

Has the red flag fallen?

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Gely Korzhev *Picking up the banner*

This text was written in June 1989 and published by Attic Press in November 1989 as part of their LIP pamphlet series. It was republished by Attic Press as a chapter in the book *A Dozen Lips* in 1994. Parts of it seem dated now, indeed make me wince with surges of irony and pathos, but it was the way the world looked to me in 1989. As to how the world looked to me a few years later, here is the text of [European Socialism: A Blind Alley or a Long and Winding Road?](#) published by MSF (now Amicus) in 1992.

Dedication:

*For those who have struggled for socialism
when the days were dark
when the tide went out
who have resisted the pressures to recant
who were still there when others were gone.
For those who are still there
who have the clarity and courage to come to terms with the times
without succumbing to its deceptions and seductions.
For those who have been . . . and may yet be . . . my comrades.*

Has the red flag fallen?

The 80s have been hard times for the left. On a world scale, the tide seemed to have gone out on us. We sometimes felt washed out and left high and dry on abandoned shores, while a tidal wave of reaction threatened to overtake all the progressive advances of recent decades in a blatant backlash against socialism, feminism, secularism and virtually every cause ever championed by the left. The red flag began to look tattered and torn and trampled into the dust by the relentless rush of the new right levelling whatever stood in its path.

For my generation, who moved to the left in a time of upsurge and felt that the world was ours to reshape, these have been dark days. History, which once seemed so malleable in our hands, suddenly became so recalcitrant and resistant to our touch. No matter how hard we continued to struggle, the world moved on in a direction disdainful of our desires.

On the days when I felt most acutely the weight of our defeat, a poem of Brecht came often to my mind:

*You tell us It looks bad for our cause.
The darkness gets deeper.
Our powers get feebler.
Now, after we have worked for so many years,
We are in a more difficult position than at the start.
But the enemy stands there, stronger than ever before.
His powers appear to have grown.
Indeed, he has taken on an aspect of invincibility.
We, however, have made mistakes.*

There is no denying it.
Our numbers are dwindling.
Our slogans are in disarray.
The enemy has twisted our words beyond recognition.
But what is now false of what we said ?
Some of it ? All of it ?
Whom can we still count on ?
Are we just left over, thrown out of the living stream ?
Shall we remain behind ?
Understanding no one and understood by none ?
Or have we just got to be lucky ?
This you ask.
Expect no other answer than your own.

These questions I have asked. The answers I am struggling to set forth, although they draw on sources far larger than myself, are none other than my own. This is not to say they might not be those of others as well. I write in the hope that it might be so.

Brecht's poem, written in an earlier decade when the tide also seemed to have gone out, captured so acutely the stress I have felt as a socialist in these times when the odds against socialism seem to have mounted, sometimes to the point of insurmountability. Capitalism has never seemed a more formidable force and socialism has never seemed in a weaker position to challenge it.

Indeed, the mass media daily have presented a picture of socialism being dismantled on a grand scale.



The socialist experiment has been portrayed as having played itself out and finally thrown up leaders who have seen the superiority of the capitalist way and decided to 'go for it'. The world is 'going our way', the leaders of 'the free world' have declared. The iron curtain has come tumbling down. The Kremlin has been conquered without a single marine opening fire, without a single ICBM being launched.

It unravels before me like a nightmare. No more the red flags flying. No more the heads held high and the fists clenched and the voices raised to the strains of *The Internationale*. No more the larger-than-life murals of workers and soldiers and peasants marching into

the future shaping the world with the labour of their hands and hearts and minds. Now it is to be Mickey Mouse and Coca Cola and Michael Jackson and Sacchi & Sacchi.

Within the capitalist world, the socialist voice challenging from within seemed to have gone silent. We have been presented with one-time socialists seeing the error of their ways and singing the praises of capitalism, with left-wing parties moving so far to the right as to jump centre. They have learned, not only to live with the market, but to love it. The electorate, they say, don't want to hear all this dreary talk about production and labour and collective solidarity and class struggle. They are individuals who shop at Next and wear designer labels and buy shares. They identify themselves more as consumers than producers in a pluralist, post-modernist, post-fordist world.

So the story goes: The old left has failed. The new left has failed. The next left that is taking shape is determined not to fail, but how left is it? Would it leave capitalism intact? Has it given up on socialism? This I ask.

To come to terms with the present and future, is it necessary to be so overanxious to shake off the socialist past? Must the next left be so dismissive of the last left?

