

An exchange on the International Space Station project

9 February 1999

Dear Editor,

I read with great amusement your "Marxist analysis" of the International Space Station. It is quite apparent that your flaming anti-Americanism (as with all forms of bigotry) has blinded you to reality. There are several glaring inaccuracies and biases in your report, which I would like to address:

The participation of ESA in the ISS is contingent on their providing a very modest laboratory module to the project. And why shouldn't it be? Of all of the participants in the project (including Brazil!), the European Space Agency's contribution is by far the least impressive--especially when measured against Europe's ample GDP and formidable technological expertise. The fact that they must actually pay to participate is completely fair. The days are long past since the financial burdens of Europe's economic and technology development have been (or should be!) born by the US (remember the Marshall Plan? The Berlin airlift?). The fact that the US has taken the lead in this project allows it to also take certain liberties. As with other analogous situations where nations or individuals take initiative and responsibility they are also accorded certain rights. (If you do the shopping in your household, you have the right to call some of the shots about what to buy, how much to spend and when and where to shop)

The motivation for Russia's participation in the project is obvious from both the US and Russian point-of-view. Of course the US is benefitting from technology and expertise gained from years of Soviet (and now Russian) space development. (Russia is also benefitting from American expertise.) But to say that the project would be technically impossible without Russian participation is ludicrous. It (at least theoretically) makes life easier to have, for instance, the use of the Russian habitat module (actually originally the core module of a planned Mir 2 that would never otherwise be flown) during the early construction phase. But the project, having gone through several design changes before the participation of the RSA, was completely feasible without said module. In fact, the participation of the RSA has further complicated, delayed and made more expensive the Space Station project. The "buying up at bargain

basement prices of Russian technology and scientists" as you so put it, is also keeping their technology development and capabilities alive. It also keeps their scientists employed on a peaceful project rather than developing say ICBM capability for some less-than-peaceminded third party. Which is why the US Congress is so generous with the funding for the project.

As to why Russia should participate in the ISS when they already have a space station?: 1) for the past several years the US rented the use of the Mir. Without those rent payments, it is very doubtful that the RSA could have afforded to continue its use. 2) Also as you mentioned in your report, the Mir, solid workhorse of a space station though it has been, has been through quite a lot, and is not expected to be space worthy for much longer. 3) The aforementioned Mir 2 in the present economic climate is not possible.

And finally.... I want to preface my next comment by saying that I was never a fan of Ronald Reagan or the policies of his administration. But the linkage between the so-called Star Wars program and the ISS is pretty weak. The ISS is of little use as a weapons or spy platform. The needs of a space-based anti-missile system are much better served by numerous, small, unmanned satellites than an expensive to construct and maintain, gargantuan, manned station. If anything, it sucks dollars away from other space activities. The usefulness of the Space Station is in the further development of manned spaceflight technology and keeping aerospace engineers and workers employed. As presently configured it is of little use scientifically (other than space medicine), commercially (except for the government contracts themselves) or militarily.

Right then. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

DM

Dear DM,

In your letter you disparage a "Marxist analysis," saying you find it amusing. Yet everything you say in your correspondence simply vindicates the major proposition in the article--that the ISS project, while potentially a

tremendous scientific advance, is riven with national rivalries and animosities.

Far from being driven by "flaming anti-Americanism," the article points to evidence of the antagonisms that have surfaced so far. Your correspondence confirms that they run quite deep. You wholeheartedly defend the US interests in the project, lambasting the Europeans for not paying their way, and imply that Russia should be grateful for the crumbs offered by the US to keep its space agency alive.

Such nationalist antagonisms arise precisely because of the contradictions of the capitalist system, which make it difficult for scientists of different nations to collaborate in a unified and harmonious way. Increasingly they are forced to work in an environment of mutual hostility and antagonism. In the end the far-reaching developments that could be made in science are subordinated to narrow nationalist and profit oriented ends.

Underlying your outlook is the conception that money is and should be the sole determinant of all things--scientific projects included. As you put it so crudely: "If you do the shopping in your household, you have the right to call some of the shots." The results of this motto are all too evident in space research, as in other scientific fields, where the long-term goals of scientific endeavour are increasingly being subordinated to the short-term profit motives of big business.

You allege there are "glaring inaccuracies" in the article. Let me deal with them:

1. You claim the article states that the project would be technically impossible without Russian participation. That is not what the article said.

Undoubtedly the technical expertise could have been found within the US if the administration had determined that the project should proceed and had been able to provide sufficient money. In fact, more generally it is quite clear science and technology continue to make great strides in the US and around the world. Our criticism is that under the profit system, these advances are not used for the benefit of mankind as a whole but rather for narrow profit interests and the defence of the nation state.

What I do point out is that the Clinton administration seized on an opportunity that emerged after the collapse of the USSR to gain access to Russian space expertise and industry at very cheap prices. Clearly that was not the only motive but given that the US was intent on slashing the costs of the project it was a major consideration.

You assert, without providing any evidence, that "the participation of the RSA has further complicated, delayed and made more expensive the Space Station project". I am sure there were complications, delays and even short-term costs. But in the long run the savings for the US will be substantial--it is enough to consider the comparable wage

structures for engineers, scientists, technicians, etc.

The relationship has been far from an equal one. Under capitalism, as you allude to yourself, he who pays the piper calls the tune. The US has insisted as the price for its financial backing that the Mir, that is a relatively independent Russian space station, be shut down in favour of the US project.

As to other US motives for involvement with the RSA, there is an obvious one that you do not mention. The opening up of the Russian space program has clearly provided the CIA and US Defence Departments with previously undreamt-of access to closely-guarded facilities, including those connected to the Russian military.

2. Your second point is that "the linkage between the so-called Star Wars program and the ISS is pretty weak". You then proceed to explain at great length how the **present** space station was unlikely to be used for such a program.

Again you are tilting at a straw man. One of the main points that I made in the course of the article is that the project underwent a significant transformation in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, as did the entire Strategic Defence Initiative.

How closely the space station was originally linked to Star Wars is not clear. But the Reagan administration did begin to provide huge amounts of money to design systems capable of knocking out Soviet ICBM's before they reached the US and many fantastic projects were initiated and proposed. There were certainly indications that the "Freedom" space station was connected with at least one of these.

Furthermore, the Soviet Union had developed long-term manned space flights in the different types of space stations. At the time, the US had no space station project and was concerned at the growing gap. Undoubtedly even in the revised ISS project, there will be spin-offs for the military, both in the short-term and long-term.

I trust this reply clarifies our position.

Yours sincerely,
Luciano Fernandez,
For the *World Socialist Web Site*



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact