Twenty years since the fall of the Berlin Wall

Statement of the Bund Sozialistischer Arbeiter, October 18, 1989—Part 2

Overthrow the Stalinist bureaucracy! Build workers' councils in East Germany!

6 November 2009

Twenty years ago, on November 4, 1989, witnessed the biggest demonstration in the history of East Germany (German Democratic Republic, GDR). Approximately 1 million people gathered in the centre of East Berlin to protest against the ruling Stalinist bureaucracy.

The demonstration in Berlin was the peak of a wave of protests that had begun in Leipzig two months previously and had grown week by week. The Stalinist SED (Socialist Unity Party) regime had already resigned at this point. On October 18, the Politburo head and long-time state council chairman, Erich Honecker, was replaced by Egon Krenz. Shortly afterwards other despised SED functionaries, such as Erich Mielke, head of the GDR secret police, the Stasi, and Kurt Hager, the party's head of propaganda, also resigned from their posts.

On November 9, five days after the mass demonstration in Berlin, the SED opened up the Berlin Wall. This began the process of the dissolution of the GDR, which, following a joint treaty and currency union with the west of the country, eventually ended with the reunification of Germany.

At the November 4 demonstration, however, there was no mention made of such a course of events. Instead, the mass protest took the form of political and social opposition to the Stalinist regime, and was dominated by such slogans as: Free elections! Resignation of the government! Abolition of the SED's monopoly on power! Abolition of the privileges of the party and state functionaries! Dissolution of the Stasi!

The speakers at the Berlin demonstration were representatives of the petty-bourgeois opposition in East Germany and consisted of artists, priests and lawyers who sought to defuse the anger and concerns of those attending by appealing for a "dialogue" with the regime. Those organising the demonstration also allowed prominent members of the SED to speak, including Gregor Gysi, Günter Schabowski and the long-time assistant head of the Stasi, Markus Wolf.

The Bund Sozialistischer Arbeiter (Socialist Workers League), the predecessor of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party of Germany), distributed an appeal at the demonstration in the form of a pamphlet. Prior to the demonstration, thousands of copies of this appeal had been smuggled across the east-west border, which was still closed at this point. As a Trotskyist party, the Bund Sozialistischer Arbeiter (BSA) fought against the Stalinist regime from a left standpoint and had been banned from conducting any activity since the foundation of the East German state in 1949. The SED conducted an uncompromising campaign of repression against any underground oppositional movements, while at the same time establishing close ties with the West German federal republic and its leading political figures—Willy Brandt, Helmut Schmidt, Helmut Kohl and Franz Josef Strauß—from the 1970s onwards.

The BSA was the only political tendency to put forward a program of opposition to the Stalinist bureaucracy based on an international socialist perspective. The party's warning of the catastrophic social consequences of the introduction of capitalism, which would in turn inaugurate a new period of imperialist conflicts and wars, has been completely vindicated by the course of events.

The appeal issued by the BSA welcomed the opposition to the GDR regime. It stressed the connection between the crisis in the GDR and the crisis of world capitalism, whose "most important political prop" for the previous six decades had been precisely the Stalinist bureaucracies. The allies in the struggle against the SED were therefore neither "Gorbachev, the leader of the Stalinist headquarters in Moscow, nor Western capitalist politicians, nor the Social Democratic Party or union bureaucrats, but only the international working class."

On the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall we are republishing this appeal. In the coming days and weeks the WSWS will publish a series of articles dealing with the background and results of the reunification of Germany, further reports and commentaries relating to the 20th anniversary, as well as additional material from the archives of the BSA.

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This statement by the Central Committee of the Bund Sozialistischer Arbeiter, the predecessor of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit, was published on October 18, 1989, in the BSA's newspaper, Neue Arbeiterpresse. *Below we post the second of three parts of the statement.* Part 1 *was posted November 5.*

The counterrevolutionary role of Stalinism

The working class in East Germany, the Soviet Union and throughout Eastern Europe is confronted not with the failure of Marxism or the shipwreck of socialism, but with the historical bankruptcy of Stalinism! Stalinism has its roots in the rise of the bureaucracy, a parasitic layer first in the state and then the party apparatus of the first workers state, during

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the 1920s and 1930s. After the October Revolution, the defeats of the world revolution and the ensuing isolation and weakening of the Soviet proletariat enabled this layer, which found its political mouthpiece and representative in Stalin, to consolidate its parasitic existence in the Soviet Union, destroy Lenin's party and gag the working class, depriving it of its political rights.

More and more, the international policies of the bureaucracy were determined by its interest in preventing any extension of the socialist revolution to other countries. The program of world socialist revolution was suppressed and replaced by the reactionary, nationalist program of "building socialism in one country." The revolutionary Marxists were persecuted and murdered and all the leaders of the October Revolution were executed during the Moscow Trials.

