alternative offered by socialism for the 21st century points to the need to understand that, regardless of the luck of our birthplaces or our own past contributions, the accumulated fruits of social brain and hand belong to us all. Internationally, its alternative is ALBA, the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas, which has created links between Venezuela, Cuba and Bolivia based upon solidarity rather than exchange relations. At the core of the alternative offered by socialism for the 21st century is the idea of building a society based upon relations of solidarity -- solidarity between producers, e.g., in formal and informal sectors, solidarity between those of the North and those of the South. At its core is the idea of producing consciously for communal needs and purposes and thereby building a society in which the free development of all is the condition for the free development of each.

So, let me conclude with a point that is completely unoriginal but which, so significantly, is being

heard more and more these days: the choice before us is -- socialism or barbarism.

Let me add, though, that socialism doesn't drop from the sky -- you have to struggle to make it real.

### **Bibliography**

Freire, Paulo. 2006. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum).

Lebowitz, Michael A. 2003. *Beyond Capital: Marx's Political Economy of the Working Class* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan).

Lebowitz, Michael A. 2006. *Build it Now: Socialism for the 21st Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press).

Marx, Karl. 1844. *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, in Marx and Engels (1975b), *Collected Works*, Vol. 3.

Marx, Karl. 1845. 'Theses on Feuerbach', in Marx and Engels (1976), *Collected Works*, Vol. 5.

Marx, Karl. 1875. *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, in Marx and Engels (1962), *Selected Works*, Vol. II.

Marx, Karl. 1973. *Grundrisse* (New York: Vintage Books).

Marx, Karl. 1977. *Capital, Vol. I* (New York: Vintage Books).

**Subscribe to Green Left Weekly,  
Australia's best source of  
progressive and alternative news.**

**Introductory subscription offer  
\$10 for 7 issues delivered to your home**

**Visit [www.greenleft.org.au](http://www.greenleft.org.au)**

---

---

## **Discussion on "The spectre of socialism for the 21<sup>st</sup> century"**

---

---

### **Internationalism, strategy and 21st century socialism**

**Richard Fidler**

Like most such pieces by Mike Lebowitz, going "beyond Capital" tends to take us back to *Capital*, and even further, to the *Grundrisse* and the early Marx. Not to deny the relevance and usefulness of this exercise. Mike has done a great job of exegesis on some of the very essential ideas of Marx and Marxism in his books and his descriptions of 21st socialism as it is being discussed in the Venezuelan context.

But what I find lacking in much of this material, including this article, is strategy -- the topic of much of 20th century socialist debate and conflict. How do we get from here to there? Mike offers some useful leads: "practice as essential for human development"; attention to "all activities of people" and to "the goals of workers... in their communities", and not just to industrial workers; social ownership (which can include non-state forms of organization of economic activity); "protagonistic democracy in the workplace", etc.

But when we get down to examining the "earthly presence" of this 21st century spectre, in the Venezuelan experience to date, we find that the Bolivarian revolution is experiencing many of the same difficulties and challenges experienced by revolutionary socialists in the 20th century. The cooperatives and recovered factories, as primarily local and often isolated experiments, are still confronted with the negative effects of the law of value in determining investments and organizing workers self-management (which Lebowitz often confuses with workers control, and vice versa). The communal councils are a promising development, by all accounts, but as he says they need to evolve a larger regional and national presence as well if they are to develop into "socialist communes". Venezuela is still terribly dependent on food

imports; its agrarian reform is very limited and undeveloped; we are still a long way from overcoming the deep-rooted “culture of corruption and clientelism” in the state structures and Chavism itself that Lebowitz correctly underscores. These are the kinds of problems that were encountered by the social revolutions of the 20th century, provoking many debates, proposals, approaches, and producing many examples of both successes and failures.

There are no ideal “models” to follow, but we do have some useful past experiences to examine and learn from. In this regard, the varied experiences of the Cuban revolution, for example -- in the 20th century, no less -- are of great value in assessing the tasks facing the Bolivarian revolution.

The challenges facing the revolution in Venezuela call for strategic responses, that is, not just the kind of democratic, participatory goals now identified with 21st century socialism, but some coherent approaches that can be pursued and implemented with the assistance of a revolutionary cadre that learns how to assimilate lessons of previous experiences, international as well as national, and to think through and tackle the new problems that arise in today’s context. That is why I would question Mike Lebowitz’s claim that “the internal struggle within Chavism [is] the main obstacle to the success of the Bolivarian Revolution.” In my view, that struggle, which is being waged today on all fronts of the revolution (communal councils, factories, farms, universities, etc.) and not just within the PSUV debates and organizational conflicts, is crucial; there must be a “revolution within the revolution” to build a national leadership that can continue leading the process forward.

But perhaps Lebowitz is saying much the same thing. As he puts it at the end of his speech, “the struggle between this ‘endogenous right’... and the masses that have been mobilised is the ultimate conflict which will determine the fate of the Bolivarian Revolution.”

In this context, there is a dimension to that revolution that is extremely important, although it is only alluded to briefly in Mike’s speech. That is, its international dimension. He mentions ALBA, the links with Cuba and Bolivia (Ecuador and Nicaragua could also be cited). As he says, these still-embryonic relations of trade and mutual social

development assistance are “based upon solidarity rather than exchange relations”. And that too, must be a key ingredient of 21st century socialism – although it receives no mention in Mike’s book *Build It Now*.

The internationalism of Chávez’s socialism is a key feature that links the Bolivarian Revolution with Cuba’s and other attempts to build an anti-imperialist, democratic, pluralistic alternative and begin building a socialist society in the Latin American context. And it renews with a key feature of communist strategy in Lenin’s time, the attempt to build meaningful international experiences of solidarity and mutual assistance. Socialism will make little progress in Venezuela, or any other country in Latin America, without a qualitative advance in continental unity and integration. As the Cubans say, it is integration... or annexation to the Empire, North American imperialism. The stakes are nothing less.

