

It didn't happen here: Why socialism failed in the United States

The failure of reformism, not socialism

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6 March 2002

It didn't happen here: Why socialism failed in the United States, by Seymour Martin Lipset and Gary Marks, WW Norton & Company 2000

This book by two prominent American political sociologists is an attempt from a liberal standpoint to deny the relevance of a socialist perspective for the working class. Dressed in the disguise of scholarly "objectivity," the work focuses its attack on the internationalist outlook of Marxism.

Seymour Martin Lipset is a professor of political science and sociology at George Mason University and a fellow of the Hoover Institute. He has authored or co-authored nearly two dozen books. His works are required reading at colleges and universities across the United States.

The co-author of *It didn't happen here*, Gary Marks, is a professor of political science at the University of North Carolina. He is a disciple of Lipset and is the author of a number of works dealing with European social democratic parties and trade unions.

This book advances no new arguments. Its central thesis boils down to the assertion that the absence of a mass social democratic or labor party in the US demonstrates that socialism is unrealizable in the heart of world capitalism.

It is significant that two prominent US academics come forward to attack the viability of a socialist perspective for the American working class at this time. After all, socialism has already been declared dead thousands of times over the past decade. The very fact that the authors feel the necessity to proclaim its death yet once more points not to the failure of socialism, but to its continued relevancy.

As the 2000 elections and the attacks on civil liberties following September 11, 2001 demonstrate, capitalist democracy is in deep crisis in the US. The ruling class can offer only the most reactionary solutions to the social contradictions that exist in the country. Sensing the buildup of popular disquiet, the spokesmen for American liberalism are mobilizing to cover up the significance of the shift to the right by the US ruling elite and its abandonment of any perspective of social reform.

The work is not a serious historical investigation of American socialism, even from a pro-capitalist perspective. It would take a book of substantial length to untangle all the confusion and half thought-out ideas it advances. Given that the authors are acclaimed as "leaders" in their field, their recent effort is further evidence of the crisis of the intelligentsia in the United States.

This reviewer will concentrate on what he considers the central historical and theoretical questions that are raised by Lipset and Marks.

In order to substantiate their thesis, the authors employ an ahistorical method of argument. There is no serious examination of the impact of the Russian Revolution on the US and international workers movement. No assessment of the defeats suffered by the working class in the 1920s and 1930s in Italy, Germany, Spain, China and other countries is made.

Further, the work takes as its starting point several unstated assumptions. The success or failure of socialism is implicitly defined as the existence of a reformist labor or social democratic party based on the trade unions. The perspective of a revolutionary socialist transformation in the United States or Europe is not even considered.

The authors make much of the failure of labor party reformism to even get off the ground in the US. However, this circumstance does not point to the failure of the socialist perspective. Instead it demonstrates the depth and intensity of social contradictions within US capitalism.

The United States has been the scene of some of the most violent class battles of any of the advanced capitalist countries. Consider the experiences of the US coal miners. Conflict with the employers and the state reached the point of virtual civil insurrection in incidents such as the Herrin massacre, the battle of Blair Mountain and many others.

The US ruling class furiously resisted trade union organization and any sign of the independent political organization of the working class. At the same time, it cultivated a privileged labor aristocracy, unrivaled in its corruption and servility.

Under these conditions the perspective of one-step-at-a-time reformism was never realistic in the United States. Given the sharp state of class contradictions, the emergence of a labor party in America would have almost immediately raised the prospect of civil war. For this reason the trade union bureaucracy opposed such a development and bent its efforts to keeping the working class tied to the Democratic Party.

The authors advance a simplistic, arithmetic, conception of politics. If reforms are impossible, they argue, then revolution is out of the question. In fact just the opposite is the case: the inability of capitalism to grant serious and lasting reforms places revolution on the historical agenda.

Lipset and Marks are well aware of the conservative character of the trade union bureaucracy and reformist social democracy and recognize the role of these organizations in promoting capitalist political stability. One gets the impression in reading the book that they lament the absence of a US version of the British Labor Party or the Canadian New Democratic Party.

