

Is socialism a form of totalitarianism?
A study of the views of the pioneer
socialists reveals what they really
taught and believed about democracy

Socialism and Democracy

by James P. Cannon

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Comrades, I am glad to be here with you today, and to accept your invitation to speak on Socialism and Democracy. It is a most timely subject, and in the discussion of socialist regroupment it takes first place. Before we can make real headway in the discussion of other important parts of the program, we have to find agreement on what we mean by socialism and what we mean by democracy, and how they are related to each other, and what we are going to say to the American workers about them.

Strange as it may seem, an agreement on these two simple, elementary points, as experience has already demonstrated, will not be arrived at easily. The confusion and demoralization created by Stalinism, and the successful exploitation of this confusion by the ruling capitalists of this country, and all their agents and apologists, still hangs heavily over all sections of the workers movement. We have to recognize that. Even in the ranks of people who call themselves socialists, we encounter a wide variety of understandings and misunderstandings about the real meaning of those simple terms, socialism and democracy. And in the great ranks

of the American working class, the fog of misunderstanding and confusion is even thicker. All this makes the clarification of these questions a problem of burning importance and immediacy. In fact, it is first on the agenda in all circles of the radical movement.

The widespread misunderstanding and confusion about socialism and democracy has profound causes. These causes must be frankly stated and examined before they can be removed. And we must undertake to remove them, if we are to try in earnest to get to the root of the problem.

Shakespeare's Mark Antony reminded us that evil quite often outlives its authors. That is true in the present case also. Stalin is dead; but the crippling influence of Stalinism on the minds of a whole generation of people who considered themselves socialists or communists, lives after Stalin. This is testified to most eloquently by those members and fellow-travelers of the Communist party who have formally disavowed Stalinism since the Twentieth Congress, while retaining some of its most perverted conceptions and definitions.

Socialism, in the old days that I can recall, was often called the society of the free and equal, and democracy was defined as the rule of the people. These simple definitions still ring true to me, as they did when I first heard them many years ago. But in later years we have heard different definitions which are far less attractive. These same people whom I have mentioned — leaders of the Communist party and fellow-travelers, who have sworn off Stalin without really changing any of the Stalinist ideas they assimilated — still blandly describe the state of affairs in the Soviet Union, with all its most exaggerated social and economic inequality, ruled over by the barbarous dictatorship of a privileged minority, as a form of "socialism." And they still man-

age to say with straight faces that the hideous police regimes in the satellite countries, propped up by Russian military force, are some kind of "People's Democracies."

When such people say it would be a fine idea for all of us to get together in the struggle for socialism and democracy, it seems to me it would be appropriate to ask them, by way of preliminary inquiry: "Just what do you mean by socialism, and what do you mean by democracy? Do you mean what Marx and Engels and Lenin said? Or do you mean what Stalin did?" They are not the same thing, as can be easily proved, and it is necessary to choose between one set of definitions and the other.

This confusion of terminology has recently been illustrated by an article of Howard Fast, the well-known writer who was once awarded the Stalin Prize. For a long time Fast supported what he called "socialism" in the Soviet Union with his eyes shut. And then Khrushchev's speech at the Twentieth Congress and other revelations following that, opened Fast's eyes, and he doesn't like what he sees. That is to his credit. But he still calls it "socialism." In an article in *Masses and Mainstream* he describes what he had found out about this peculiar "socialism" that had prevailed in the Soviet Union under Stalin and still prevails under Stalin's successors.

This is what Howard Fast said: "In Russia, we have socialism without democracy. We have socialism without trial by jury, habeas corpus or . . . protection against the abuse of confession by torture. We have socialism without civil liberty. . . . We have socialism without public avenues of protest. We have socialism without equality for minorities. We have socialism without any right of free artistic creation. In so many words, we have socialism without morality."

These are the words of Howard Fast. I agree with

everything he says there, except the preface he gives to all his qualifications — that we have “socialism” without this and that, we have “socialism” without any of the features that a socialist society was supposed to have in the conceptions of the movement before Stalinism. It is as though Fast has discovered different varieties of socialism. Like mushrooms. You go out and pick the right kind and you can cook a tasty dish. But if you gather up the kind commonly known as toadstools and call them mushrooms, you will poison yourself. Stalinist “socialism” is about as close to the real thing as a toadstool is to an edible mushroom.