The Communist International (Comintern) was turned from an instrument of the working class for the conquest of workers' power into a servile instrument of the Kremlin bureaucracy and its foreign policies. Its leaders were replaced by obedient lackeys and henchmen of Stalin. Those members who were devoted to the revolutionary traditions of Marxism or represented even the slightest opposition to the policies of Stalin were expelled, turned over to the Nazis, or liquidated by Stalin's secret police during the Spanish Civil War. Those who had fled from the Nazis into the Soviet Union were murdered or deported to the Siberian camps.

Only the Left Opposition led by Leon Trotsky and the Fourth International, which he founded in 1938, have since defended the program of world socialist revolution in the international workers' movement.

The Stalinist bureaucracy had become the main counterrevolutionary pillar of imperialism within the international workers movement. This was proven by the historic betrayal of the KPD (Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands—Communist Party of Germany) and Comintern leadership in 1933, which enabled the Nazis to take power without a fight in Germany, and afterwards the Popular Front policies which Stalin devised to defend capitalist "democracy" of the bourgeois state against the working class, as in the Spanish Civil War and in France.

The origins and class nature of the East German state

The East German bureaucracy stands directly in this counterrevolutionary tradition of the Kremlin bureaucracy. It was installed as their instrument. It is a product of the agreements that Stalin concluded with the imperialists in Yalta and Potsdam. On the part of the imperialists, as well as the Kremlin bureaucrats, these agreements were dictated entirely by their fear of revolutionary developments within the working class.

Moscow pledged to suppress every revolutionary movement with the help of its servile party apparatuses in the respective countries, guaranteeing imperialist rule in the imperialist "zones of influence." In return, the Moscow bureaucracy obtained the agreement of the American, French and British imperialists to have its own "zone of influence" in Eastern Europe, where it intended to establish "buffer states" for the protection of the Soviet Union against further attacks and wars. The revolutions in Greece, Italy, France, Persia, Vietnam, Japan and many other countries fell victim to these agreements, by which the Stalinist bureaucracy hoped to achieve peaceful coexistence with imperialism at the expense of the international working class.

Central to this conspiracy was the partition and military control of the German working class. The Kremlin bureaucracy feared a renewal of the working class's strength and revolutionary potential no less than the imperialists themselves, because a revolutionary uprising in Germany would have immediately mobilized the working class in the USSR and strengthened its fight for the overthrow of the bureaucracy in the Soviet Union.

The partition of Germany, therefore, is not a national question, but a class question! In the zones occupied by the Western allies, the state apparatus, police, judiciary and secret services were taken over from the Nazis essentially unaltered and corporate bosses like Krupp, Thyssen and Siemens, and Nazi bankers like H.J. Abs, were all soon returned to their old positions. Neither did the Stalinist bureaucracy strive to smash and expropriate German capital, which had provoked two world wars. Rather, their aim was to split and weaken the working class. In the Eastern zone occupied by the Soviet Army, Stalin and his representatives were far from mobilizing the working class for socialist revolution. Quite the contrary: the document calling for the refounding of the KPD in 1945 declared its aim to be a "democratic capitalism," which would guarantee the right to private ownership of the means of production, protect "free enterprise" and condemn the working class to "learn bourgeois democracy."

In order to put this reactionary program into effect, the Ulbricht group was brought in from Moscow. Its members were, like Walter Ulbricht, handpicked and absolutely obedient creatures of Stalin or had, like Wilhelm Zaisser and Franz Dahlem, been tested and approved as henchmen of the Stalinist secret police in the Spanish Civil War. This group found allies among social democratic bureaucrats like Otto Grotewohl, who were united with the Stalinists in their hostility towards a socialist revolution and in their aim of a "democratic capitalism."

Their common enemy was the working class, which in a powerful spontaneous movement strove to put an end to capitalism, the source of war and fascism. Workers threw old capitalists and their bosses out of the factories, and built factory councils in order to control production and get it going again. Based on the Stalinist secret service and the Soviet military power, the Stalinists around Ulbricht then began to build a police-state apparatus, in order to control this movement of the working class.

When faced with the renewed economic and military offensive against the Soviet Union, initiated by the imperialists in 1947-48 with the cold war and the Marshall Plan, the Stalinist bureaucracy in Moscow felt compelled to abandon its plans for the building of "democratic capitalist" regimes in the buffer states and replaced them by the no less reactionary program of "building socialism in one country," or rather half a country. Under the pressure of the working class, the bureaucracy carried out extensive nationalizations and initiated the building of a centrally planned economy. However, at the same time, the bureaucracy feared the imminent mobilization of the working class, which was strengthened by these measures. The bureaucracy therefore bureaucratically suppressed and nipped in the bud any independent activities and political movement of the working class.

