

WOSA replies to Slovo

Disinheriting the heritage of Stalinism

ADAM HABIB and MERCIA ANDREWS of the Natal branch of the Workers Organisation for Socialist Action (WOSA) argue that Slovo's *Has Socialism Failed?*, while a welcome defence of socialism and self-critique of the SACP, provides an inadequate definition of Stalinism. This, they argue has specific political implications.

In January this year Comrade Joe Slovo, General Secretary of the SACP, published a lengthy discussion paper which represented his first intervention in the debate on the future of socialism (see *Labour Bulletin* Vol 14 No 6). This paper was prompted by some of the political debates that have raged on in this country over the last decade, but more immediately by the collapse of the 'communist regimes' of Eastern Europe. It is an important milestone as a first concrete attempt by a leading member of the party to try and map a new path of politics for the

organisation.

Slovo's contribution must be welcomed by all revolutionary socialists. It must be welcomed not only because of the necessity to defend socialist ideas, but also because it represents the beginning of a self-critique of the history and policies of the SACP.

Has socialism failed?

Let us begin our response to Cde Slovo by supporting his belief that the crises of the communist regimes of the Soviet Union, China and Eastern Europe does not herald the downfall of socialism. Why do we say this?

We maintain this position because of our firm belief that socialism was never established in the USSR, China or Eastern Europe. Socialism has always meant, from the time of Marx and Engels to that of Lenin and Trotsky, a society qualitatively superior to capitalism, in terms of the average standard of living, of social equality, of human freedom (including political freedom and civil rights), of pluralistic democracy and cultural diversity and of the weakening of institution-alised authority. It has meant the arming of the people instead of having a professional army, paying leaders in the party and the state the same wage as the average worker, and having every political leader directly accountable to the masses with the latter having the right of recall. It has always implied a withering away of commodity



Workers Organisation for Socialist Action

production, of the market economy, of social classes and of the state - in short, socialism has always meant a social system that ushers forth a classless society.

However in the late 1920s and early 1930s this consensus on the concept was broken in favour of a radically reductionist definition of socialism. Based on the foundation of Stalin's unscientific slogan of 'socialism in one country', this reductionist definition equated socialism with merely the abolition of private property and the means of production. But nationalisation of production and planning does not on its own make a society socialist. Under socialism, a planned economy can only achieve its objectives by placing the state under the leadership of the working class, so that the latter can use this political power to control the economy. Under socialism then, the conscious force of the working class replaces the unconscious force of the capitalist market in the co-ordination of the production and distribution of the millions of different products.

Yet it was precisely this feature that was and is lacking in the societies of the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and China. Soviet or workers democracy was replaced by bureaucratic command in the Soviet Union soon after the death of Lenin. In the societies of Eastern Europe and China, such democracy had never

existed at all. In all three societies a bureaucracy set itself up as a separate layer in society. They lived in different places from the working class, shopped in different shops, earned different salaries, and were not accountable to anyone but themselves. Instead they substituted themselves for the working class and ruled in their name. The crisis then, that confronts the 'socialist world' is not a crises of socialism, but rather a crises for the bureaucracy - it is a crises of Stalinism.

What is Stalinism?

Slovo argues in *'Has Socialism Failed'* that Stalinism is the "bureaucratic-authoritarian style of leadership (of parties both in and out of power) which denuded the party and practice of socialism of most of its democratic content and concentrated power in the hands of a small tiny self-perpetuating elite." Stalinism is then, "socialism without democracy".

Two problems exist with this definition. The first is that Cde Slovo's definition implies that Stalinism is merely a distortion of socialism amongst the higher echelons of the party or country's leadership. But this is not an adequate portrayal of Stalinism. Such an explanation of Stalinism is unable to account for the duration and depth of the phenomena, and also falls into the trap of bourgeois thought by explaining the degeneration of the Soviet party and state

through the mere actions of great men (albeit if they were great evil men).

For us, only a Marxist explanation is able to account for the emergence of Stalinism. Stalinism represented a counter-revolution which resulted in the dictatorship of a bureaucracy, thereby providing this social layer with the opportunity to skim off part of the social surplus. Only



Joseph Stalin - what are the real implications of his impact on socialism?

such an explanation based on the material interests of the bureaucracy helps us to understand the degeneration of the party and state in the Soviet Union. Consequently, a break with Stalinism in the 'socialist world' cannot be achieved by simply democratising the top. It will require a fundamental revolution from below that will have to wrest power from the hands of the bureaucracy, and allow the working class to occupy the dominant position in society.

Outside the socialist world, Stalinism represented the subordination of the interests of socialist revolution, to the interests of Soviet diplomacy. Communist parties, because of their material dependence and ideological timidity, now became simple instruments to justify the tactical 'twists and turns' of the Kremlin. In the process these parties, instead of serving as instruments for the analysis of the nature of their own capitalist regimes, and the transition from capitalism to socialism, served merely to justify the manoeuvres of the bureaucracy of the USSR - the chief bastion of the world revolution and the centre of the world socialist camp.

Yet this counter-revolution was not inevitable or something that was historically ordained. Although it had profound roots in the social and economic reality of Russia in the 1920s - in the exhaustion of Russian society after the civil war, the collapse of industrial production which numerically weakened the working class, and the depoliticisation of the proletariat - it is not as if this phenomena was unavoidable. Already in the 1920s both Lenin and the Left Opposition - the latter being forced to wage a factional struggle within the Party against the right-ward swing of Stalin - were preoccupied with the task of fighting this dominance of the bureaucracy.

The proposals of the Left Opposition are incisive if we want to understand how this fate of the Russian Revolution could have been avoided. They proposed, amongst other things: accelerating the industrialisation of the country to strengthen the weight of the proletariat; increasing wages and fighting unemployment as a means of increasing the confidence of the working class; increasing democracy in the Soviets and in the Party as a means of increasing the level of political activity and class consciousness of the working class; assisting the poor peasantry as a means of strengthening the alliance with the proletariat and differentiating this strata from the kulaks; and finally, correcting the tactics and strategies of the Comintern to make it more effective in assisting the world revolution.

The second problem with Slovo's definition is that it views Stalinism only in an organisational aspect. But Stalinism also occurred at an ideological level. With the rise of the bureaucracy in the Soviet Union, the theoretical premises underlying the October Revolution of 1917 were disfigured so as to justify and legitimate the new ruling elite.

This process began in 1924 when Stalin challenged the Marxist commitment to proletarian internationalism with his theory of 'socialism

in one country'. This theory justified the subordination of the interests of world revolution to the interests of the Soviet bureaucracy. It served as the foundation upon which the bureaucracy proceeded to reverse the theoretical advances made by the Bolshevik party in the long build-up to the Russian Revolution of 1917.

Thus in 1928 the Communist International (Comintern), which by then was completely dominated by Stalin, reverted to the previous Menshevik position of the transition to socialism occurring over stages. This position argued that it was incorrect for a communist party in a 'backward country to try and lead a socialist revolution. The strategy was: first achieve national liberation, and then we can begin the battle for socialism.

This position was transported to the communist parties affiliated to the Comintern. These parties were instructed, in line with the theory of revolution by stages, to form 'popular fronts' with the national bourgeoisie. This entailed the submerging of the communist parties' programmes to that of their national bourgeoisies. The results were disastrous.

In 1927, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was forced to join the nationalist Kuomintang*, thereby losing its independence, and rende-

* see 'Resolution of the Comintern executive, March 1926' in Degras (1960), *Communist International 1919-1943 Vol 2*

ring its cadres to the mercy of Kuomintang leader Chiang Kai-Shek, who massacred them and drowned the revolution in blood. Yet the communist bureaucracy still maintained this policy.

In 1936, the Spanish Revolution was similarly defeated. The Cuban Communist Party until 1959 maintained a strained relationship with Fidel Castro's 26 July Movement. Up until its merger with the 26 July Movement a few years after the revolution, the Communist Party argued strongly that the revolution must be contained within the 'national-democratic' framework.* Similarly, before the Nicaraguan revolution in 1979, the official communist party, called the Nicaraguan Socialist Party, strongly opposed the the FSLN's insurrectionary road to power.**

Stalinism, then, cannot be simply viewed as undemocratic and bureaucratic styles of leadership. Whilst the latter is clearly characteristic of Stalinist practices, it alone does not constitute Stalinism. The theory of socialism in one country, the strategic conception of socialism being a product of revolution in stages, and the tactic of the Popular Front as a particular form of alliance, all are inextricable parts of the Stalinist whole.

Stalinism must be viewed

as a counter-revolution which has developed its own organisational practice, political programme, strategy and tactics. The task then, of destalinising the communist movement must be based on this understanding of Stalinism.

Perestroika and Glasnost

The crises of the 'socialist world' has given rise to a variety of 'communist' and 'non-communist' responses. Cde Slovo is correct when he attacks those who wish to hang onto the past and blame Gorbachev for the collapse of Stalinism. However, we do not believe, as Cde Slovo maintains, that *perestroika* is the diagnoses and prescription for the illness of Stalinism.