Now, of course, the Stalinists and their apologists have not created all the confusion in this country about the meaning of socialism, at least not directly. At every step for thirty years the Stalinist work of befuddlement and demoralization, of debasing words into their opposite meanings, has been supported by reciprocal action of the same kind by the ruling capitalists and their apologists. They have never failed to take the Stalinists at their word, and to point to the Stalinist regime in the Soviet Union, with all of its horrors, and to say: “That is socialism. The American way of life is better.”

It is these people who have given us, as their contribution to sowing confusion in the minds of people, the delightful definition of the capitalist sector of the globe, where the many toil in poverty for the benefit of the few, as “the free world.” And they describe the United States, where the workers have a right to vote every four years, if they don't move around too much, but have no say about the control of the shop and the factory; where all the means of mass information and communication are monopolized by a few — they describe all that as the ideal democracy for which the workers should gladly fight and die.

It is true that Stalinism has been the primary cause of the demoralization of a whole generation of American *radical* workers. There is no question of that. But the role of Stalinism in prejudicing the great American working class, against socialism, and inducing them to accept the counterfeit democracy of American capitalism as the lesser evil, has been mainly indirect. The active role in this miseducation and befuddlement has been played by the American ruling minority, through all their monopolized means of communication and information.

They have cynically accepted the Stalinist definition, and have obligingly advertised the Soviet Union, with its grinding poverty and glaring inequality; with its ubiquitous police terror, frame-ups, mass murders and slave-labor camps, as a "socialist" order of society. They have utilized the crimes of Stalinism to prejudice the American workers against the very name of socialism. And worst of all, comrades, we have to recognize that this campaign has been widely successful, and that we have to pay for it. We cannot build a strong socialist movement in this country until we overcome this confusion in the minds of the American workers about the real meaning of socialism.

This game of confusing and misrepresenting has been facilitated for the capitalists, and aided to a considerable extent, by the Social Democrats and the labor bureaucracy, who are themselves privileged beneficiaries of the American system, and who give a socialist and labor coloring to the defense of American "democracy" In addition to all that, we have to recognize that in this country, more than any other in the world, the tremendous pressures of imperialist prosperity and power and the witch-hunt persecution, have deeply affected the thinking of many people who call themselves radicals

or ex-radicals. These powerful pressures have brought many of them to a reconciliation with capitalist society and to the defense of capitalist democracy, if not as a paradise at least as a lesser evil, and the best that can be hoped for.

There is no doubt that this drumfire of bourgeois propaganda, supplemented by the universal revulsion against Stalinism, has profoundly affected the sentiments of the American working class, including the bulk of its most progressive and militant and potentially revolutionary sectors.

After all that has happened in the past quarter of a century, the American workers have become more acutely sensitive than ever before to the value and importance of democratic rights. That, in my opinion, is the progressive side of their reaction, which we should fully share. The horrors of fascism, as they were revealed in the thirties, and which were never dreamed of by the socialists in the old days: and the no less monstrous crimes of Stalinism, which became public knowledge later — all this has inspired a fear and hatred of any kind of dictatorship in the minds of the American working class. And to the extent that the Stalinist dictatorship in Russia has been identified with the name of socialism, and that this identification has been taken as a matter of course, the American workers have been prejudiced against socialism.

That's the bitter truth, and it must be looked straight in the face. This barrier to the expansion and development of the American socialist movement will not be overcome, and even a regroupment of the woefully limited forces of those who at present consider themselves socialists, will yield but little fruit, unless and until we find a way to break down this misunderstanding and prejudice against socialism, and convince at least

the more advanced American workers that we socialists are the most aggressive and consistent advocates of democracy in all fields; and that, in fact, we are completely devoted to the idea that socialism cannot be realized otherwise than by democracy.