They wax enthusiastic about all sorts of reformist schemes that sprang up at one time or another in the US, such as Upton Sinclair's End Poverty in California movement in the 1930s. The authors, however, are hostile to anything that smacks of principled working class politics. They are unsparing in their criticism of the Socialist Party in its early years, before it broke definitively with a revolutionary orientation. The authors assert that the party's rigid adherence to "orthodox Marxism" and its alleged sectarianism prevented it from forging an alliance with the trade unions, thus sabotaging whatever possibility existed for the creation of a mass reformist party.

To accuse American socialists of sectarianism for failing to form a trade

union-based labor party in alliance with the American Federation of Labor in the first decades of the twentieth century is reactionary and absurd. The great wealth of US capitalism enabled the ruling class to corrupt the trade union bureaucracy to an unprecedented degree, far surpassing anything seen in Europe. The conservative and complacent American aristocracy of labor has never shown the slightest interest in independent political action on a wide scale, let alone the capability for organizing such a step.

The Socialist Party emerged in a struggle against the pure and simple trade unionism of the American Federation of Labor. Whatever the political weaknesses of the Socialist Party, and there were many, it stands to the credit of men like Eugene V. Debs, Bill Haywood and other socialist militants that they bitterly opposed the American Federation of Labor headed by Samuel Gompers. The AFL, based for the most part on craft unions, was implacably hostile to blacks, immigrants, women, the unskilled and other oppressed sections of the working class. The great battles of the 1930s that led to the formation of industrial unions in the mass production industries were initiated and led by militant workers in direct opposition to the AFL bureaucracy.

Given the resurgence of US militarism it is highly significant that Lipset and Marks should focus their criticism of the American Socialist Party on its position during World War I, when the party refused to endorse the slaughter taking place in Europe. They write, "The sectarian character of the Socialist Party was acutely demonstrated by its response to World War I and the Russian Revolution. Before 1914, along with other socialist parties, the American Socialists opposed foreign wars as imperialist conflicts fought on behalf of capitalist interests. Yet socialists in the European democracies engaged in the war soon abandoned their commitment to internationalism and supported their government's war effort. The American Socialists were bitterly upset by this 'betrayal' and condemned their comrades in the belligerent nations who went along with war mobilization. Opposition to the war became a rallying call for the American party. Its 1914 campaign slogan was 'Every socialist ballot is protest against war.'" (p. 184).

Far from the scene of the actual fighting, there was much less pressure on the American Socialist Party to adapt to the patriotic pro-war hysteria. Further, the US remained officially neutral until 1917. Nevertheless, the principled opposition of Debs and other socialist leaders to American participation in World War I was a courageous act. The aging Debs was jailed for his anti-war speeches. He ran for US president from his prison cell in 1920 and won nearly one million votes, the largest vote total ever received by a socialist candidate in the United States. For their part, the authors demonstratively spit on this principled display of internationalism.

Through a sleight of hand, Lipset and Marks falsely attribute the collapse in Socialist Party membership following World War I to its opposition to the war. In fact the American Socialist Party was thrown into turmoil following World War I, not over its position on the war, but over the Russian Revolution. The Socialist Party majority voted to break with the Social Democratic (Second) International and affiliate with the newly founded Communist (Third) International. In doing so the majority broke with a right-wing rump headed by Morris Hillquit, Victor Berger and other reformist leaders.

In Europe, millions of workers disgusted by the betrayal of the "socialist" leaders who supported WWI and inspired by the Bolshevik Revolution left the social democratic parties and joined the newly founded sections of the Communist International. In Germany and a number of other European countries revolutionary struggles erupted, threatening the very existence of the capitalist order. This threat was beaten back with the assistance of the social democratic bureaucracy, which acted, quite literally, as hangman for the capitalists.