Let us begin by distinguishing between *glasnost* and *perestroika*. *Glasnost* represents the opening up of democratic space to allow Gorbachev, the leading representative of the enlightened section of the bureaucracy, to manoeuvre and implement his reforms against the wishes of his conservative counterparts.

But this process of democratisation has taken on a momentum of its own. It has provoked the massive movement of the working class in both the republics and the central states.

On the other hand, *peres-*

troika represents economic reform through the introduction of market mechanisms, the freeing of prices, the removal of subsidies, the closure of uneconomic enterprises, and the reduction of the work force. But these measures will result in price increases of goods and services, and increasing unemployment.

This is why sections of the Soviet working class has proceeded to engage in strike action, most notably the Ukrainian and Siberian miners' strikes. In the first nine months of 1989, over seven million workdays were lost through workers engaging in strike action.

Perestroika has failed. Today, five years after *perestroika* was unleashed, the economy is increasingly beset by inflation, budget deficits, and unemployment. The official budget deficit of the Soviet union is 120 billion rubles.

In the first nine months of 1989 the economy registered a zero growth rate. Currently, 40 million Soviet people live on or below the official poverty level. The words of Gorbachev's chief economist, Abel Aganbeygan, are incisive. He says:

'We are in deep crises, especially a financial crises and a crises of the consumer market. It provokes social unrest. The strikes of the were the ... first sign that we are moving

* see M Lowry (1981) *The politics of combined and uneven development*, New Left Books, pages 142 to 159

** see Carlos Fonseca Amador in *Sandinistas Speak*, edited by Bruce Marcus, Pathfinder Press, pages 23 to 24

towards economic disaster.' (Wall Street Journal 13.10.89).

What then is the way out? We take our lead from the Soviet miners who have linked their economic demands to the demand for the restoration of socialism. We



stand fully behind the demand for an economy commanded democratically by the working class.

We reject the understanding that says we must bring back pieces of the market economy, for this solution involves telling some people 'enrich yourselves', and preventing others, the immense majority of the population, from defending even their poverty-level buying power. We also stand behind this view because of our firm belief that the working class, organised in councils democratically elected on the basis of a multi-party system and with the broadest democratic freedoms, must choose what

to produce, under what conditions to produce, and how the goods produced should be distributed.

We believe that this is a system that has never been fully tested in practice. And since it hasn't been tested, it cannot be argued that it has failed.

Challenges facing the SACP

How does the above analysis impact on the task of disinheriting the Party from the heritage of Stalinism? We identify three major prerequisites for this goal to be realised. These are:

- the implementation of inner-party democracy and political pluralism;
- transcending the theories, strategies and tactics of Stalinism
- rejuvenating and renewing the revolutionary socialist tradition.

1. Inner-party democracy and political pluralism

The SACP and Cde Slovo in particular, have already committed themselves to the principles of inner-party democracy, political pluralism, and the adoption of a non-sectarian attitude towards comrades both inside and outside the party. This is most welcome and needs to be commended.

However, it is important to decode what the realisation of inner-party democracy and political pluralism really entails. The

irrevocable contents of inner-party democracy are freedom of criticism and intellectual conflict. These are necessary practices for any revolutionary socialist party to be submerged in, for it is only through the free-play of ideas that the 'wisest' theories, strategies and tactics of the class struggle can be arrived at.

But this free-play of ideas can only be truly realised if it is based within the framework of tendencies and organised caucuses. Intellectual conflict is only possible if comrades are allowed to agitate for their views on the basis of groups and tendencies.

This need not contradict the basic principles of democratic centralism. The organisation's members will and must always be bound by the organisations decisions until such time that those decisions are reversed. All the right of tendencies facilitates, is the greatest possible debate prior to a decision being made.

The right of tendencies then, provides greater content to the concept of democratic centralism. But the SACP has not until now, unequivocally and clearly accepted this right within its structures. And until it does so, inner-party democracy will be restricted and stunted.

At the level of political pluralism, all political currents should politically intervene on all political, strategic and tactical questions that confront the

liberation movement and the working class. This is imperative if the working class is to democratically arrive at its own decisions. If it is to do the latter, then it must be presented with the full range of options. Of course once the decision has been made, all comrades participating in the structures are bound by these decisions.