In Western Europe, I witness the debut of designer socialism in sections of this new look left. I don't mind the clipboards and filofaxes and amstrads and attention to sophisticated televisual techniques. In fact, I welcome these things. There is nothing in our socialist principles requiring us to be tacky. We need the best design and the most efficient techniques that are compatible with the sincerity of our convictions. I don't mind the ads for mugs and t-shirts and videocassettes in *Marxism Today*. However, I do mind the deeper shift from production to consumption, from a politics of class struggle to a politics of declassed citizenship.

They scoff at men who drink pints in pubs and have stains on their ties who think that the working class has some special role to play on the stage of history. The working class is disappearing and class consciousness is evaporating even faster, they say, therefore we must make our appeal to those who do not see themselves as members of a class, to 'milieu groups' whose material needs have all been met.

The male, manual worker is yesterday's man, says today's man, as he rolls up the sleeves of his baggy *Miami Vice* suit with such smugness on his stubbled face. Meetings and agendas and resolutions and wage claims and GNPs are so boring, says today's woman, clad in the latest post-everything pastiche. They give off such an air of knowingness. After all, they have read Pynchon novels and they have seen *Paris, Texas*. They can discourse about Derrida and deconstruction, about floating signifiers with no signified. They know that grand narratives are out and market segmentation is in.

But do they know what class actually is? Do they know anything about the fundamental connection between production and consumption? Do they know from where the

standard of living they take for granted has actually come? Must acknowledging the ascendancy of the yuppie ethos entail assimilating its perceptions and accepting its values?

In Eastern Europe, I see the spoiled children of socialism. They take for granted everything that socialism has given to them and turn on it for everything that it has not given to them. They long for everything that is other than what socialism has been until now. They idealise free enterprise and pop culture, indeed, they idealise capitalism itself, seeing only the consumer luxury and closing their eyes to the exploitation on which it is based.

The policies of glasnost and perestroika have brought ferment to spheres that had gone stagnant and brought masses of people to believe that their society was theirs to create and re-create. But must this mean evaluating negatively everything that has been evaluated positively until now? Does the Soviet Union really need Mickey Mouse and Macdonald's hamburgers? I know that we live in an interconnected world and I believe in the flow from one culture to another, but when they look from east to west, do they have to take the worst of our world? Why do they ignore feminism and go only for beauty contests and first ladies?

I also feel the force of the long dark struggle echoing from of the south of the world and the questions it poses to the north. I look into deep dark eyes that wonder if the beacon they have seen shining before them is going dim. I hear voices asking what de-ideologised foreign policy means for their brothers and sisters crossing borders under cover, awaiting trial or serving life sentences in South Africa, what it means for fragile frontline states striving towards socialism against all the pressures of a world capitalist order bearing down on them and amidst constant sabotage in a regional war zone.

Are they to be abandoned by both east and west as third world liberation movements are no longer in fashion? Will first world socialism seek only to redistribute from within the social product taken from the third world? Will second world socialism become so preoccupied with its own security and standards of living as to turn away from its practice of internationalist duty?



Will the new emphasis on universal human rights be a bland blanket to smother the burning exigencies of class / gender / racial struggle? Will the euphoria over market forces block out the sight of the devastation they engender? Will the lists of piecemeal, short-term reforms replace the objective of expropriating the expropriator?

Was it for this, I ask myself, that men and women gave their sweat, their tears, their blood, their lives? Was it for this that they led clandestine hunted lives or were shot in the streets? Was it for this they endured prison or exile or died of dysentery in the bush? Was it for this that they stormed the winter palace? Was it for this that they left their dead in the valleys of Spain? Was it for this that they battled in the hills of Hercegovina?

Was it for this that my own generation marched on the Pentagon, picketed the Miss America contest, cut sugar cane in Cuba, had our heads battered in Chicago or were fired upon at Kent State? Was it for this that we have marched so many times to Leinster House, to the US embassy, to the Department of Foreign Affairs? Was it for this that we have risked our careers and our security, endured the wear and tear of an endless round of meetings in cold rooms, spent so much of our adult lives studying and writing and attending weekend schools?

So many have fallen by the wayside. Those of us who are left on the left have to ask ourselves so many hard questions. The world has moved on, but what exactly has changed? What is now false of what we said? Some of it? All of it? We may have been marginalised, but were we wrong? Capitalism has prevailed, stronger than ever, and has proved to be a far more resilient system than we ever imagined, but has our critique of capitalism been refuted? Socialism may seem to be falling apart and pushed off the agenda, but has the need for it been superseded?

To answer such questions, I retrace my steps. I push myself to sort out what socialism is, what brought me to it, what has sustained me in it and what am I to make of it now.

Apprehensively I ask: Has the red flag fallen? What has become of that tradition which turned my world upside down and set my mind racing and my blood surging? Will my generation be the last to sing:

The people's flag is deepest red,
It shrouded oft our martyred dead,
And ere their limbs grew stiff and cold,
Their hearts' blood dyed its every fold.

Then raise the scarlet standard high.
Beneath its shades we'll live and die.
Let cowards flinch and traitors sneer.
We'll keep the red flag flying here.

(To find out more about the song [The Red Flag](#) and its author [Jim Connell](#) and the monument in [Crossakiel](#), click [here](#). To hear the [song](#), click [here](#). This website about the song, the man and the monument includes sound files of a new recordings of all 6 verses of the song.)

Dyed with the blood of men and women who set out to expropriate the expropriators, the red flag has been for generations the symbol of hope that a new world could be built from the ashes of the old. Must we abandon that hope now?

Although I grew up under the star-spangled banner and then the tricolour, the red flag has come to be the central symbol of my own hopes. It was the cause of socialism which seized my imagination and stirred my blood as nothing else could and became the fundamental loyalty of my life.

Why?

Everyone who has come to socialism has come to it in their own way, rooted in the experience of their own lives, their own time, their own place. The trajectory of my own transformation was not altogether atypical, given the axis from which I began to explore the terrain of the times and to see my own story within a larger story. In its broad outlines, it is the story of the 60s generation.

My own story is told in [Portrait of a marxist as a young nun.](#)

It began with specific issues. First it was racism. We joined our white hands with black ones and we sang *We Shall Overcome*. Then it was sexism. We raised consciousness and we raised tempers and we called ourselves Ms. Then it was ghetto poverty and then it was the Vietnam war and then it was the whole 3rd world. It was, as we came to see it, a seething scenario of an inequitable division of labour and distribution of resources at home and imperialist wars to maintain the same abroad.

For those of us who were catholic, all of this was underpinned by the relativisation effect of Vatican II in which so much of what had been considered absolute was suddenly discovered to be relative, so much of what had been thought immutable was suddenly made mutable. This atmosphere of rethinking and adapting to modernising modes and mores within the church was crucial to those of us who were its children, even if we took it far beyond the boundaries of what even the most liberal theologians ever intended and many of us soon found ourselves outside its doors altogether.

A momentum was building and gathering mass and velocity. We were no longer just civil rights supporters or feminists or agnostics or anti-war activists. We were no longer liberals who wanted to reform the system. Shocking not only our elders, but even ourselves, we began to think of ourselves as revolutionaries who wanted to transform the system in a most fundamental way. Questioning that began in response to particular injustices swelled into a critique of capitalism, a critique which saw racism, sexism, poverty and war, no longer as isolated phenomena occurring in spite of the system, but as interconnected manifestations emerging because of it.



From this critique of capitalism came a new curiosity about socialism, which brought various strands of the new left into a new relation to the old left. In America, the cold war had created a chasm very difficult to bridge. In Europe, however, where I have lived since the early seventies, the gap between the old and new narrowed considerably. Ireland may have seemed an unlikely place to have become a socialist, but the political subculture of the Irish left has provided an atmosphere in which I have grown, argued and struggled, a base from which I have reached out to a wider world and refined my understanding of what socialism is and what is its place in the agenda of our times.

So what is it and where does it fit into the world looming ahead of us?

There is a crying need for clear definitions, both of socialism and capitalism. There is so much loose and lazy talk which identifies capitalism with buying a house and wearing a suit and socialism with concern for the poor, higher social welfare payments and increasing aid to the third world.

There is also such complexity in our world and such a clutter of contending theories all analysing it in such contradictory ways, many of them doing more to mask the underlying realities than to shed light on them. It has never been so difficult to see structures and to see them clearly and to see them whole.

There is a need for definitions which penetrate to the most fundamental structures and not flit about on the periphery, which convey what capitalism is and what socialism is in structural terms.

Capitalism is a mode of production based on the private ownership of the means of social production, distribution and exchange. It is a system giving primacy to the free play of market forces propelled by the drive for maximum profitability with minimum risk in the shortest time.

Capitalism generates a fundamental class division between those whose wealth comes from ownership of the means of production and those whose livelihood depends on their labour. The illusion of equivalent exchange on the free market masks the structural inequality of class between those who produce and those who appropriate that

production, between those whose position in the marketplace is based on what they are paid for their labour and those whose position is based on what they own, which is the accumulation of what the surplus value created by labour has produced.