### **The spectre of Bolivarian internationalism**

#### **Felipe Stuart Cournoyer**

Richard Fidler’s comments on Mike Lebowitz’s talk are very to the point, and need to be discussed.

I agree with much of what Richard argues, but would like to stress a prior point to any discussion of obstacles to victory in Venezuela. The main obstacle and enemy of the victory of 21st Century socialism in Venezuela, that is the Bolivarian revolution broadly conceived, is not internal. It is imperialism, centred both in the USNA and in Europe. The strategists of imperial power are highly skilled and experienced in taking advantage of internal weaknesses and mistakes, but they have additional assets - raw power and control over ideological production on a world scale.

It is this reality that leads the Bolivarians to stress the strategic importance of Indo-Latin American unity, of common economic strategies on the part of South and Mesoamerican countries. We could refer to this as the “spectre of internationalism.”

Not even the stupendous dollar resources of Venezuela’s oil exports can save the revolution short of a broader anti-imperialist response on a continental scale. We can already see the contours

of the imperialist counteroffensive in Bolivia, in Colombia, in Peru, and here in Nicaragua.

These are additional reasons to support Richard's appeal for strategic responses, and not just the broad generalizations that Mike portrays. I do not want to diminish the vital contribution that Mike is making to our understanding of the challenges faced by the Bolivarians. They are almost beyond description in a short talk or essay. But, in the last analysis, or perhaps now the next stage of the analysis, the question of class power and anti-imperialist alliances becomes more and more central and decisive to the outcome of the developing showdown in Venezuela.

Fortunately, I would argue, we find a very sophisticated and open leadership in Venezuela, a team that is looking for input to help them cross hurdles and even more hurdles after that. The outcome of the showdown will be a function not just of a relationship of class forces, measured internationally, but also the calibre and will of the leadership. I am too far from the theatre of the conflict to express a solid opinion on that issue. But not so far that I can't say that so far the leadership has made all the difference. Let's hope that this qualitative factor persists over the next phases and beyond.

### **A missing strategy... or a different one?**

**Michael A. Lebowitz**

There is a curious phenomenon among some putative revolutionaries -- they reason that distance from a revolutionary process is an advantage because it gives one a perspective that is not available to those too close to the ground. To fill in the inevitable knowledge gaps, the formulae of old texts, the scripts of old movies and the score-sheets of revolutions past are always available.

Happily, Richard Fidler in his recent comment in Links ("Internationalism, strategy and 21st century socialism") avoids most of this theoretical substitutionism; however, he is not entirely immune. Note, for example, his references to "the negative effects of the law of value" upon Venezuelan cooperatives and recovered factories "in determining investments and organizing worker self-management" (as if this were the central problem of those workplaces), his plaint about the

absence of a "revolutionary cadre" that can assimilate lessons of past experiences (as if Venezuela's problem was a revolutionary cadre deficit), and his muted reference to the catechism about the impossibility of building socialism in one country (as if anyone these days was arguing otherwise).

I certainly appreciate Richard's favourable comments about my theoretical work, my discussions of socialism for the 21st century, and my descriptions of the situation in Venezuela. However, his caveat with reference to my talk in Canada (published in Links as "The spectre of socialism for the 21st century") that what he finds "lacking in much of this material, including this article, is strategy" puzzles me! What have I been writing about all along (both in general and in relation to Venezuela) if it is not revolutionary strategy?

As my response ("The Politics of Beyond Capital", *Historical Materialism*, 14:4, 2006) to a symposium on *Beyond Capital: Marx's political economy of the working class* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1992, 2003) demonstrates, a political strategy was present in that book. Its implications for a political theory for the working class included (1) a focus on human development, (2) the importance of a vision of a socialist alternative, (3) the centrality of revolutionary practice, (4) the necessity of theory, (6) the critique of social democracy (which enforces the logic of capital), (7) the necessity for a worker's state which stresses the centrality of revolutionary practice, (8) the need to go beyond exploitation as the basis for entitlement within the new society, (9) the recognition that the subjects of revolutionary change go well beyond industrial workers, (10) the need for a political instrument to unite the collective worker, (11) the need for an organized effort to communicate theory, and (12) the need for a party of a different type (because "nothing could be more contrary to a theory which stresses the self-development of the working class through revolutionary practice than a party which sees itself as superior to social movements and as the place where the masses of members are meant to learn the merits of discipline in following the decisions made by infallible central committees").

Look back at the talk that provoked Fidler, a talk intended to reach out to despairing, dormant left Canadians with a vision of a socialist alternative based upon the key link of human development and revolutionary practice. The theme of a "democratic, participatory, protagonistic society as the necessary way for the complete development of people, individually and collectively", the ideas of a state based upon communal councils, of democracy in the workplace, of a "political instrument which respects the creative energy and revolutionary practice of masses rather than substitutes its own wisdom" -- it is all there. "Why," I asked, "is this not a spectre that can appeal to Canadians in their communities and workplaces? Why is there not the potential for a political instrument here that can focus on these aspects, that can put forward a vision and that can be a medium for coordinating the struggles from below?"

Obviously, there is a strategy there -- one distinct from social democracy, entrism and the "banked knowledge" of the Leninist party. So, it must be the lack of strategy with respect to Venezuela that is my sin in Fidler's eyes. But, that charge is simply not true. Consider Build it Now's emphasis upon the importance of democratic decision-making from below in communities and workplaces, its indication of the high-level opposition to worker-management and its stress upon the need for "a political instrument that can bring together those fighting for protagonistic democracy in the workplace and in the community"--- i.e., "a party from below that can continue the process of revolutionary democracy that is needed to build this new type of socialism". As can be seen easily on-line at *Monthly Review*, *MRZine* and *Links*, I have continued since to stress these points in talks that I have given in Venezuela and have made increasingly explicit the centrality of and necessity for class struggle within the Chavist movement.