The socialist movement in America will not advance again significantly until it regains the initiative and takes the offensive against capitalism, and all its agents in the labor movement, precisely on the issue of democracy. What is needed is not a propaganda device or trick, but a formulation of the issue as it really stands; and, indeed, as it has always stood with real socialists ever since the modern movement was first proclaimed 109 years ago. For this counter-offensive against bourgeois propaganda, we do not need to look for new formulations. Our task, as socialists living and fighting in this day and hour, is simply to restate what socialism and democracy meant to the founders of our movement, and to all the authentic disciples who followed them; to bring their formulations up to date and apply them to present conditions in the United States.

This restatement of basic aims and principles cannot wait; it is, in fact, the burning necessity of the hour. There is no room for misunderstanding among us as to what such a restatement of our position means and requires. It requires a clean break with all Stalinist and Social Democratic perversions and distortions of the real meaning of socialism and democracy, and their relation to each other, and a return to the original formulations and definitions. Nothing short of this will do.

The authentic socialist movement, as it was conceived by its founders and as it has developed over the past century, has been the most democratic movement in all history. No formulation of this question can

improve on the classic statement of the *Communist Manifesto*, with which modern scientific socialism was proclaimed to the world in 1848. The *Communist Manifesto* said:

"All previous historical movements were movements of minorities, in the interest of minorities. The proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority."

The authors of the *Communist Manifesto* linked socialism and democracy together as end and means. The "self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority" cannot be anything else but democratic, if we understand by "democracy" the rule of the people, the majority. The Stalinist claim that the task of reconstructing society on a socialist basis can be farmed out to a privileged and uncontrolled bureaucracy, while the workers remain without voice or vote in the process—is just as foreign to the thoughts of Marx and Engels, and of all their true disciples, as the reformist idea that socialism can be handed down to the workers by degrees, by the capitalists who exploit them.

All such fantastic conceptions were answered in advance by the reiterated statement of Marx and Engels that "the emancipation of the working class is the task of the workers themselves." That is the language of Marx and Engels — "the task of the workers themselves." That was just another way of saying — as they said explicitly many times — that the socialist reorganization of society requires a workers revolution. Such a revolution is unthinkable without the active participation of the majority of the working class, which is itself the big majority of the population. Nothing could be more democratic than that.

Moreover, the great teachers did not limit the demo-

cratic action of the working class to the overthrow of the bourgeois supremacy. They defined democracy as the form of governmental rule in the transition period between capitalism and socialism. It is explicitly stated in the *Communist Manifesto* — and I wonder how many people have forgotten this in recent years: “The first step,” said the *Manifesto*, “in the revolution by the working class, is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class, to establish democracy.”

That is the way Marx and Engels formulated the first aim of the revolution — to make the workers the ruling class, to establish democracy, which, in their view, is the same thing. From this precise formulation it is clear that Marx and Engels did not consider the limited formal democracy under capitalism, which screens the exploitation and the rule of the great majority by the few, as real democracy. In order to have real democracy, the workers must become the “ruling class.” Only the revolution which replaces the class rule of the capitalists by the class rule of the workers can really “establish democracy,” not in fiction but in fact. So said Marx and Engels.

They never taught that the simple nationalization of the forces of production signified the establishment of socialism. That’s not stated by Marx and Engels anywhere. The nationalization only lays the economic foundations for the transition to socialism. Still less could they have sanctioned, even if they had been able to imagine, the monstrous idea that socialism could be realized without freedom and without equality; that nationalized production and planned economy, controlled by a ruthless police dictatorship, complete with prisons, torture chambers and forced-labor camps, could be designated as a “socialist” society. That unspeakable perversion and contradiction of terms belongs to the Stalinists and their apologists.

All the great Marxists defined socialism as a classless society — with abundance, freedom and equality for all: a society in which there would be no state, not even a democratic workers' state, to say nothing of a state in the monstrous form of a bureaucratic dictatorship of a privileged minority.

The Soviet Union today is a transitional order of society in which the bureaucratic dictatorship of a privileged minority, far from serving as the agency to bridge the transition to socialism stands as an obstacle to harmonious development in that direction. In the view of Marx and Engels, and of Lenin and Trotsky who came after them, the transition from capitalism to the classless society of socialism could only be carried out by an ever-expanding democracy, involving the masses of the workers more and more in all phases of social life, by direct participation and control.