But if such a form of activity is to be realised, then two essential prerequisites need to be satisfied. These are the unity and independence of all mass defence organisations of the working class. This is imperative if these structures are to serve as 'United Front' forums within which all political currents are to participate.

Cde Slovo and the SACP have already gone some way towards this process by recognising and calling for the independence of the trade union movement. We welcome this call, and would like to extend it to incorporate the civic and youth movements. This would result in all mass defence organisations of the working class becoming the 'United Front' forums which would facilitate the empowerment of the working class, so that the class as a collective can take control of its own destiny.

2. Transcending the theories, strategies and tactics of Stalinism

The SACP has from very early on in its history, been

wedded to a conception that views the transition to socialism occurring over stages. The organisation's 1926 programme put forward the slogan 'an independent native South African republic as a stage towards a workers and peasants republic'.

The essential content of this strategy was carried forward into the 1962 programme, *The road to freedom*, and is currently contained in the 1989 programme, *The path to power*.

In both programmes the organisation calls for the initial establishment of a national democratic state. The organisation then, clearly views the transition to socialism occurring over stages - the first being, according to Cde Slovo in 'Has Socialism Failed?', the construction of a post-Apartheid state, and the second being the establishment of a socialist South Africa.

If Cde Slovo refutes, as he correctly does in 'Has Socialism Failed?', Stalin's theory of socialism in one country, then he is also obliged to reject its South African manifestation, namely the conception of the transition to socialism occurring over stages.

This would of course require Cde Slovo to reject the theory of national democracy. And it should be rejected. For the notion of the national democratic state creates the illusion that it is possible to establish, without the overthrow of the capitalist class, some form of

'radical' democracy that would empower the working class.

This would also mean that the tactic of forming broad anti-Apartheid Fronts with bourgeois parties, which follows logically from a two-stage strategy, should be abandoned. It would be a positive step, since it would affirm the traditional view of alliances within Marxism, which sees the task of revolutionary socialists as unifying the working class in order for the latter to be able to wage a war against their capitalist counterparts.

The task of generating support for the revolution from the poor peasantry and the radical petty-bourgeoisie is not through the formation of multi-class fronts, but rather by bringing to the attention of these social forces, through practice, that there exists no alternative route to peace, prosperity and the resolution of humanity's problems, but through the overthrow of the capitalist system.

Yet Cde Slovo raises none of these issues in 'Has Socialism Failed?'. At no point in the lengthy pamphlet is the conception of the two-stage revolution, or its logical tactic of broad popular fronts questioned.

But this is the essential kernel of Stalinism. And if the SACP is truly serious about disinheriting itself from the heritage of Stalinism, then it is necessary for it to transcend these theories, strategies and tactics.

3. Rejuvenating and renewing the revolutionary socialist tradition

The crisis of Stalinism has provoked a serious moral and ideological crisis for the communist parties across the world. Cde Slovo, seeing the crisis confronting the SACP, attempts to plot a new path of politics for the organisation.

Indications of what this path of politics is, are expressed when Cde Slovo questions (not refutes) the historical validity of the dictatorship of the proletariat in the transition to socialism. It is further suggested when he argues that should there exist real democracy in the post-Apartheid society, then "the way will be open for a peaceful transition towards our ultimate objective - a socialist South Africa ... It is perfectly legitimate and desirable for a party claiming to be the political instrument of the working class to lead its constituency in democratic contest for political power against other parties and groups representing other social forces"