Last year, in "Venezuela: a Good Example of the Bad Left of Latin America" (*Monthly Review*, July-August 2007), I wrote that the dialectic between leadership and the movement of masses, "a dialectic of masses which understand that there is an alternative and a revolutionary leadership prepared to move in rather than give in" had been essential in the advance of the Bolivarian Revolution. But what

happens when that dialectic is suspended or reversed?

Given the current dismay (which may be difficult to see from a distance) among many supporters of the process over the increased inflation generated by the removal of price controls on food and by Chavez's June 11th "productive re-impulse" speech proposing an alliance with national capitalists, it is useful to look back at what I also wrote in "the Bad Left". In looking at the obstacles to socialism from within the Bolivarian Revolution, I noted that "there is also a very clear tendency which supports the growth of a domestic capitalist class as one leg upon which the Bolivarian Revolution must walk for the foreseeable future." Mixed signals, I warned, were being sent out, and "what is being strengthened is the 'capitalist triangle': private ownership of the means of production, exploitation of wage labourers, for the purpose of profits." Indeed, the Bolivarian Revolution was producing "its own potential gravediggers. To the extent that it fosters the infection of the logic of capital, the Bolivarian Revolution does not walk on two legs but, rather, has one leg walking backward."

Which brings us back to the "claim" I made which Fidler explicitly questions--- that "the internal struggle within Chavism [is] the main obstacle to the success of the Bolivarian Revolution" (although, curiously, he seems to accept my statement that "the struggle between this 'endogenous right' [the right from within] and the masses who have been mobilised is the ultimate conflict which will determine the fate of the Bolivarian Revolution"). It's obvious that it is not the lack of a strategy in my arguments with respect to Venezuela that bothers Fidler. Rather, he just doesn't seem to agree with the strategy there.

And, why? The answer appears to be signaled in his title--- "Internationalism, strategy and 21st Century Socialism" and in his emphasis upon learning from the experience of the Cuban Revolution (presumably not with respect to communal councils and worker-management) and upon allying with Cuba. The implicit suggestion (which can be read as well into the comments of his old comrade Phil Cournoyer) seems to be that the principal contradiction is with imperialism. Certainly, that calls for a strategy which differs from one which

stresses the need to struggle for socialism within the Chavist movement against the ‘bolibourgeoisie’; and, this position has been most explicitly advanced by the PCV (the Venezuelan Communist Party) which has argued for a broad, multi-class alliance against imperialism at this time and, at a later stage, a struggle for socialism led by a Marxist-Leninist Party.

Obviously, imperialism has demonstrated and continues to demonstrate that it is a major threat to the Bolivarian Revolution--- I have made that point repeatedly. And, no one can deny the importance of Cuba’s success to date in the struggle against U.S. imperialism. In “New Wings for Socialism” (*Monthly Review*, April 2007), I wrote that “I regard Cuba’s victory over imperialism in the Special Period not as the last chapter of twentieth-century socialism but as a new beginning -- the first chapter of socialism for the twenty-first century.” The question, though, is whether Cuba could have succeeded with one leg marching backward.

## **Response to Michael Lebowitz**

### **Richard Fidler**

Michael Lebowitz’s clarification is appreciated. In fact, his list of the attributes of 21st century socialism (the 12 points) is a useful summary not just of the topics addressed by 21st century socialism but of many of the topics of debate and struggle that absorbed the attention of socialists in the 20th century.

I still don’t think that Michael’s summary of goals and processes — “democratic, participatory, protagonistic society as the necessary way for the complete development of people, individually and collectively” — adds up to a strategy, which to my way of thinking refers to the coherent responses forged by the masses themselves in a dialectical process of responding to and overcoming the challenges and obstacles that arise in the revolutionary process. That is why I see the internal debate within the Chavista movement not as an obstacle to the success of the Bolivarian Revolution (as Michael put it in his speech) but rather as the means by which the masses themselves are working their way through those problems and developing their alternatives.

As Michael reminds us, he has the benefit of first-hand observation of this process through his presence in Venezuela. I look forward to his accounts in future of how these strategic debates within the revolution are proceeding — the element that was absent from his speech.

In this sense, I would question Michael’s assertion that it is somehow contradictory to pose the struggle to defeat the endogenous right, the “Bolibourgeoisie”, within the Chavista current as one that must necessarily unfold within an anti-imperialist framework.

If there is one overriding distinction between the socialisms of the 20th and 21st centuries, it is that the latter must be imbued with an internationalist, anti-imperialist content. Both Social-Democracy and Stalinism, the twin devils of 20th century socialism, were products of imperialism as a system: Social-Democracy as an ideology reflecting the relative privilege of workers in the imperialist countries; Stalinism as the ideology of the ruling caste that seized control in a Soviet republic isolated within a world dominated by the imperialist powers. At bottom, both ideologies were and are an expression of nationalist interests, not internationalist.

While most socialists today reject these ideologies, the system that spawned them remains in place, stronger and more universal than ever. This reality poses some particular challenges to the socialist movement. It does not mean erecting a Chinese wall between anti-imperialism and socialism (as Michael says the Venezuelan CP does), but it does mean incorporating the anti-imperialist perspective as a vital component of socialist strategy.

It is no accident that the Cuban revolution, which has been imbued throughout its history by this anti-imperialist, internationalist perspective, is the most successful and enduring of the 20th century socialist revolutions.

That is why I regard the internationalism of Hugo Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution, along with Cuba, as emblematic of the attempt to build a socialism of the 21st century. This is expressed in the international exchanges of solidaristic social programs, the formation of ALBA and other non-market based economic and trade relations, the

strong stance of international solidarity with all the victims of imperialism, and not least the ongoing attempts to forge Latin American and Caribbean unity and integration as a counter-force to the imperialist colossus of the North.