Capitalism came into being with the struggle of the revolutionary bourgeoisie to free production from feudal restriction. Capitalism gradually replaced feudalism, a social order in which ownership and power were founded on blood and land, with a social order in which ownership and power were based on buying and selling. Capitalism achieved an unprecedented concentration of productive forces and advanced civilisation, creating institutions of parliamentary democracy, mass literacy, scientific and technological development and the highest standards of living that the world has ever known.

Capitalism achieved this and continues to achieve this at the cost of the most severe inequalities that history has ever known. Capital accumulation in Europe and North America was built upon the expropriation of land and raw materials from Africa, Asia and Latin America and on the exploitation of labour both at home and abroad. Colonialism has given way to neo-colonialism, an even more efficient system of expropriation, which no longer depends on state power. It is not really nations that are colonised by other nations anymore. It is the earth and the majority of its people that are colonised by international finance capital.

Capitalism is engaged in one of the most radical phases of its history of periodic restructuring. It is embarked on a whole new cycle of capital accumulation, based on the internationalisation of the world economy, the deregulation of market forces and the reconstruction of the productive process through new technology. In order to restore capital's rate of profitability, which had been eroded through compromises forced by labour and liberation movements and through challenges to the first world's hold on land, labour and resources in the third world, capitalism is reorganising itself.

The economic crisis of recent years has been the result of a massive struggle over the re-allocation of the world's productive resources and a re-negotiation of the international division of labour. Cuts in public expenditure have been forced by the pressure to dismantle the public sector in so far as capitalism has outgrown its need for it and it has become an obstacle to further profitability.

The economic crisis is not the result of sudden scarcity in the world. The cuts are not caused by the world no longer being able to afford the same standards of education and health care as it previously had. The fact is that there is more wealth in the world than ever there was. The fact is that there has never been such enormous inequality in how that wealth is allocated.

The disparities in the distribution of the world's wealth can be indicated by the following statistics:

According to figures based on a World Bank report in 1987, if we list the percentage share of the world's gross product according to the world's population in five groups ranging from the poorest to the richest:

poorest 20 % have 1.8 % of world's GNP
2nd 20 % 2.4 %
3rd 20 % 3.6 %
4th 20 % 13.9 %
richest 20 % 77.9 %⁴

The developing world has 75 % of the world's population, but only:

17 % of the world's GNP
15 % of the world's energy consumption
30 % of the world's grain consumption
6 % of the world's educational expenditure
6 % of the world's health expenditure
5 % of the world's scientific & technological capacity
8 % of the world's industrial capacity⁵

One man, Rupert Murdoch, owns more than 80 newspapers & magazines (not to mention film studios & television stations), whereas 8 African countries don't even have one newspaper.⁶

In the most underdeveloped countries of the world, where land is the main source of wealth, 79 % of the land is owned by 3 % of the population.⁷

In Ireland, in an intermediate position between the developed and developing world, the 23rd richest country in the world, 5 % of the population owns 72 % of the wealth.⁸

These inequalities are inherent in the very structure of capitalism. The free play of market forces allocates \$550,000,000 a year to a dealer in junk bonds in the US and \$276 a year to a teacher in Tanzania. The free play of market forces generates a global system of trade in which the price of imported manufacturing goods rise and commodity prices fall, in which shareholders, who need never leave their swimming pools in Santa Barbara, live in luxury, while copper miners in Zambia and tea pickers in Sri Lanka struggle for subsistence. Parasitic elements thrive effortlessly, consuming what they do not produce, while primary producers toil like Sisyphus rolling the rock up the hill, producing more and more to consume less and less. Some reap what they do not sow and leave others to sow more and more to reap less and less. Those who give least to the world take most. Those who give most take least.

The theory is that each individual pursuing their own individual interests results in the greater good of all. It may seem that way on the floor of the stock exchange in New

York, London or Tokyo, but that is not the way it looks from the fields and factories of Nicaragua, Nigeria or Nepal.

Capitalism of its very nature creates contradictions which cannot be overcome within its boundaries. It generates crises of overproduction and underconsumption caused by the drive to expand production and maximise profits and at the same time to minimise wages, resulting in the production of goods which the workforce who are also consumers cannot afford to buy. It creates massive unemployment in societies where there is work crying out to be done. It uses accumulated surplus value created by human labour to invest in technology to reduce its need for human labour and to cast out the class whose ancestors produced it from participating in its fruits. It wreaks havoc upon the earth whose resources have provided the basis for all it has produced. It destroys the very forces that have formed the very foundations of its creativity.

