

Socialism today

Speech by Sitaram Yechury, member of the Political Bureau, Communist Party of India (M), at a panel discussion in the World Social Forum, Mumbai, 17 January 2004; reprinted from *Socialism Today* (Mumbai), no. 3 (2004).

Dear comrades and friends,

At the outset, we are extremely heartened and grateful that more than twenty important communist parties of the world—from the socialist, developed and developing countries—are participating in this programme. I consider it both an honour and a privilege to initiate this discussion. I would, however, choose to provoke a discussion! On the basis of our modest efforts in India, and based on our experience, I wish to place before you seven points in the nature of a healthy provocation!

1. No matter what we may think about the actual experience of socialism in the past, one thing is undeniable. It was the first time in human history that a society had come into being not spontaneously, not on the basis of the spontaneous movement of history, independent of human will, but on the basis of human conception.

Karl Marx had remarked in *Capital* that the difference between the best bee and the worst architect is that the architect, unlike the bee, erects a structure in the mind before erecting it in reality. Socialism is the first structure of society that was first erected in the mind before it was erected in reality. True, what came into being might not have fully corresponded to what was in the mind; nonetheless socialism, even as it existed, was the first non-spontaneously evolved mode of production in human history.

Quite apart from its historical significance in establishing the rule of the hitherto exploited classes, in defeating fascism, in enabling the oppressed nations to liberate themselves from imperialism, and in forcing capitalism, however transiently, to adopt welfare-state measures, this aspect of socialism, of representing the first grand effort of mankind to transform a vision into reality, must never be lost sight of. In fact socialism defined, to a significant extent, the contours of human civilisational advance in the twentieth century and left an inerasable imprint on all its aspects.

Since mankind would never again rest content, leaving its fate to the blind forces of history, the victory of socialism—not necessarily in the form it originally appeared in but maybe in some other form, representing a vision going beyond capitalism towards social ownership—is assured and inevitable. Through all our present travails, this is a truth we must never lose sight of.

2. Nonetheless we must face the question: why did socialism collapse over large parts of the world? The usual answer to this question focuses on the defects of the system that was erected, notably the extreme centralisation of power in the socialist societies, which were characterised by a dictatorship of the party and which ultimately ended up depoliticising the working class to a significant extent. The CPI(M) had, in its 14th Congress, identified four areas, viz. the character of the socialist state, the content of socialist democracy, the construction of the socialist economy, and inadequate development of ideological consciousness amongst the people, where distortions and deviations took place undermining the socialist state.

There is, of course, much truth in this. But this answer itself has to be located within a historical context, and that context was provided by imperialism. Imperialism, leading to uneven development, kept socialism confined only to countries in the periphery while countries in the metropolis, belying the hopeful anticipation of Marx and Engels and the expectations of Lenin and his comrades, came close to, but never succeeded in, achieving the breakthrough to a socialist revolution. As a result, socialism, wherever it had come into being, remained “encircled” throughout its entire brief history, resulting in an ossification of the centralised bureaucratic structure, from which there was no escape other than through a collapse of the system itself.

3. There is an additional point to note. Not only did revolutions not happen in the advanced centres of capitalism but the very revolutionary conjuncture itself passed. The programme of the Comintern was based on the notion of a “general crisis of capitalism,” from which the only way out could be provided by a transition to socialism. All of us recollect the meetings of 1957 and 1960. Eighty-one communist parties in a declaration asserted in 1960 that the international correlation of forces shifted decisively in socialism’s favour, that capitalism is incapable of developing any further, that socialism is irreversible in the existing socialist countries, etc., etc. In retrospect, it is clear that there was both an underestimation of capitalism and an overestimation of socialism—an incorrect estimation that had grave consequences for the advance of the socialist cause.

Capitalism restructured itself in the aftermath of the Second World War, through Keynesian demand management ushering in an unprecedented boom, through political decolonisation removing the moral stigma of being an oppressor of other nations from it, and through the diffusion of a degree of development to certain pockets in the Third World, such as east Asia, which appeared to belie the Sixth Congress thesis that development of the Third World could occur only through socialism.