And, in the course of further progressive development in all fields, as Lenin expressed it, even this democracy, this workers' democracy, as a form of class rule, will outlive itself. Lenin said: "Democracy will gradually change and become a habit, and finally wither away," since democracy itself, properly understood, is a form of state, that is, an instrument of class rule, for which there will be no need and no place in the classless socialist society.

Forecasting the socialist future, the *Communist Manifesto* said: "In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association." Mark that, "an association," not a state — "an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all."

Trotsky said the same thing in other words when he spoke of socialism as "a pure and limpid social system which is accommodated to the self government of the toilers . . . and uninterrupted growth of universal equal-

ity — all sided flowering of human personality . . . unselfish honest and human relations between human beings.”

The bloody abomination of Stalinism cannot be passed off as a substitute for this picture of the socialist future, and the democratic transition period leading up to it, as it was drawn by the great Marxists.

And I say we will not put the socialist movement of this country on the right track, and restore its rightful appeal to the best sentiments of the working class of this country, and above all to the young, until we begin to call socialism by its right name as the great teachers did. Until we make it clear that we stand for an ever-expanding workers' democracy, as the only road to socialism. Until we root out every vestige of Stalinist perversion and corruption of the meaning of socialism and democracy, and restate the thoughts and formulations of the authentic Marxist teachers.

* * *

But the Stalinist definitions of socialism and democracy are not the only perversions that have to be rejected before we can find a sound basis for the regroupment of socialist forces in the United States. The definitions of the Social Democrats of all hues and gradations are just as false. And in this country they are a still more formidable obstacle, because they have deeper roots, and they are tolerantly nourished by the ruling class itself.

The liberals, the Social Democrats and the bureaucratic bosses of the American trade unions are red-hot supporters of “democracy.” At least that is what they say. And they strive to herd the workers into the imperialist war camp under the general slogan of “Democracy versus Dictatorship.” That is their slippery and

consciously deceptive substitute for the real "irrepressible conflict" of our age, the conflict between capitalism and socialism. They speak of democracy as something that stands by itself, above the classes and the class struggle, and not as the form of rule of one class over another.

Lenin put his finger on this misrepresentation of reality in his polemic against Kautsky. Lenin said: "A liberal naturally speaks of 'democracy' in general; but a Marxist will never forget to ask: 'for what class?' Everyone knows, for instance (and Kautsky the 'historian' knows it too), that rebellions, or even strong ferment, among the slaves in antiquity at once revealed the fact that the state of antiquity was essentially a *dictatorship of the slave-owners*. Did this dictatorship abolish democracy *among*, and *for*, the slaveowners? Everybody knows that it did not."

Capitalism under any kind of government, whether bourgeois democracy, or fascism or a military police state — under any kind of government, capitalism is a system of minority rule, and the principal beneficiaries of capitalist democracy are the small minority of exploiting capitalists, scarcely less so than the slave-owners of ancient times were the actual rulers and the real beneficiaries of the Athenian democracy.

To be sure, the workers, in the United States have a right to vote periodically for one of two sets of candidates selected for them by the two capitalist parties. And if they can dodge the witch-hunters, they can exercise the right of free speech and free press. But this formal right of free speech and free press is outweighed rather heavily by the inconvenient circumstance that the small capitalist minority happens to enjoy a complete monopoly of ownership and control of all the big presses, and of television and radio, and of all other means of communication and information.

We who oppose the capitalist regime have a right to nominate our own candidates, if we're not arrested under the Smith Act before we get to the city clerk's office, and if we can comply with the laws that deliberately restrict the rights of minority parties. That is easier said than done in this country of democratic capitalism. In one state after another, no matter how many petitions you circulate, you can't comply with the regulations and you can't get on the ballot. This is the state of affairs in California, Ohio, Illinois, and an increasing number of other states. And if you succeed in complying with all the technicalities, as we did last year in New York, they just simply rule you out anyhow if it is not convenient to have a minority party on the ballot. But outside of all these and other difficulties and restrictions, we have free elections and full democracy.