Acknowledging all that capitalism has achieved, while realising that it is structurally incapable of utilising fully and fairly the constructive forces it has itself brought forth, socialism came into being.

Socialism is a social order organised according to the principle:

from each according to their abilities, to each according to their work and needs

Socialism is a mode of production based on the social ownership of the major means of social production, distribution and exchange. It is a system in which market forces are subordinated to an overall plan, which ensures that what is socially produced will be socially distributed and reinvested in the most efficient and equitable fashion.

Socialism has reduced the massive inequalities that exist in the world. It eliminates the class division between those whose standard of living comes from ownership and those whose standard of living comes from work. All live by their labour, except those who are unable to work who are subsidised according to their need. It ensures equality at the starting line, but not necessarily at the finish. It need not produce wage or status levelling, but should reward hard work and creative achievement and penalise parasitism and passivity in a system of material and moral incentives.

Socialism deals with the surplus value created by labour in a fundamentally different fashion from capitalism. Profit is not diverted into private accumulation and parasitic consumption, but reinvested in social production or redistributed in social consumption. Everything that is created by collective effort is collectively distributed, whether as wages, as social services or as social investment.

Socialism also is engaged in one of the most radical phases in its history of periodic restructuring. Perestroika represents the refinement of the relationship between central planning and market forces and the adaptation of socialism to an increasingly

internationalised world economy. Experiments with new forms of social ownership are necessary to eliminate the log jams created by particular methods of planning riddled with inefficiencies and disincentives. Reassessment of the role of nationalisation is obviously necessary in a world in which the nation state is no longer what it once was, if for no other reason.

Capitalism and socialism are fundamentally different modes of production which generate fundamentally different social orders and fundamentally different world views. They are alternative ways of structuring not only our economy, but also our political institutions, our social customs, our cultural creations, our educational systems, our moral codes, our aesthetic values, our domestic lives, our sexual roles, our personal relationships, our psychological development, our patterns of thought and behaviour. The entire social order in which a person lives is given characteristic shape by the dominant mode of production, which has profound implications for the prevailing division of labour and the whole complex ideological apparatus flowing from it.

Capitalism has generated an increasingly specialised division of labour, which is not confined to the organisation of a factory, but reaches into the very formation of personality, shaping the very patterns of perception that prevail, giving rise to patterns of thought and behaviour that are ever more fragmented and distorted. It is a social order based not only on the maximum expropriation of surplus value but on the maximum dissolution of social bonds, decreasing access to totality, increasing atomisation of thought processes and behavioural norms. Capitalism begets the craziness endemic to our age.

Postmodernism in particular bears witness to the disintegrative power of late capitalism. It is something in the very essence of our present social order which structurally inhibits integrated thinking, which undermines the very foundations of rationality and sanity and morality. It is something at the very core of contemporary experience which blocks access to totality, which keeps theory flying so far apart from experience and keeps experience groping so helplessly in the dark. Only by breaking its boundaries, only by penetrating to the very source of this society's inner tensions, only by perceiving the very mechanism generating this fragmentation, only by naming the system and taking it on, can the way beyond it be discerned.

Socialism is the way beyond. Integrated thinking, which touches all the bases, is not possible within the logic of capitalism. A vision of an alternative social order is a necessary matrix for alternative thinking. Only socialism, as a radical transformation of our relations of production as the foundation for a fundamental reorganisation of human energies, gives us the possibility of human wholeness.

Although capitalism and socialism need to be seen as strongly contrasting structural alternatives, it must be said that neither exists in pure form. There are many intermediate and transitional forms.

Most existing capitalist societies have made concessions to socialist ideas under pressure from labour and liberation movements. The post-war edifice of nationalised industry and the welfare state in such countries as Britain and Ireland are such hybrids, as is even the USA in so far as some regulatory mechanisms constraining the market are still in place. Social democratic regimes such as Austria and Sweden are further along the spectrum, combining more radical redistribution within a mixed economy of public and private ownership of the means of production.

Other countries such as Zimbabwe and Mozambique have chosen the socialist path, but are constrained in moving as far or as fast along it as they would choose, because of such obstacles as foreign control of the economy, sabotage and underdevelopment. Even countries further along that path such as Cuba and Vietnam have to contend for a long time to come with the legacy of underdevelopment and disruption. Not even the socialist countries in Eastern Europe, including the Soviet Union as the world's first socialist state with the longest history of socialist construction, are free from the pressures and constraints imposed by functioning within a world order still dominated by the capitalist mode of production.