As the socialist forces within Venezuela and other countries advance, the threat from imperialism will increase, and the challenge of confronting it is a major issue already facing the participants in Venezuela's fledgling protagonistic democracy, from the PSUV to the grass-roots councils in communities and workplaces. These debates and struggles will be a key arena in the battle against the Bolibourgeoisie and the endogenous right wing, which imperialism is already manipulating through the media, NGOs and a plethora of institutions based within the state structures inherited from Venezuela's semi-colonial past.

### **Response to Michael/Richard**

**Chris Kerr**

I am not sure I agree with the level emphasis that Richard places on the anti-imperialist aspect of the struggle. Like Richard I am not in Venezuela and am not in a position to judge things on the ground. But comments from Venezuelan friends, people who consider themselves Chavistas but who aren't activists in any sense are becoming increasingly disillusioned with the Chavez government - not because that Chavez is too radical but because they feel the layers around him aren't for social change but are only for their own power and wealth. (One particular friend has told me of a number of stories of great activists who have basically sold-out everything once they got a sniff of power and unaccountable access to finance. Or other more honest people she knew being executed in their homes after exposing corruption in the National Guard.)

That doesn't lead them to the opposition who they equally despise, but it just leads to a feeling of despair that nothing will ever change and there is no use for hope, no use for getting involved. So, to give a concrete example, US imperialism can organise, train and finance the Venezuelan oligarchy to destabilise the Chavez government and be a stronger force organisationally and in terms of their image. But from what I understand from

people in Venezuela, this is not the most crucial danger in this upcoming election. What is more dangerous than the opposition parties themselves, is people abstaining from politics because they are disillusioned with government corruption and bureaucracy. I think this was a major force in the referendum battle.

But anyway I think the battle against this emerging "Bolibourgeoisie" is a battle required to get much of the population out of the frame of mind of "home-delivery revolution" and actually get them to become capable leaders in their own right - but its a battle that does need to be fought in the short term as well as the long term if the revolution is to survive and deepen.

### **On the role of anti-imperialism in Latin America**

**Felipe Stuart Cournoyer**

Mike Lebowitz's response to a critique by Richard Fidler (Missing Strategy...or a Different One?) attributes to me in passing a political position on the Bolivarian revolutionary struggle that I do not hold, while raising an important question regarding the struggle for socialism in Latin America.

Mike wrote that it is possible to read into my comments, "The Spectre of Bolivarian Internationalism," an "implicit suggestion ... that the principal conflict is with imperialism. Certainly, that calls for a strategy which differs from the one which stresses the need to struggle for socialism within the Chavist movement against the 'bolibourgeoisie'; and, this position has been most explicitly advanced by the PCV (the Venezuelan Communist Party) which has argued for a broad, multi-class alliance against imperialism at this time and, at a later stage, a struggle for socialism led by a Marxist-Leninist Party."

I don't see how Mike can read such a conclusion into my brief comments. Holding that imperialism is the main enemy does not require one to adopt the Venezuelan CP theory of a two-stages revolution, a position that has been discredited in Latin America since the time of the First and Second Declarations of Havana in the early sixties.

I draw the opposition conclusion. Imperialism is the main enemy, but it operates through sections of the

national oligarchy and bourgeoisie and a myriad of “civic” organizations. The national bourgeoisie derives much of its strength and power from imperialism. It is the working masses of town and country who are challenged to lead the fight against imperialism that is also necessarily a class struggle within the country for hegemony over the anti-imperialist struggle.

And to the extent that popular forces contend against the bourgeoisie for leadership in an anti-imperialist struggle, they will seek to endow it with a program and direction that corresponds to their own social goals and that points to socialism.

Venezuela provides a good example of this process.

My schematic description obviously needs to be modified in terms of social conditions (tasks in Haiti are far different from those in Brazil) and the stage of the struggle. One can also debate the meaning of “main enemy” – I am sure there are more nuanced and precise ways to describe how anti-imperialism relates to the class struggle.

But it does seem clear, and here I believe Mike and I are in full agreement, that currents that leave imperialism out of their analysis of Latin America will go wrong on the tasks before working-class and popular movements. The evolution that I have witnessed in Nicaragua of the dissident Sandinistas – the Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS) – provides a tragic example of this danger. (See my “Nicaragua: Anti-FSLN opposition seeks unity to topple Ortega government” at *Links* <http://links.org.au/node/482>).

Mike is absolutely right to insist that the struggle for a socialist course for the PSUV must be waged now – not at some distant time in the future. At the same time the PSUV is challenged to keep leading Venezuela’s anti-imperialist course and the international alliances it is spearheading – not just the pro-socialist ALBA alliance, but broader economic and political alliances that point towards the unification of the Gran Patria – South and Mesoamerican or Indo-Black-Latin American unity against the Empire.

Mike has advanced a developed strategic concept of revolutionary transformation that is best articulated in his book *Beyond Capital*, and he summarizes this strategy in paragraph four of his “A Missing

Strategy...or a Different One?” This summary is worth careful attention, and I will quote it in full:

“(1) [A] focus on human development, (2) the importance of a vision of a socialist alternative, (3) the centrality of revolutionary practice, (4) the necessity of theory, (6) the critique of social democracy (which enforces the logic of capital), (7) the necessity for a worker's state which stresses the centrality of revolutionary practice, (8) the need to go beyond exploitation as the basis for entitlement within the new society, (9) the recognition that the subjects of revolutionary change go well beyond industrial workers, (10) the need for a political instrument to unite the collective worker, (11) the need for an organized effort to communicate theory, and (12) the need for a party of a different type (because ‘nothing could be more contrary to a theory which stresses the self-development of the working class through revolutionary practice than a party which sees itself as superior to social movements and as the place where the masses of members are meant to learn the merits of discipline in following the decisions made by infallible central committees’).” [Note that point (5) was missing in the original].

I agree fully with the points raised here and I believe they apply to struggles in Latin America today. We should note that Mike advances this strategy for the working-class struggle on a world scale. In applying it to countries of Latin America, I suggest there are three other points that should be considered, obviously with due regard to the vastly varying conditions from one country to another.