It is true that the Negro people in the United States, ninety-four years after the Emancipation Proclamation, are still fighting for the right to vote in the South; and for the right to take a vacant seat on a public bus; or to send their children to a tax-supported public school, and things of that kind — which you may call restrictions of democracy in the United States.

But even so, with all that, a little democracy is better than none. We socialists have never denied that. And after the experiences of fascism and McCarthyism, and of military and police dictatorships in many parts of the world, and of the horrors of Stalinism, we have all the more reason to value every democratic provision for the protection of human rights and human dignity; to fight for more democracy, not less.

Socialists should not argue with the American worker when he says he wants democracy and doesn't want to be ruled by a dictatorship. Rather we should recognize that his demand for human rights and democratic

guarantees, now and in the future, is in itself progressive. The socialist task is not to deny democracy but to expand it and make it more complete. That is the true socialist tradition. The Marxists, throughout the century-long history of our movement, have always valued and defended bourgeois democratic rights, restricted as they were; and have utilized them for the education and organization of the workers in the struggle to establish full democracy by abolishing the capitalist rule altogether.

The right of union organization is a precious right, a democratic right, but it was not "given" to the workers in the United States. It took the mighty and irresistible labor upheaval of the thirties, culminated by the great sit-down strikes — a semi-revolution of the American workers — to establish in reality the right of union organization in mass production industry.

And yet today — I am still speaking under the heading of democracy — twenty years after the sit-down strikes firmly established the auto worker's union, the automobile industry is still privately owned and ruled by a dictatorship of financial sharks. The auto workers have neither voice nor vote in the management of the industry which they have created, nor in regulating the speed of the assembly line which consumes their lives. Full control of production in auto and steel and everywhere, according to the specific terms of the union contract, is still the exclusive prerogative of "management," that is, of the absentee owners who contribute nothing to the production of automobiles, or steel or anything else.

What's democratic about that? The claim that we have an almost perfect democracy in this country doesn't stand up against the fact that the workers have no democratic rights in industry at all, as far as regulating production is concerned; that these rights are exclusively

reserved for the parasitic owners who never see the inside of a factory.

In the old days, the agitators of the Socialist party and the IWW — who were real democrats — used to give a shorthand definition of socialism as “industrial democracy.” I don’t know how many of you have heard that. It was a common expression: “industrial democracy,” the extension of democracy to industry, the democratic control of industry by the workers themselves, with private ownership eliminated. That socialist demand for real democracy was taken for granted in the time of Debs and Haywood, when the American socialist movement was still young and uncorrupted.

You never hear a “democratic” labor leader say anything like that today. The defense of “democracy” by the Social Democrats and the labor bureaucrats always turns out in practise to be a defense of “democratic” capitalism, or as Beck and McDonald call it, “peoples’ capitalism.” And I admit they have a certain stake in it, and a certain justification for defending it, as far as their personal interests are concerned.

And always, in time of crisis, these Social Democrats and labor leaders, who talk about democracy all the time, as against dictatorship in the “socialist countries,” as they call them — in time of crisis, they easily excuse and defend all kinds of violations of even this limited bourgeois democracy. They are far more tolerant of lapses from the formal rules of democracy by the capitalists than by the workers. They demand that the class struggle of the workers against the exploiters be conducted by the formal rules of bourgeois democracy, at all stages of its development — up to and including the stage of social transformation and the defense of the new society against attempts at capitalist restoration. They say it has to be strictly “democratic” all the way. No emergency measures are tolerated:

everything must be strictly and formally democratic, according to the rules laid down by the capitalist minority. They burn incense to democracy as an immutable principle, an abstraction standing above the social antagonisms.

But when the capitalist class, in its struggle for self-preservation, cuts corners around its own professed democratic principles, the liberals, the Social Democrats and the labor skates have a way of winking, or looking the other way, or finding excuses for it.