It is possible to go only so far and no further in building socialism in one country as long as capitalism controls the commanding heights of the world economy. In a world more interdependent than ever this has never been more true.

It is not only countries that are intermediate or transitional forms. So are socialist movements within capitalist countries and so even are individual psyches within those movements and those countries.

The strategy for achieving socialism must begin within ourselves and encompass the whole terrain that must be contested ... from the struggle for the individual soul to the challenge to the citadels of world capitalism. It must be taken on in all of its dimensions.

Ideological struggle is a primary task. Capitalism rules most powerfully, not through coercion, but through consent, not through its armies and police forces and guns and nuclear weapons, but through its ability to define reality, to make its view of the world appear to be 'common sense'. The task of socialists is to challenge its hegemony, its power to exercise intellectual, moral, political and economic leadership and to make its particular view of the world appear to be immutable and universal truth. The building of socialism begins with breaking that consent, undermining that hegemony, and winning consent for an alternative view of the world, gaining hegemony for alternative intellectual, moral, political and economic norms.

Socialists need to break with old paradigms for achieving power. Old strategies of social democratic evolutionism or revolutionary insurrectionism are both obsolete.

The social democratic programme of piecemeal reforms only redistributes within severe limits and does not address the questions of taking on power at the commanding heights of the world economy. It also lacks a strong inner core and the vision to create a full blown socialist society and not just a socialist state.

The insurrectionist model, which involved seizing factories and storming government buildings, is an anachronism now. First of all, because real power isn't actually there any more, neither in locally or nationally based enterprises nor in nation states. Secondly, while parliamentary democracy is not an end point of human political evolution, it has been an advance in human history that must be built upon rather than destroyed. Thirdly, a real revolution must pervade the whole of civil society and reach deep into the psyche and not confine itself to industry and institutions of state. This is a much more sustained and subtle struggle for power than a coup d'etat, but it is also far more solid.

Socialism must be built through making the long march through all the institutions of our society, our schools, our universities, our farms, our factories, our offices, our homes, our unions, our newspapers, our publishing houses, our radio and television, our theatres, both before and after achieving state power. We need to build the new within the shell of the old. We must not believe that socialism will suddenly spring into being full blown ex nihilo on the day we elect a socialist majority to Dail Eireann. Between now and then, and in order to bring that about, we need to bring the clarity and warmth of socialism into every dark and cold space within ourselves, within our own movement, within every corner of our society.

Our political culture in Ireland has been far too statist in its terms of political discourse, distracting from the complex political tasks within civil society on the one hand and from the power of global capital on the other.

On the other hand, there has been a populist anti-statism that is more in the interests of those stripping the state from above than those looking for power from below. Unprecedented centralisation at the top has been masked by a flurry of decentralisation at the bottom, squeezing out the middle level of institutions which have heretofore been at the centre of power. Simultaneous globalisation and localisation have displaced nationalisation on a grand scale, bringing the pressure for the dismantling of nationalised industry and the privatisation of the public sector in education, health, broadcasting, etc, indeed the erosion of the power of the nation state itself in the face of the power of stateless money. However, the nation state is not yet powerless and the defence of the nation state and the public sector is a vital bulwark of resistance in the present situation.

State power should be an important intermediate objective. The left in Ireland should build on the steady advances it has made in achieving left representation in Dail Eireann and Seanad Eireann with a view to achieving an eventual majority It cannot simply take over the existing state apparatus, but must enter upon a course that will transform the state and the public sector in a socialist direction.

But a socialist government and even a socialist transformation of civil society will not be enough to achieve socialism.

Even when liberations movements, in Africa for example, win massive popular support in elections and control the state apparatus and exercise considerable (but not complete) hegemony within civil society, they do not control the economy. There is not social ownership of the major means of production, distribution and exchange, which are not only in private, but largely foreign, ownership.

There remains the problem of expropriating the expropriators, which cannot be done on any meaningful scale any more within the nation state, not even in the most powerful developed nations. Of the 50 greatest economic powers in the world today, only half are nation states 10 and in the future it will probably be less. Quite a few transnational corporations, such as General Motors, rank far ahead of nations, such as Ireland. With capital flows being what they are and with power becoming increasing more remote and impenetrable, how can what has been taken be taken back? We must tackle this most difficult question in detail, but certain things should be clear.