1. The need for the pro-socialist forces to include leadership of the anti-imperialist struggles in their strategic program for advancing the Bolivarian revolution.
2. The need to forge international alliances not just of a partially anti-capitalist character such as ALBA and special relations with the Cuban workers state, but of broad anti-imperialist alliances such as UNASUR and regional market alliances designed to shield Latin American countries from the worst depredations of imperialism.
3. The growing and crucial role of indigenous struggles in Indo-Black and Latin America. The

MAS-Morales government is the high watermark of this process to date.

Once again, I assume agreement with Mike regarding the relevance of these points. What remains unanswered in my mind is what weight he assigns to these questions and how they relate to his overall strategic argument.

I believe that anti-imperialism and strategic alliances with other Indo Latin American and Caribbean countries, and the special relations with revolutionary Cuba (in the case of the Bolivarian struggle) are vital. They are not an optional add-on or accessory. They too are part of the building the social forces of oppressed and exploited people who will change themselves in the course of struggle. Anti-imperialist struggle too is a school for revolution.

Anti-imperialism and internationalism are a necessary component of the ideological and political struggle against the Venezuelan oligarchy and "bolibourgeoisie." They seek to ally with other bourgeois forces abroad, including in North America, rather than an alliance with working-class and popular movements abroad. It is a matter of their internationalism and ours. The toilers of Venezuela cannot win their national struggle at home without including these internationalist elements as a crucial component of their political and ideological arsenal.

Also, the defense of indigenous struggles, especially in countries where native peoples can pose the question of power or make a significant difference in class and social polarization, has strategic weight and importance for revolutionary strategy today.

Finally, let me emphasize that we all owe Mike a vote of thanks for persistently explaining the urgency that exploited and oppressed forces in Venezuela struggle for leadership in the Bolivarian struggle for national sovereignty and socialism.

**THE DEMOCRATIC SOCIALIST  
PERSPECTIVE**

**Visit [www.dsp.org.au](http://www.dsp.org.au)**

---

---

## **May Day: The capitalist workday, the socialist workday**

**Michael A. Lebowitz**

---

As May Day approaches, there are four things that are worth remembering:

1. For workers, May Day does not celebrate a state holiday or gifts from the state but commemorates the struggle of workers from below.
2. The initial focus of May Day was a struggle for the shorter workday.
3. The struggle for the shorter workday is not an isolated struggle but is the struggle against capitalist exploitation.
4. The struggle against capitalist exploitation is an essential part but not the *only* part of the struggle against capitalism.

What I want to do today is to set out some ideas about the capitalist workday and the socialist workday which I hope can be useful in the current struggles in Venezuela and, more immediately, in today's discussion.

### **The capitalist workday**

What is the relation between the work the capitalist workday and exploitation? When workers work for capital, they receive a wage which allows them to purchase a certain amount of commodities. How *much* is that wage? There is nothing automatic about the wage level. It is determined by the struggles of workers against capital.

Those commodities which form the worker's wage contain a certain quantity of labour, and those hours of labour on a daily basis are often described as the "necessary labour" of the worker -- the hours of labour necessary for workers to produce the commodities they consume on a daily basis.

---

<sup>3</sup> This article was presented as initiating remarks to the "Roundtable Discussion on the Reduction of the Workday" held on April 24, 2008, at the Centro Internacional Miranda, Caracas, Venezuela.

But, in capitalism workers do not just work their hours of necessary labour. Because they have been compelled to sell their ability to work to the capitalist in order to survive, the capitalist is in the position to demand they work longer than this. And the difference between their hours of necessary labour and the total work that workers perform for capital is *surplus* labour -- the ultimate source of capital's profits. In other words, capitalist profits are based on the difference between the workday and necessary labour; they are based upon surplus labour, unpaid labour, exploitation.

So, the more the capitalist is able to drive up the workday, the greater the exploitation and the greater the profit. Marx commented that "the capitalist is constantly tending to reduce wages to their physical minimum and extend the working day to its physical maximum". How true. Marx continued, though, and noted "while the working man constantly presses in the opposite direction". In other words, class struggle: workers struggle to increase wages and to reduce the workday; they struggle to reduce exploitation by capitalists.

Of course, your workday is more than just the time spent between clocking in and clocking out. There is the time it takes you to get to work, the time it takes to buy the food you need to survive, the time to prepare that food -- all this is really necessary labour and part of the worker's workday. But since this labour is free to the capitalist, since it is not a cost for him, it is therefore *invisible* to him. So, when the capitalists want to drive down necessary labour by driving down wages (or by increasing productivity relative to wages), it is not the labour he does not pay for that he wants to reduce. Rather, he wants as much free labour is possible, as much unpaid labour as possible.

It is not surprising that workers want to reduce their unpaid labour for capital and to do so by struggling to reduce the capitalist workday. But it is not only the unpaid labour in the workday that is a burden for workers; it is also the *paid* labour that they are compelled to do for capital. In other words, the problem is not only exploitation. It is the way that capitalist production deforms working people. In the capitalist workplace, the worker works for the goals of capital, under the control of capital and with an organisation of production which is designed not to

permit workers to develop their capabilities but, rather, has the single goal of profits. "All means for the development of production", Marx stressed about capitalism, "distort the worker into a fragment of a man, they degrade him" and "alienate from him the intellectual potentialities of the labour process". In other words, the process of capitalist production cripples us as human beings. Life in the capitalist workplace is a place where we are commanded from above, where we are mere tools that capital manipulates in order to get profits.

That is why we want to reduce the capitalist workday. That is why we cannot wait to escape. It is not only the exploitation, the unfairness and the injustice in the distribution of income. Time away from capitalist production appears as the only time in which we can be ourselves, a time when our activity can be *free* time, time for the full development of the individual.

This is what it necessarily looks like within capitalism. But we have to recognise that so many of our ideas within capitalism are infected. The most obvious example is the phenomenon of consumerism -- we must buy all those things! What we own defines us. The socialist answer, though, is not that everyone should own the same things -- in other words, equalisation of alienation; rather, the socialist idea is to end the situation in which we are owned and defined by things.