The authors simply ignore these events. They consider the Russian Revolution something too awful to merit consideration. Insofar as they discuss the policies of the Russian Bolsheviks, it is to make, from the

authors' standpoint, unflattering comparisons between the American socialists and Lenin. Thus they write, "Where socialist controlled unions were reasonably effective bargaining agents, they soon realized that it was worth struggling to improve conditions under the existing system of wage labor without pooling their resources for the final battle to eradicate capitalism. Only parties without union links thought otherwise.... Like the Russian Bolsheviks, the American Socialist party was isolated from the inherently broad reformist stream of trade unionism" (p. 201).

The authors devote only a single chapter to the activities of the American Communist Party and Socialist Party in the 1930s. Because of their refusal to make a serious assessment of the Russian Revolution and the subsequent degeneration of the Soviet regime under Stalinist leadership, they are unable to present a politically coherent account of the events of that turbulent decade. They claim that the election of Roosevelt in 1932 placed radicals in "an almost impossible" situation. "They faced the starkest possible choice between ideological purity, i.e., supporting a socialist alternative, and policy effectiveness, which would involve supporting Roosevelt" (p. 204).

While Roosevelt was a politician of undoubted skill, his New Deal policies could never have succeeded in co-opting masses of workers without the support of the US Communist Party, which threw the then considerable prestige of the Russian Revolution behind the Democratic Party administration. Further, Roosevelt had at his disposal the considerable resources of US capitalism, which enabled his administration to embark on a program of limited social reform at a time when a large part of the crisis-ridden European bourgeoisie was going over to fascism.

Indeed, while praising the American Communist Party for its lack of "sectarianism" (that is, its crude opportunism) the authors themselves are forced to concede that the party worked to block the formation of an independent party of the working class during the 1930s. Lipset and Marks write: "In effect, for the American Communists, in the United States the Popular Front became the Democratic Party. Though they took part in conferences to discuss forming a new national farmer-labor party or labor party, their role invariably was to oppose or to urge delay in creating a new third party. They favored continued support for the Democratic Party and appeared to have lost sight of their separate identity" (p. 221).

While less extensive than those in granted in Europe, the American ruling class made substantial concessions to the working class in the 1930s and again during the post-World War II economic boom. These included higher wages and benefits, cost-of-living adjustments, old-age pensions, civil rights legislation and laws regulating health and safety on the job. The Democratic Party, with the support and collaboration of the American trade union bureaucracy and the Stalinists, played the major role as agents of the reformist policies of the ruling class. In this respect, the Democrats played substantially the same role as the European social democratic parties.

Its support for the Democratic Party in the United States was only one facet of Stalinism's politically criminal role in the international proletariat. Falsely claiming to represent the continuity of the policies of the Bolshevik Party that led the Russian Revolution, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, through slander, intimidation and outright murder, sought to derail all revolutionary tendencies within the working class. Beginning with the Moscow purge trials of 1936, Stalin sought to physically annihilate the entire generation of Marxist workers and intellectuals that carried out the 1917 Russian Revolution. Its resources were directed in particular at wiping out the Left Opposition led by Trotsky, who had been exiled from the Soviet Union by Stalin in 1929. The murderous activities of the GPU (Soviet secret police) were not confined to Russia. The Stalinists murdered Trotsky's son Leon Sedov in Paris in 1938 and assassinated Trotsky in Mexico in 1940.

Stalinism wreaked havoc within the international workers movement. In

Spain the Communist Party terror apparatus even set up its own prisons and torture chambers aimed at silencing left-wing opponents of Stalinism. In the United States the American Communist Party was notorious for its free resort to physical violence to intimidate opponents within the labor movement.

The only reference the authors make to the role of the American Trotskyists is in relation to their decision to enter the US Socialist Party headed by Norman Thomas. The maneuver was a success, and resulted in the Trotskyists winning the majority of the socialist youth. It helped prepare the basis for the founding of the Socialist Workers Party as the US Trotskyist movement in January 1938.

The Trotskyist movement played a critical political role that is ignored by the authors, as it is by virtually all bourgeois historians. That is because the Trotskyists alone, of all tendencies on the left, advanced a clear revolutionary alternative to the policies of the Social Democracy and the Stalinist Communist International.