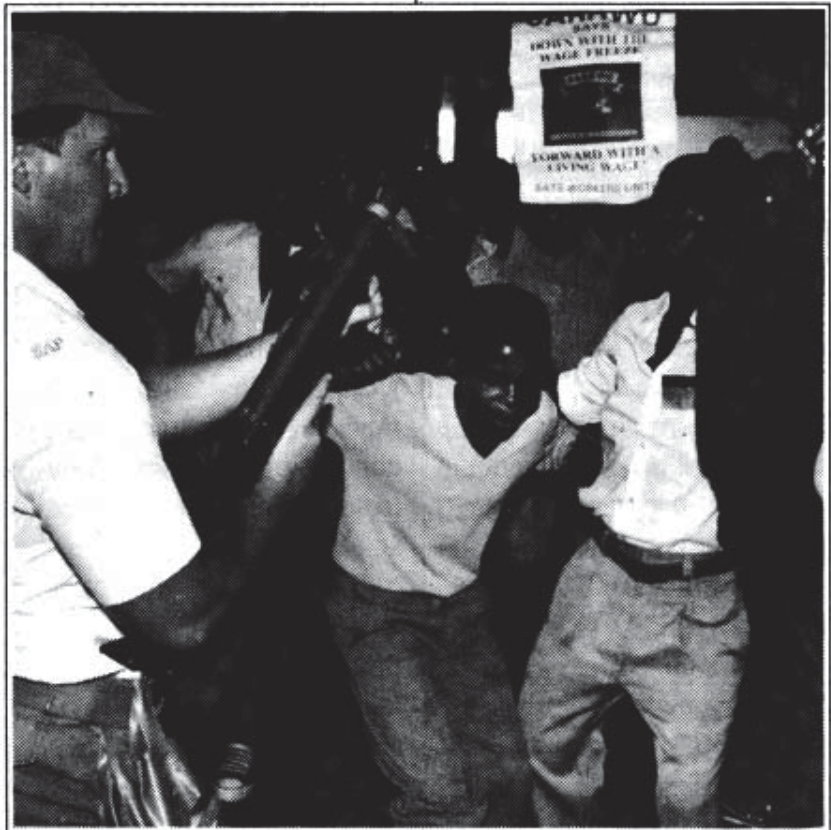
The question that needs to be posed is what does Cde Slovo mean by the existence of true democracy? Does he mean bourgeois democracy in the form of a 'representative' system, which allows the masses to elect representatives to parliament, but does not provide them with the right to control these representatives once they've

been elected? Or does he use the term to mean a form of working class democracy that is based on the delegate system, and provides the masses with the right to recall these delegates if they have failed to carry out their mandate? If he means the latter, then it is only truly attainable in a democratic socialist society. However, since he attempts to distinguish between post-Apartheid and socialist society, it seems fair to presume that he uses the term in the former sense, that is, to mean some form of bourgeois democracy.

Cde Slovo then, seems to suggest that it is possible to achieve socialism through participation in bourgeois parliaments. But this is essen-

tially the strategy of social democracy in Western Europe. Termed Eurocommunism, this tradition views the state as an impartial arbiter above the selfish contention of classes. However, this is an unrealistic view of the nature of the state. For us, in line with the traditional Marxist analysis, the state is a product of irreconcilable class conflict within the social structure which it seeks to regulate on behalf of the ruling class. The state is the organised political expression, the instrument, of the decisive class in the economy.

This is clearly evident when one looks at the behaviour of the state in South Africa. When workers go on strike, the police and the



Police, representing the state, confronting striking workers

Photo: Adil Bradlow/Afrapix

army (both part of the state) act against the workers and on behalf of the capitalists. The law is a law which protects private property against all those who have nothing. The courts daily convict homeless and landless people because they are occupying land that belongs to the capitalist.

How then, can participation in such a state lead us to socialism? Cde Slovo seems to neglect the fact that education, law, media are all under the control of the bourgeoisie. This clearly prevents a peaceful transition to socialism through the ballot box. The bourgeoisie's control and ownership over all these aspects of communication have got to first be dismantled. And this can only occur through the overthrow of the bourgeois state and capitalist system. Participation in the electoral games of the state then, would merely serve to justify the rule of the bourgeoisie.

Disinheriting the heritage of Stalinism does not mean that the SACP must move from the latter to some form of Eurocommunism. 'Has Socialism Failed?' seems to suggest this.

What is our alternative? For us, socialism would only be realised through the overthrow of the bourgeois state and the system that it represents and defends. This can only occur through the mass actions of the working class which would eventually culminate in an insurrection. The socialist state can and



Will the South African working class be the first to establish a society true to the aims of socialism?

Photo: ELNews/Afrapix

will only be built on the ashes of its bourgeois predecessor.

This is the classical Marxist-Leninist tradition which the SACP should move towards the rejuvenating and renewing. This is not a mere quibble over words. It is a debate whose conclusion could determine the success or failure of our attempts to build a socialist society.

Conclusion

The South African and international working class movements are today at crossroads. Faced with the attacks on socialism by the bourgeoisie, it is important that revolutionary socialists respond in a concerted way to regain the moral high ground that socialism to date has occupied. The collapse

of Stalinism also heralds the possibility of a realignment of political forces within the socialist camp. This is imperative more so than ever before, for the South African working class is in a position today to establish the first society on the face of this earth to be based on the principle of 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his need'.

Yet this is only possible if revolutionary socialists located in the different political camps are able to communicate with each other. Cde Slovo has begun this process with the publication of 'Has Socialism Failed?'. It is important for other left socialist forces to now respond in a critical but comradely way to this gesture. Such has been the aim of our contribution. ☆