

Questions on socialist organisation and planning

Nick Beams
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Dear Sir/Madam,

I have a few questions I was hoping you could answer.

* The capitalist would not surrender their infrastructure voluntarily so how would the people go about taking it over?

* I understand there would be workers' councils at local, regional and national levels. How would these councils be formed, lead and run?

* Would the council at national level form the government? If so, would a single individual lead the government or would a collective of representatives lead it?

* Even if you have workers' councils, it is still possible for the representatives to influence the workers for their own gain. Therefore, how would the formation of a bureaucracy be countered?

* Who would carry out the policing, how would it be carried out and who would have immediate authority over them?

* How would legislation be drafted, i.e., how would the people be actively involved in the process?

* Who would develop the national plan and how would it be developed?

I look forward to your reply,

HSB

Dear HSB,

It is certainly the case that the capitalist class will not voluntarily cede political power and the establishment of socialism will take place through a revolution. It is impossible to say in advance exactly how such a struggle will proceed. What one can say is that the new state structure will undoubtedly be based on the organisations formed in the course of the political struggle against the old ruling classes.

Historically these organisations have taken the form of workers' councils. Precisely what form they will assume in the 21st century is difficult to say. There have been many changes in economic organisation and the structure of the workforce since the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the revolutionary struggles of the working class in the Europe of the 1920s.

While it is not possible to determine in advance the forms

of organisation that will emerge in the course of a series of economic and political struggles, there is no question that, given the vast changes in the economy over the past decades, they will involve the broad mass of the population. Some may be based on workplaces and others may well emerge in the course of struggles involving people in definite localities, or around particular issues.

Before turning to your series of questions, let me make a general point. At the centre of the socialist transformation of society is the return of political and economic power into the hands of the working people—now, more than ever before, the overwhelming majority of the population.

Marx explained that the Paris Commune of 1871 involved the “reabsorption of the state power by society as its own living forces instead of as forces controlling and subduing it, by the popular masses themselves, forming their own political force instead of the organised force of their suppression (Marx, *On the Paris Commune* p.153).” It was, therefore, a government of the people by the people.

This analysis of Marx has acquired immense significance for the situation we presently confront. The establishment of new forms of social organisation, in which the broad mass of the population are actively involved in the running of the economy and society as an integral part of the daily lives is not some kind of dream but has become a practical necessity.

The human society of the 21st century, developing out of the vast changes in production over the past 200 years and all that has resulted from this, is an extremely complex organism and has outgrown the capitalist social relations within which it developed.

In fact, the continued subordination of society to the logic of the capitalist market—in which such complex questions as health, education, care of the aged, the allocation of resources, the planning of cities, the care of the land and environment, the provision of decent living standards for all, etc., etc., are determined by the drive to accumulate private profit—can only bring one disaster after another. Nor can these problems be resolved through the creation of a

revamped welfare state in which some kind of bureaucratic apparatus undertakes social and economic organisation.

I trust this brief exposition will make clear that it is impossible in advance to answer your questions on the forms of organisation and the relationships between them. This is because these new forms of political power will not develop according to some already developed plan to which society must conform.

Rather, they will emerge as the outcome of social and political struggles involving millions of people. After all, the soviets or workers' councils which first made their appearance in the 1905 revolution in Russia did not develop according to a plan devised by the Bolshevik party but arose in the struggle against the czarist regime. Marx explained that the secret of the Paris Commune was that it was "a working class government, the produce of the struggle of the producing against the appropriating class, the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of Labour" (Marx, *On the Paris Commune*, p.75).

The political forms necessary for carrying out this task will have to be "discovered" in the 21st century in the course of broad social struggle against capitalism. While it is impossible to set out a kind of blueprint, certain general principles have been established.

The chief safeguard against the formation of bureaucracy is the active involvement of the whole population in the running of society. Of course, certain representative organisations will probably still be necessary. Those representatives will be subject to recall by those who elected them and their wages will not be higher than the average.

With the development the advanced communications systems of today it would certainly be possible to involve the whole population in the discussion, formulation and drafting of policies on a continuous basis. In other words, the formulation of policy and the "policing", as you put it, of its implementation would be carried out by the mass of the population acting through the various organisations they had created.

In order to further clarify the issues you have raised let me cite a passage from an extremely valuable work by Richard N. Hunt.

"If we were to read of a society," he writes, "in which there existed a 'union of town and country'; where 'civil rights implied civil duties'; whose ideal of democracy 'requires that all citizens not only shall be the sovereign power but shall in fact rule'; where this goal was accomplished by making all offices 'generally accessible and by constantly changing the holders'; where 'all officials were elected' and there resulted 'the greatest possible turn-over within the citizen body in the holders of office'; where

as a consequence there was no 'bureaucratic hierarchy' but 'every official was no more than a citizen, accidentally, as it were, for a limited period engaged in some special service for the state'; where all these practices created a 'political life that was the very life and nature of the citizens', an 'identity of citizens with the state', an 'identity of state and society'—if we were to read these things, we might be sure it was Marx describing the classless society. But in fact it is a description of Periclean Athens written by the German-educated classicist, Victor Ehrenberg" (Hunt, *The Political Ideas of Marx and Engels*, Volume II, p. 254).

Of course, Greek democracy rested on slavery, which made it possible for citizens to take part in public affairs. In general, as Engels draws out, throughout human history where there is a low productivity of labour there develops a special class that looks after the common affairs of society.

However this state of affairs has now changed. Today "the immense increase of the productive forces attained by modern industry has made it possible to distribute labour among all members of society without exception, and thereby to limit the labour-time of each individual member to such an extent that all have enough free time to take part in the general—both theoretical and practical—affairs of society" (Engels, *Anti-Duhring*, pp. 217-218).

One point on your question regarding the development of a national plan: It would be wrong to conceive of socialist society as a series of nations each with their own national plan. On the contrary, socialist society will emerge as the outcome of an international struggle by the working class in which it will have to develop new forms of global organisation in order to prosecute the struggle against global capitalism. Moreover, the development of globalised production, the higher development of the international division of labour, and the impossibility of dealing with a whole host of problems—the control of the environment, the fight against disease to name but two—mean that planning will have to be undertaken on a global scale as well.

Yours sincerely,
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