They exposed the terrible degeneration of the Communist Party under Stalinist leadership. Stalin had crushed workers democracy and substituted a regime of bureaucratic absolutism. The Soviet bureaucracy had abandoned the Leninist perspective of world revolution in favor of the reactionary nationalist perspective of building “socialism in one country.” In order to defend its own narrow interests, the bureaucracy in the Soviet Union used the various Communist parties around the world as pawns in its diplomatic maneuvers with the major capitalist powers. In the United States this took the form of the American Communist Party seeking to subordinate the working class to the Roosevelt administration.

The American Trotskyists fought to mobilize the working class independently of the Democratic Party and the trade union bureaucracy. This was exemplified in the Trotskyists’ leadership of the Minneapolis strikes of 1934, a crucial struggle which helped pave the way for the formation of the mass industrial union movement in the United States.

It is incorrect to imply, as do Lipset and Marks, that the first and necessary step for the American working class is the formation of a reformist labor party. It is true that in response to the growth of the mass industrial unions during the 1930s Trotsky proposed that the Socialist Workers Party advocate the construction of a labor party as a means of exposing the political subservience of the labor bureaucracy to the Democratic Party and the capitalist state. However, Trotsky made it clear that the movement should in no way advocate the building of a reformist labor party along the lines of the party in Britain. He rejected the idea that the American working class had to inevitably pass through a reformist stage of development on its way to Marxist politics

Trotsky explained that the refusal of the American trade union bureaucracy to build a labor party did not indicate the futility of the struggle for socialism in the United States. Instead he said it expressed the depth of class contradictions in the center of world capitalism. He wrote, “If the official leaders of the trade unions, in spite of the imperious voice of the situation and the growing pressure of the masses, hold back on the question of a labor party, it is precisely because the deep social crisis of bourgeois society now imparts to the question of the labor party a considerably greater degree of sharpness than in all preceding periods.”

The Achilles heel of American imperialism, Trotsky went on to explain, was that its rise to supremacy occurred in the period of the overall decay of world capitalism. As US capitalism expanded, it was compelled to subsume within itself all of the contradictions of the profit system on a world scale.

This underscores another fundamental flaw in the analysis of Lipset and Marks. In pointing to the alleged exceptionalism of the United States, they fail entirely to take into account the unique role of American capitalism as the dominant world power. The emergence of the United States as an economic colossus following World War I and its even greater hegemony following World War II imparted to America the role of defender of the

world capitalist order. The survival of capitalism in the period following the World Wars depended to a large degree on the ability of the United States to prop up the tottering capitalist regimes in Europe and Japan.

The question the authors fail to consider is: What will be the impact on capitalism of a meltdown at its heart, the United States? The United States is passing today through a political crisis of unprecedented scope. First came the failed attempt to impeach Bill Clinton on the basis of a trumped-up sex scandal. Then came the antidemocratic suppression of votes in Florida by the Supreme Court and the handing of the election to George W. Bush. Since the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington the Bush administration, with the support of Congress and the media, has moved rapidly to establish the juridical framework for a police state in the US.

For most of the twentieth century the United States served as the economic and political stronghold of capitalist counterrevolution. However, for the most part, US capitalism was able to mask its predatory aims under the disguise of fighting for peace and democracy.

In the decades of the Cold War the United States could, with some success, counterpose its democracy, however constricted by the power of great wealth, to the despotic methods of the Soviet regime, which both the Stalinist bureaucracy and the capitalists presented to the working class as the realization of “socialism.” (Lipset and Marks try to have it both ways—they share the conventional anticommunist framework, yet seek to analyze the history of socialism in America as though it had nothing to do with the experience of the Russian Revolution).

With the assault on civil liberties under way in the US and all the major capitalist countries, capitalism is dropping its democratic disguise and surrendering one of its most important ideological weapons against socialism. This heralds a period of increasing class conflict and interest in revolutionary ideas in the United States and internationally. In preparing for these developments one of the central tasks of socialists is to expose the distortions and outright falsifications of history advanced by official sociology and political science.



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