The battle of ideas, which is central to the struggle for socialism, is based on the alternative conception of socialism. Its focus is not to reform this or that idea that has developed within capitalism but, rather, to replace ideas from capitalism with conceptions appropriate to socialism. So, is our idea of the workday within capitalism infected? And, can we get any insights into the workday by thinking about the workday within socialism?

### **The socialist workday**

Firstly, what do we mean by socialism? The goal of socialists has always been the creation of a society which would allow for the full development of human potential. It was never seen as a society in which some people are able to develop their capabilities and others are *not*. That was Marx's point in stating clearly that the goal is "an association, in which the free development of each

is the condition for the free development of all." And this is clearly the point, too, of Venezuela's Bolivarian constitution where it stresses in article 20 that "everyone has the right to the free development of his or her own personality" and in the explicit recognition in article 299 that the goal of a human society must be that of "ensuring overall human development".

In contrast to capitalist society, where "the worker exists to satisfy the need" of capital to expand, Marx envisioned a socialist society where the wealth that workers have produced "is there to satisfy the worker's own need for development". So, what is the nature of the workday in a society oriented toward ensuring overall human development?

Let us begin by talking about necessary labour -- quantitatively. There is the labour which is contained in the products we consume daily -- just like before. To this, however, we need to add the labour that workers want to devote toward expanding production in the future. In socialism, there are no capitalists who compel the performance of surplus labour and invest a portion of the profits in the search for future profits. Rather, workers themselves in their workplaces and society decide if they want to devote time and effort to expanding satisfaction of needs in the future. If they make this decision, then this labour is not surplus to their needs; it forms part of what they see as their necessary labour. Thus, the concept of necessary labour changes here.

In a socialist society, further, we recognise explicitly that part of our necessary labour is labour within the household. In other words we acknowledge that our workday does not begin after we leave the household but includes what we do within the household. Article 88 of the Bolivarian constitution recognises the importance of this labour when it notes that labour within the household is "economic activity that creates added value and produces social welfare and wealth".

The concept of necessary labour and our workday within a socialist society also includes the labour which is required to self-govern our communities. After all, if socialism is about the decisions we make democratically in our communities, then the time we need to do this is part of our necessary

labour. Similarly, if socialism is about creating the conditions in which we are all able to develop our potential, then the process of education and of developing our capabilities is also activity which is necessary.

When we think about the socialist workday, in short, we think about the workday differently. Our view of the quantity of necessary labour, for example, is not distorted by the capitalist perspective of treating as necessary only that labour for which capital must pay. That is the difference between the political economy of capital and the political economy of the working class. From the perspective of workers, we recognise as necessary labour all the labour that is necessary for "the worker's own need for development".

But the difference is not only quantitative. In socialism, the workday cannot be a day in which you receive orders from the top (even in strategic industries). Rather, it is only through our own activity, our practice and our protagonism that we can develop our capabilities. Article 62 of Venezuela's constitution makes that point in its declaration that participation by people is "the necessary way of achieving the involvement to ensure their complete development, both individual and collective". In other words, in every aspect of our lives (the traditional workplace, the community, the household), democratic decision making is a necessary characteristic of the socialist workday; through workers' councils, communal councils, student councils, family councils, we produce ourselves as new socialist subjects.

Thus, when we look at the workday from the perspective of socialism, we see that the simple demand for reducing the workday is a *demand from within capitalism*. Its message is simple -- end this horror! This is an "infected" conception of the workday. It starts from a view of labour as so miserable that the only thing you can think of doing is reducing and ending it.

When we think about building socialism, however, we recognise that the demand is to *transform* the workday -- to recognise all parts of our workday explicitly and to transform that day qualitatively. Rather than only "free time" being time in which we can develop, from the perspective of socialism it

is essential to make the *whole* day time for building human capacities.

In short, there are two ways of looking at the demand for the reduced workday: one way talks simply about a shorter work week and thus longer weekend vacations; in contrast, a second way stresses the reduction of the traditional workday in order to provide the time on a daily basis for education for self-managing, for our work within the household and our work within our communities. In other words, it is the demand to *redefine and transform our workday*.

The first of these is simply a reform within capitalism. For socialists, May Day should be the day to struggle for the *whole* worker's day, to struggle for the *socialist* workday.

**Latest articles on Latin America available at Links – International Journal of Socialist Renewal.**

Latin America's struggle for integration and independence – *Federico Fuentes*

Venezuela: the hard battle for socialism – *Interview with Minister of Energy and Petroleum Rafael Ramirez*

Debate on Argentine rural crisis – *Claudio Katz, Movimiento Socialista de los Trabajadores (Socialist Movement of Workers, Patria y Pueblo (Homeland and People))*

Analysis on Colombia, FARC, Uribe after the freeing of Ingrid Betancourt

El Salvador elections 2009: High hopes for FMLN – *National Committee of War Veterans' sector of Frente Farabundo Marti de Liberacion Nacional (Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front)*

Leo Pantich on movements, debates and struggles in Latin America

Nicaragua's 1979 revolution remembered – *John Pilger*

And more.....

