

An exchange on wages under a socialist society

Nick Beams
8 January 2002

Dear WSWS;

I would like to ask a question. In a socialist state, how would the matter of wages be settled? Specifically, if a socialist economy were to be organized around the principles laid out by Lenin in "State and Revolution":

- 1) Free and democratic elections and the right of recall for all officials.
- 2) No official to receive a wage higher than a skilled worker.
- 3) No standing army but the armed people.
- 4) Gradually, all the tasks of running the state to be carried out in turn by the workers: when everybody is a "bureaucrat" in turn, nobody is a bureaucrat.

How would the contradiction of differently qualified/skilled workers be resolved? I am a physician. Would I make the same amount of money as a janitor with an eighth grade education, an uneducated laborer? If so, what incentive would anyone have to pursue a higher education or the years of training needed to practice the skilled professions?

This is an argument frequently put forward by some of my pro-market friends that socialism/communism takes away the "incentive to excel." I would appreciate any thoughts as well as guidance for further study.

Thank you.

AH

Arkansas

26 December 2001

Dear Reader,

Thanks for your recent letter on the issue of wages under socialism.

A very common misconception, actively encouraged by the enemies of socialism, is that a socialist government would impose an "equality of poverty" on every section of the population. The degeneration of the Russian Revolution is pointed to to argue that socialism

can only mean backwardness and stagnation.

A reading of Lenin, as well as Trotsky, will show that the leading revolutionary socialists understood that socialism, in the sense of complete social equality, is not something that can be decreed overnight. In the period of the transition from capitalism to socialism, material incentives continue to exist, though not in the form that they do under capitalism. As long as conditions of relative scarcity continue to exist, so does the need for money and for some differences in living standards, although far smaller than at present.

Socialism envisions a society of abundance for all, in which inequality eventually disappears, along with the current struggle for existence and the need for money itself as the means of obtaining life's necessities and luxuries. The enormous development of the productive forces and technology shows that this is not a utopian dream, but it requires the planned and democratic organization of the global economy.

Your pro-market friends' arguments are based on a completely ahistorical conception of an unchanging world and an unchanging human nature. Even today, we might add, the best artists, scientists, physicians and other highly skilled professionals are not motivated by the material incentive of great wealth.

As a physician yourself, I don't think you can argue that what we need is simply more opportunities for wealth to attract the best and the brightest to the field of medicine. This is an important example. More and more workers and middle class people are being forced to confront the fact that the growth of for-profit medicine has not produced a better and more humane medical system in the US. On the contrary, honest and objective observers have noted everywhere the decline in compassion and in genuinely quality care—not only for the poorest and the uninsured, but also for the great

majority of those whose care is dictated by the profit interests of the HMOs and similar organizations.

To sum up, on the path to socialism, a period that might involve several generations or more, the physician or other highly skilled worker would not make the same amount of money as the least skilled, but neither would we see anything remotely like the current growing disparity in which the most highly paid receive 20 times the minimum wage (not to mention the stratospheric pay and bonuses for the top CEOs of major corporations).

A socialist government would implement policies that lead to a lessening of social inequality, not through lowering living standards, but through improving the conditions for the vast majority. Rapidly improving living standards and conditions of life will lead to a waning of the kind of competitiveness and cult of material acquisitiveness which characterizes modern capitalism. The fruits of technology will be available to all, and a far more balanced and meaningful cultural and intellectual life will also become possible. This is very much in line with the visionary conceptions advanced so powerfully by Lenin in "The State and Revolution."

The socialist goal proved impossible to reach in the backward and isolated Soviet Union but this was for definite historical reasons, not because the goal is itself unattainable. In 1917 the world capitalist system broke at its weakest link, so to speak. The growth of the parasitic Soviet bureaucracy turned the USSR away from the path of socialism and back toward capitalism. Even as the bureaucracy falsely claimed to be building socialism, it was besmirching the ideals of socialism and laying the basis for the current misery in the former Soviet Union. The revival of socialist consciousness and a world socialist movement today will learn the lessons of the betrayal of Stalinism and forge the kind of international unity needed to advance human progress.

I hope that this provides some information for you, and I would urge you, in addition to continuing to read the *WSWS*, to examine the writings of Trotsky from the 1920s and 1930s, in which he often deals in a wide-ranging and profound fashion with the topic of the nature of the transition from capitalism to socialism.

Sincerely,

Peter Daniels

World Socialist Web Site and the Socialist Equality Party

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