For example, they do not protest when the American imperialists wage war according to the rules of war, which are not quite the same thing as the rules of "democracy." When the atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it never occurred to these professional democrats to demand a referendum of the noncombatant residents of these doomed cities as to how they felt about it. The most they could offer, these democrats, after this ghastly fact, the most abominable atrocity in all history — the bombing of a defenseless civilian population and the wiping out of whole cities of men, women and children — the best these liberals, labor fakers and Social Democratic defenders of American democracy could offer, was the plaintive bleat of Norman Thomas. You know, he was supporting the war, naturally, being a Social Democrat. But Norman Thomas rose up after Nagasaki and Hiroshima were wiped off the face of the earth and said the bombs should not have been dropped "without warning." The others said nothing.

These professional democrats have no objection to the authoritarian rule of the military forces of the capitalist state, which deprives the rank-and-file soldiers of all democratic rights in life and death matters, including the right to elect their own officers. The dic-

tatorial rule of MacArthur in Japan, who acted as a czar over a whole conquered country, was never questioned by these professional opponents of all other dictators. They are against the dictators in the Kremlin, but the dictator in Japan — that was a horse of another color. All that, you see, concerns war; and nothing, not even the sacred principles of "democracy," can be allowed to stand in the way of the victory of the American imperialists in the war, and the cinching up of the victory afterward in the occupation.

But in the class struggle of the workers against the capitalists to transform society, which is the fiercest war of all, and in the transition period after the victory of the workers — the professional democrats demand that the formal rules of bourgeois democracy, as defined by the minority of exploiters, be scrupulously observed at every step. No emergency measures are allowed.

By these different responses in different situations of a class nature, the professional democrats simply show that their class bias determines their judgment in each case, and show at the same time that their professed devotion to the rules of formal democracy, at all times and under all conditions, is a fraud.

And when it comes to the administration of workers' organizations under their control, the Social Democrats and the reformist labor leaders pay very little respect to their own professed democratic principles. The trade unions in the United States today, as you all know, are administered and controlled by little cliques of richly privileged bureaucrats who use the union machinery, and the union funds, and a private army of goon squads, and — whenever necessary — the help of the employers and the government — to keep their own "party" in control of the unions and to suppress

and beat down any attempt of the rank and file to form an opposition "party" to put up an opposition slate. And yet, without freedom of association and organization, without the right to form groups and parties of different tendencies, there is and can be no real democracy anywhere.

In practice, the American labor bureaucrats, who piously demand democracy in the one-party totalitarian domain of Stalinism, come as close as they can to maintaining a total one-party rule in their own domain. Kipling said: "The colonel's lady and Judy O'Grady are sisters under the skin." The Stalinist bureaucrats in Russia and the trade-union bureaucrats in the United States are not sisters, but they are much more alike than different. They are essentially of the same breed, a privileged caste dominated above all by motives of self-benefit and self-preservation at the expense of the workers and against the workers.

The privileged bureaucratic caste everywhere is the most formidable obstacle to democracy and socialism. The struggle of the working class in both sections of the now divided world has become, in the most profound meaning of the term, a struggle against the usurping privileged bureaucracy.

In the Soviet Union it is a struggle to restore the genuine workers' democracy established by the revolution of 1917. Workers' democracy has become a burning necessity to assure the harmonious transition to socialism. That is the meaning of the political revolution, against the bureaucracy, now developing throughout the whole Soviet sphere, which every socialist worthy of the name unreservedly supports. There is no sense in talking about regroupment with people who don't agree on that, on defense and support of the Soviet workers against the Soviet bureaucrats.

In the United States the struggle for workers' democracy is pre-eminently a struggle of the rank and file to gain democratic control of their own organizations. That is the necessary condition to prepare the final struggle to abolish capitalism and "establish democracy" in the country as a whole. No party in this country has a right to call itself socialist, unless it stands four-square for the rank-and-file workers of the United States against the bureaucrats.

In my opinion, effective and principled regroupment of socialist forces requires full agreement on these two points. That is the necessary starting point. Capitalism does not survive by its own strength as a social system, but by its influence within the workers' movement, reflected and expressed by the labor aristocracy and the bureaucracy. So the fight for workers' democracy is inseparable from the fight for socialism, and the condition for its victory. Workers' democracy is the only road to socialism, here in the United States and everywhere else, all the way from Moscow to Los Angeles and from here to Budapest.

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