The answer to it must be on a global scale and involve global forces. Nation states are still capable of functioning as power bases to regulate and mitigate the effect of global forces and ways to do so more effectively need to be explored. Generally, however, we can not and should not resist internationalisation. We are already connected to the wider world in a different way than our ancestors in a way that is positive as well as negative. We should struggle for a progressive internationalisation against an exploitative internationalisation. We need to strengthen existing countervailing forces as alternative power bases to international capitalism: the existing socialist countries, the non-aligned countries, the socialist group in the EC, the OAU, SADCC, etc. If the world's debtor countries were to unite against the conditions of the IMF and to insist that more was owed to them in reparations than they could ever possibly owe, what might happen?

The new world situation has brought a reduction of world tensions, but the prevailing attitude is that it is the socialist world that must make all the concessions and will only become acceptable in so far as they are moving like children taking their first feeble steps in the direction of 'democracy', which is ludicrously used as a synonym for capitalism. The attitude of west to east is that it is they who must change and they are judged as 'getting it right' only in so far as they approximate western practice. This must be turned around.

It has been perhaps the primary objection raised against socialism that it is undemocratic. Although this image of socialism has not been without foundation, it has nevertheless been a gross distortion. The smug identification of democracy with capitalism has masked the reality of a system in which real power has never been so far from people's grasp. The facile identification of socialism with denial of democracy and the representation of the new flourishing of democracy in the Soviet Union as a move away from socialism confuses distortions of socialism with socialism itself and the process of restoring socialism with destroying it. Gorbachev ... has been at pains to clarify this:

We are not abandoning socialism...What we are abandoning is everything done in past decades that was not socialist.

If anyone thinks we are leading socialism to the ashtip of history, they are wrong.

Socialists have been arguing for decades, not only that there is no real socialism without democracy, but also that there is no real democracy without socialism. How can there be democracy in a society in which there is private ownership of the means of social production ? ...

The new turn of socialism in Eastern Europe has been perhaps the strongest surge of promise breaking through the bleak eighties. If capitalism can restructure and renew itself, so can socialism. It is a process fraught with dangers, because formidable reactionary forces have been let loose. It must be so. They must be let loose and defeated by socialism for real and in the open. There is only an even chance of winning, given the seething underground resentment building during years of repression, the dynamic of over-reaction that has set in now that they are above ground and the very real pressure of capitalist co-optation

The past and recent history of socialism has been full of both triumphs and tragedies. However, anyone who persists in saying that 'socialism has failed' is either deceived or deceitful. The current wave of criticism and self-criticism of socialism is obscuring its enormous achievements. Even though it may lag behind capitalism in material productivity, because of its legacy of previous underdevelopment, and even though it is full of defects and self-inflicted disasters, it still represents a historically more advanced stage of human development that cannot be reduced to a historical cul de sac from which there is need to retreat and to catch up with capitalism. It has brought material and social equality on a vast scale such as history has never before known. It has put a considerable part of the world in the hands of the people who work in it. It is striving to evolve ways of building on this to make it ever more open, democratic and efficient.

In the meantime, the rest of the world is not in the hands of those who work in it. Those who say that class struggle is outdated are wrong. Those who say that the working class is disappearing are wrong. It is true that the workforce is dramatically changing, that it

is less dominated by the salt-of-the-earth, grease-on-the-hands, spanner-in-the-back-pocket, donkey-jacketed male proletariat, that it is encompassing women using wordprocessors or teaching school, leaving their children at playschool after returning from maternity leave. The workforce may be better paid, more highly skilled, more educated, more female, more complex than it was before, but a computer programmer still stands in the same basic relation to the means of production as a labourer on a construction site. As long as one class works and another appropriates the fruit of their work, there will be reason to engage in class struggle. As long as there is capitalism, there will be a need for socialism.

New social forces coming onto the scene and adding to the complexity of our political culture do not invalidate class struggle or justify a false dichotomy between a workerist caricature of class and class struggle and a declassed pluralism of alternative political subjects with alternative agenda. New social movements growing up around the politics of gender, race and environment should broaden and deepen the socialist agenda and not displace it.

None of the problems they highlight can be decisively resolved within the capitalist mode of production. The ecological agenda, for example, requires social planning on a vast scale and generates imperatives that are antithetical to the fundamental capitalist imperative of maximum profitability.

Feminists often argue that socialism is just one more form of patriarchy. Although patriarchal attitudes persist in some socialists, there is in deep structural relationship between socialism and the liberation of women.