These changes, together with the experience of the very horrors of the Second

World War, contributed to the passing of the revolutionary conjuncture of the period 1913–1950. While we have a renascent imperialism today, and the moral stigma associated with oppression and stagnation is once again beginning to adhere to capitalism, portending the beginning of yet another possible revolutionary conjuncture, the fact remains that this would not be a return to the earlier conjuncture. Lenin always teaches us that concrete analysis of concrete conditions is the living essence of dialectics. Just as he authored Leninism as Marxism in the era of imperialism, it falls on our collective shoulders to define the contours of the socialist revolution in the present conjuncture.

Therefore, there is no going back. We can stand on Lenin's shoulders to see the future, but we cannot see it through Lenin's eyes.

4. Given the fact of uneven development under imperialism, it is clear that the transition to socialism would be a protracted affair. Likewise, given the reassertion of the hegemony of imperialism in the epoch of the emergence of a new form of international finance capital, it is clear that the socialist movement must be engaged above all in an anti-imperialist struggle. Indeed the chief hallmark of the socialist movement today is that it constitutes the most consistent fighter against imperialism, since it alone can visualise a transcendence of capitalism, which is a necessary condition for the transcendence of imperialism. For Marx has irrefutably proved that capitalism can never survive without its *raison d'être*, i.e. the exploitation of man by man and nation by nation.

To those who spread illusions of reforming capitalism (since Bernstein) and to those who parrot the TINA ("there is no alternative" to globalisation) factor, the communist answer can only be that the alternative to TINA is SITA: socialism is the alternative.

We can therefore carry the struggle for socialism forward today only through the adoption of an uncompromising stand against imperialism. This is our historic task in an era when the vileness of imperialist predatoriness, notwithstanding all the high phrases about "freedom" and "democracy," is becoming apparent to everyone in the aftermath of the war on Iraq.

5. There is an additional point to consider. The reassertion of imperialist hegemony is occurring in a situation of the ascendancy of international finance capital in a new form, which has the effect of causing deflation, recession and unemployment everywhere. In other words, the contemporary imperialist aggressiveness is the other side of the same coin that imposes enormous burdens on the working class in the advanced capitalist countries in the form of unemployment and cuts in social wage.

Imperialism of course tries to pit the workers in the advanced countries against those

in the Third World by arguing that the latter are snatching jobs away from the former. Nothing could be further from the truth. It is the worldwide deflation imposed by finance capital that is the cause of unemployment everywhere, not the redistribution of employment from one section of workers by another. An anti-imperialist struggle, provided it can make this point clear and present a vision for improving the lot of mankind as a whole, embracing the working class and other exploited classes in all countries—developed, developing, and underdeveloped—can acquire worldwide support and contribute to a change in the conjuncture.

6. Of course the precise contours of what a future socialist society would look like still need to be drawn, based on the past experience of socialism. The road map of this would naturally vary from country to country, depending on the concrete realities. Each one of us has this historic responsibility to discharge in our respective countries. However, the task of advancing the anti-imperialist struggle worldwide cannot afford to wait. Neither can it wait until that intellectual task of evolving a coherent and comprehensive revolutionary theory for the socialist revolution in the present conjuncture, important though it is, is completed.

7. Finally, let us confront a reality squarely. The present phase of capitalist globalisation is simply unsustainable. This is precisely because, by sharply accentuating economic inequalities—between countries and between the rich and poor in individual countries—the vast majority of the world's population are increasingly placed beyond market operations, as they simply lack the requisite purchasing power. The imperialist hegemonic drive, therefore, will increasingly be determined by military aggressiveness.

Under these conditions, as Rosa Luxembourge said earlier and as Fidel Castro says today, the choice before humanity's future is between socialism and barbarism. Each one of us, working in tandem with our domestic revolutionary goals, will have to work for integrating the worldwide anti-globalisation protests with the global anti-war upsurge in a mighty anti-imperialist movement. This requires, simultaneously, the intensification of the ideological combat within these movements that seek to obfuscate socialism as the only alternative available to humanity. Come, let us together rise to the occasion.