---

---

## **“Without worker-management, there is no socialism”**

**Michael A. Lebowitz<sup>4</sup>**

---

On May Day 2005, I marched with workers in Caracas. The slogan workers were chanting was, “without co-management, there is no revolution”. Indeed, the main slogans for that May Day march, organised by the National Union of Workers, the main progressive union federation in Venezuela, were “co-management is revolution” and “Venezuelan workers are building Bolivarian socialism”. We don't hear much of that anymore. We don't have masses of workers saying, “without worker-management, there is no socialism”, or that you cannot build socialism without worker-management. Nevertheless, I think that we have to recognise the essential truth of this proposition. Let me stress, though, that I'm not simply talking about worker-management as workers making decisions in individual workplaces. That's a necessary part of it, but it's not enough. When we talk about the goals of production, they should be the goals of workers—but not in single workplaces. They should be the goals of workers in society, too—workers in their communities. The goals which guide production should be developed democratically in both communities and workplaces and based on the concept of solidarity. In this respect, it's important to remember the different dimensions of what Venezuela's President Hugo Chávez has called the “elementary triangle” of socialism: units of social property, social production organised by workers, and production for the needs of communities. You can't separate those in socialism. As I've written in the new edition of *Socialism doesn't drop from the sky*, “Without production for social needs, no real social property; without social property, no worker decision-making oriented toward society's needs;

---

<sup>4</sup> A talk given at the two-day seminar “Workers Management: Theory and Practise”, held on October 26 and 27, 2007, organised by the Human Development and Transformative Praxis Program at the Caracas-based Miranda International Centre.

without worker decision-making, no transformation of people and their needs.”

### The ‘capitalist triangle’

Capitalism, of course, involves a different triangle. The “capitalist triangle” is private ownership of the means of production, the exploitation of wage labourers, for the purpose of profits. And what is the situation of workers in this context? They work to achieve capital’s goal; they submit to the authority and will of capital; and, they produce products which are the property of capital. The products of workers are turned against them and dominate them as capital. The world of wealth, Marx commented, faces the worker “as an alien world dominating him”. And, that alien world dominates the worker more and more because capital constantly creates new needs to consume as the result of its requirement to realise the surplus value contained in commodities. For workers, producing within this relationship is a process of a “complete emptying out”, “total alienation”. And, we fill the vacuum of our lives with things -- we are driven to consume.

But that’s only one way that capitalism produces defective people. In *Capital Vol. 1* (Penguin Books edition, 1976), Marx described the mutilation, the impoverishment, the “crippling of body and mind” of the worker “bound hand and foot for life to a single specialised operation” which occurs in the division of labour characteristic of the capitalist process of manufacturing. Did the development of machinery rescue workers under capitalism? No, Marx stressed, it completes the “separation of the intellectual faculties of the production process from manual labour”.

And, in this situation, head and hand become separate and hostile: “every atom of freedom, both in bodily and in intellectual activity” is lost. The worker is distorted “into a fragment” of a person, degraded and “the intellectual potentialities of the labour process” are alienated from them. In short, in addition to producing commodities and capital itself, the product of capitalist production is the fragmented, crippled human being whose enjoyment consists in possessing and consuming things.

Is that inevitable? Is the only way to escape the effects upon us of capitalist production by lowering the work day? There is an alternative. It is the

society that Marx (*Capital Vol. 1*, 1976: 772) described as characterised not by the capitalists’ drive to increase the value of their capital but, rather, by “the inverse situation in which objective wealth is there to satisfy the worker’s own need for development”. That society oriented to the full development of human beings is socialism. It is the society where, instead of this crippling of body and mind of the worker and the alienation from the worker of all “the intellectual potentialities of the labour process”, there is the *re-combining* of head and hand, the uniting of mental and physical labour. In this way, workers develop their capabilities through their practice. The partially developed individual is “replaced by the totally developed individual, for whom the different social functions are different modes of activity he takes up in turn” (Marx, *Capital Vol. 1*, 1976: 617-8). The combination of thinking and doing, Marx stressed, is “the only method of producing fully developed human beings” (Marx, *Capital Vol. 1*, 1976: 613-4, 643).

That can’t happen, though, when you work for capital. Even if workers have complete control in the workplace. If the interconnection of workers in production “confronts them, in the realm of ideas, as a plan drawn up by the capitalist, and, in practice, as his authority, as the powerful will of a being outside them” (Marx, *Capital Vol. 1*, 1976: 450), how can workers develop all their capabilities? Without “intelligent direction of production” by workers, without production “under their conscious and planned control”, in other words, without worker-management, workers cannot develop their potential as human beings (Marx, *Capital Vol. 1*, 1976: 173). Clearly, for “the worker’s own need for development” to be the goal and to be the result requires an economic system quite different from capitalism, a socialist system which is the inversion of capitalism.

This brings me, though, to the question of worker-management and what we should learn from the efforts to build socialism in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Let me suggest three propositions:

1. When workers don’t manage, someone else does.
2. When workers don’t develop their capabilities through their practice, someone else does.

3. However much you may think you have banished capitalism from the house, when production is not based upon the relation of production of associated producers, sooner or later capitalism comes in: first, through the backdoor, and then it marches openly through the front door.

### Lessons from the Soviet Union

Let's think about some experiences in the attempt to build socialism in the 20th century. Consider the position of workers in the Soviet Union from the 1950s onward. Workers there had job rights. Not only was there full employment, but they also had significant protection against losing their jobs, or having their individual jobs altered in a way which they didn't like. That was real job security. And, they weren't tied to their jobs—in this situation of full employment they could move to better jobs when they wanted; e.g., 30% of industrial workers moved to better jobs in any one year. This certainly was not the situation for workers under capitalism, where the reserve army of unemployed is regularly reproduced and reinforces the dependence of workers upon capital.

What *more* could workers want? Well, think about what Soviet workers did *not* have. First of all, they had no power to make decisions within the workplace—they had the right to submit proposals on how to improve work, but the managers decided which, if any, suggestions they would accept. Those workers had no independent and autonomous voice: the trade unions, which protected their individual job rights, had their leaderships selected from above and played the role principally of transmission belts to mobilise the workers in production.

What was the result of the powerlessness of the Soviet worker? One result was the effect upon workers—they were alienated, cared little about the quality of what they produced or about improving production, worked as little as possible (except at the end of plan periods when there was the possibility of getting bonuses) and used the time and energy they had left to function in the second economy, or informal sector.