If we do not settle for a shopping list of particular demands on contraception, equal pay, child care, etc and press to the core of the problem, we come to see that the source of the oppression of women is in the sexual division of labour and the whole ideological apparatus supporting it, which is inherent in class society and intensified under the capitalist form of class society. With increasing specialisation and the increasing separation of the public and private spheres along the lines of the separation of male labour from female labour, patterns of one-sided distortion of personality developed along the fault lines of definitions of masculinity and femininity parallel to the exclusion of women from the public realm and the exclusion of men from the domestic realm.

The liberation of women must be grounded in a radical break with the existing sexual division of labour. Women must re-enter the public realm and demand that men re-enter the domestic realm. There is no real liberation for women without labour, without participation in the realm of collective effort. Until work plays the same part in the lives of women as it does for men and women stop living off the labour and social position of men, things will never be right. It will not do to demand the right to decide whether to work or not to work. To have the right to consume what a society produces and to

participate in deciding what a society does, it is necessary to contribute to what a society needs.

The full participation of the full potential labour force in social production and distribution is a structural impossibility under capitalism. Because it is inherently subject to booms and slumps and because its driving force is maximum profitability, it needs a reserve labour force and it needs a division of labour based on class, sex and race. This is not to say that many reforms cannot be achieved under capitalism, but the full liberation of women requires a thoroughgoing revolution in consciousness and in the patterns of everyday life grounded in a revolution in the relations of production. It requires an end to a social division of labour based on class, race and sex.

Exploitation resulting from such a division of labour goes much deeper than is often realised. It is not only that an individual is excluded from control of the labour process and denied the fruits of his / her own labour on the basis of class, race or sex (in the case of black working women, all three). It is being excluded from the whole apparatus of cognitive, cultural, technological power, being deprived of access to what has been produced by the collective labour of centuries, to the knowledge, culture, technology grounded in the surplus value created by generations of human effort.

Emancipation is not only being paid a fair price for individual labour, but being free to make our own the whole web of knowledge and culture and technology of the centuries and to recast it according to new norms free of capitalist, racist and sexist values. Only socialism provides the foundations for this.

Socialism is about everything. An economist / reductionist / soulless caricature of socialism as one enormous conformist factory is the substitution of a badly-drawn, black and white, two-dimensional diagram for the richness, colour and vitality of a full-blooded, three-dimensional life world. Socialism is a movement, not only for the socialisation of the means of production, distribution and exchange, but for the total transformation of human energies. Socialism is not only a different way of organising our economic activity, but a whole different way of thinking, experiencing, creating and coming together. Socialism is the only system able to give full scope to the full flowering of human personality, strong in the dignity that comes only from labour, reconciled to nature and to society. Socialism enables us to come together in our fullness and at our best, instead of preying upon each other in competition, dissipation and despair. Socialism is bread and roses and much more.

Socialism is possible, but it is not inevitable. History is an open process, full of real risk and real surprise. It is up to us. It is up to everyone to decide: Which side are you on ? Capitalism or socialism ?

The obstacles have multiplied and the stakes have never been so high, but perhaps our determination can rise to meet them.

Hopefully, the song of Labi Siffre *So Strong* sung both at the Labour Party 1989 conference and in the Workers Party 1989 election broadcast may be indicative of our determination:

The higher you build your barriers
The taller I become...
Something inside so strong
I know that I can make it
Though you're doing me wrong, so wrong
You thought that my pride was gone
Oh no, something inside so strong
The more you refuse to hear my voice
The louder I will sing
You hide behind walls of Jericho
Your lies will come tumbling
Deny my place in time
You squander wealth that's mine
My light will shine so brightly
It will blind you...
Brothers and sisters
When they insist we're just not good enough
We know better
Just look them in the eyes and say:
We're going to do it anyway.
We're going to do it anyway.

Perhaps, after all the difficulties and disappointments and defeats, we are going to do it anyway. Perhaps our time will come again. Perhaps from the living stream still flowing from the old left and the new left a great burst of a newer left will rush forth into the next century.

The red flag is tattered and torn, but it still flies.

It waved above our infant might
When all ahead seemed dark as night
It witnessed many a deed and vow
We must not change its colour now.

1998 postscript (9 years later):

In April 1998 the red flags were flying against the cloudy skies and green hills of Meath and a new generation (along with previous generations) was singing the [The Red Flag](#)

in [Crossakiel](#).



Inspired by this initiative of local people in Meath and Irish and British trade unionists, I constructed a website about [The Red Flag: the song, the man, the monument](#) and produced [new recordings of the song](#) and then a cd entitled [Songs of Irish Labour](#).

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