There was another effect, though, of the denial of opportunity for workers to manage their workplaces and to develop their capabilities. Someone *else* did—the enterprise managers and their staff. This

was a group which maximised its income by its knowledge of production, its ability to manipulate the conditions for obtaining bonuses and its development of alliances. Over a period of time, the leadership at the top of the Soviet Union became increasingly dependent on the managers and came to accept their perspective on how to solve the increasing problems in the economy. The managers, whose perspective was quite different from that of workers, emerged as the capitalist class of the Soviet Union.

### Yugoslavia

This was not the only model for building socialism. Many experiences in the 20th Century were variations on the Soviet attempt to build socialism. In Yugoslavia, though, there was a *real contrast*, especially with respect to the situation of workers. In 1949, the Yugoslav leadership described the Soviet model as state capitalism and bureaucratic despotism; and they argued that the bureaucracy in the Soviet Union had become a new class. To build socialism, the Yugoslavs stressed, you need worker-management, self-management. So, in 1950, they introduced a law making managers responsible to workers' councils; and they argued that it was necessary to move from state ownership to the higher form, social ownership.

It was a real experiment. Would it work? Marshal Tito, President of Yugoslavia, pointed out that many people worried that "the workers will not be able to master the complicated techniques of management of factories and other enterprises". His answer, though, was that workers will gain the necessary experience through practice. We recognise only through practice, he said. Only through practice will they learn.

Well, over the next few decades, workers *did* learn much about their enterprises, especially because there was a principle of rotation on the workers' councils both at the enterprise and shop levels. But, they learned much less than Tito and other leaders anticipated at the beginning. One key reason is that there was not a sustained effort to educate workers in the workplace as to how to run their enterprises. So, the result was that the distinction between thinking and doing remained—the workers' councils tended to accept the recommendations of the managers and the experts on the key decisions

for these self-managed enterprises. Why? Because they felt the experts knew better. The workers' councils had the legal power but they didn't exercise it.

It is important to understand that these Yugoslav self-managed enterprises functioned in the market and were driven by one thing—self-interest. Although the enterprises were state owned and were viewed as social property, there was no focus upon the needs of society and there was no concept of solidarity. Rather, in every enterprise, the goal followed was to maximise income per member of the individual enterprise. They competed against each other, they used their economic strength to dominate each other and they fought against paying taxes. (In fact they attacked the state as engaging in Stalinist exploitation of workers by taxing them.)

Further, these self-managed enterprises tended to introduce advanced, machine intensive technology—so they could be more productive and generate more total income without adding more members to their collective. So, they *were* productive, but they didn't generate many new jobs. Not surprisingly, unemployment was high because people coming from the countryside couldn't find jobs; so, they went to countries in Western Europe as “guest workers”—in 1971, there was 7% unemployment plus 20% of the labour force was working outside the country for this reason.

Legally, these enterprises were called “social property”, but social property means that everyone in the society has equal access to the means of production, and benefits from it. The unemployed had *no* access to the means of production, and some workers had access to much *better* means of production than others. In fact, what had happened was that, in the context of the market, a new productive relation had emerged in fact—group ownership of these enterprises, group property. The workers felt that they (and *only they*) were entitled to the income generated by the sale of their commodities.

And, in their competitive struggle for income, the workers' councils accepted the recommendations of the managers about investments, new products and new ways of producing because the managers had the *same* self-interest—maximising the income for the enterprise. Of course, all members of these

collectives weren't really equal—it was the managers and technical experts in these enterprises who understood about marketing and selling commodities; it was the managers and technical experts who knew about investments, about placing the funds of the enterprises in banks and establishing links with other enterprises, creating mergers, etc. Workers didn't know these things; they knew that they were dependent upon the experts.

By the 1970s, there was the recognition in Yugoslavia that something unanticipated had happened: a “techno-bureaucracy” had emerged. In the struggle against state bureaucracy, they had forgotten about battling against capitalism. So, the government tried to introduce a number of new measures and constitutional changes to strengthen workers against this techno-bureaucracy; however, these measures never went very far—because they continued to stress self-interest as the only way to development, and they did not focus upon communal needs and purposes. They never challenged the new relations of production that had emerged. In the end, it was, of course, the managers who emerged as capitalists, leaving the workers as wage labourers.

**‘Without worker-management, there is no socialism’**

The Yugoslavian case demonstrates that the existence of workers' councils—even with the legal power to make all decisions—is not the same as worker-management; and, that the focus upon the self-interest of workers in individual enterprises is not the same as a focus upon the interest of the working class as a whole. They had workers' councils, but the division between thinking and doing that cripples people continued.

So, I come back to my three propositions:

1. When workers don't manage, someone else does.
2. When workers don't develop their capabilities through their practice, someone else does.
3. However much you may think you have banished capitalism from the house, when production is not based upon the relation of production of associated producers, sooner or later capitalism comes in: first,

through the backdoor, and then it marches openly through the front door.

Let's come back to that elementary triangle of socialism: units of social property, social production organised by workers, for satisfaction of communal needs and purposes. Of course, we know that this can't all be put into place at once. Of course, we know that it is a long process of struggle to develop each side of that triangle. But, we also know that if we are *not* actively building each side, we inevitably infect the whole process ... sooner or later.

How can you build socialism without real workers' management? How can you build fully developed human beings without protagonistic democracy in the workplace and community?

In my book, *Build it Now*, I quoted a line from an old song by Bob Dylan— 'he not busy being born is busy dying'. So, I have to say to you how sad it is to recognise how things have changed since 2005. I look forward to being able to march once again with masses of workers on May Day chanting, "without worker-management, there is no socialism".



Links seeks to promote the exchange of information, experience of struggle, theoretical analysis and views of political strategy and tactics within the international left. It is a forum for open and constructive dialogue between active socialists from different political traditions. It seeks to bring together those in the international left who are opposed to neoliberal economic and social policies, and reject the bureaucratic model of 'socialism' that arose in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Inspired by the unfolding socialist revolution in Venezuela, Links is a journal for 'Socialism of the 21st Century' and the discussions and debates flowing from that powerful example of socialist renewal.

**Visit [www.links.org.au](http://www.links.org.au)**