Thus, the gains of the October Revolution of 1917 were extended to Eastern Europe, but not through the conscious, revolutionary actions of the working class and its independent organs of power, but through an almighty bureaucracy attempting to uphold its grip over the working class and prevent such socialist consciousness and revolutionary actions. The working class was prescribed its "salvation" from above, and it was handed down by the police boot.

The Trotskyist movement has, therefore, always emphasized the completely deformed nature of these workers' states in Eastern Europe, like East Germany, which originate from the counterrevolutionary maneuvers of the Stalinist bureaucracy, and not from a socialist revolution by the working class. The economically progressive content of the introduction of a planned economy weighs far less in history than the immense damage the Stalinist bureaucracy inflicted on the consciousness of the world proletariat by discrediting the perspectives of socialism, thus

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throwing back the world socialist revolution for decades.

The nature of the Ulbricht-Honecker regime as completely hostile to the workers was expressed openly just after they had proclaimed the "building of socialism in the GDR." In June 1953, the uprising of hundreds of thousands of workers was crushed by Soviet tanks, more than 200 workers were shot and thousands imprisoned. The bureaucracy in East Berlin lost whatever had been left of its political credibility, as did the Kremlin bureaucracy. Up to then, Moscow had still commanded some respect among the working class due to the victory of the Red Army over Hitler fascism and the threat from restored and rearmed German imperialism.

Whatever concessions to raise living standards the Stalinist bureaucracy later was forced to grant to the working class in order to stabilize its own rule, these concessions never signified a political reform to involve the masses of the working class in the formation and organization of society through independent organs of workers' democracy. Not only did the ruling caste misuse the centrally planned economy for their own positions and personal enrichment, they also systematically broadened their own social base against the working class by granting privileged positions in the state and economy to a growing horde of elements from the petty bourgeoisie, the intelligentsia and the upper strata of the working class. Or these elements were made the "poets laureate" or "state athletes" in the "cultural life" of the bureaucracy.

All the bureaucracy's contentions that "socialism has been realized," or about "socialism in real existence" have always merely served to veil the truth: the working class is oppressed; the very limited and bureaucratically effected reforms carried out under the pressure of the working class during the late 1940s, the nationalizations and elements of a planned state economy were increasingly undermined; and, finally, the Stalinist bureaucracy in East Berlin was functioning above all as a pillar and agency of imperialism against the international working class.

Nothing demonstrated more drastically this counterrevolutionary role of the Stalinist GDR bureaucracy than the erection of the Berlin Wall, which sealed the borders of East Germany and deprived the working class of every possibility to evade the bureaucratic oppression. The wall was nothing but a measure to uphold the agreements and strategies of Potsdam and Yalta against a working class whose strength and self-confidence had grown since the end of the war. It resulted in the consolidation not only of the power of the bureaucracy within East Germany, but also of West German capitalism. During the years when the Adenauer-Erhard government was thrown into the deepest political crisis since the end of the war, through the Spiegel scandal and the first great recession, the bureaucracy in East Berlin always provided them with sufficient material for anticommunism, which the social democratic bureaucracy needed to subordinate the West German working class to the Adenauer-Erhard government and later to the Great Coalition and the capitalist SPD/FDP (Liberals) government.

Contrary to the Stalinist propaganda about an "antifascist protecting bulwark against imperialism," the confinement of the working class in East Germany enabled the Ulbricht regime to take the first economic steps towards a restoration of capitalism. In the Soviet Union, the attempt to introduce on a broad scale capitalist methods for increasing labor productivity, the so-called Liberman reforms, was met by fierce resistance from the working class. The strikes and demonstrations in the industrial centers led eventually to the overthrow of Khrushchev. Ulbricht, however, was able to effect these measures under the "New Economic System": the reintroduction of incentive wages, which had been abolished in 1945 by the working class and its factory councils in most workplaces, on a broad scale; the profit orientation of every individual factory; and even the dependence of wages on the profit made by the individual plant.

However, during the early 1960s, the bureaucracy already felt compelled to reverse this decentralization and initial dismantling of the planned economy. Then they were deeply shocked by the struggles of the working class in Czechoslovakia (1968) and Poland (1970) against the ruling bureaucracies and by the powerful mobilization of the Western European and international working class against capitalism, which had culminated in the general strike of May-June 1968, had toppled numerous dictatorships as in Greece and Portugal and brought about the first SPD government in West Germany. The SED leadership replaced Ulbricht by Honecker and tried to consolidate its rule through extensive concessions to the working class, subsidizing food and housing. At the same time, the regime intensified its collaboration with the West German capitalists in the framework of the latter's "new Eastern policies" (ostpolitik).

The sources of and solution to the present crisis in East Germany

The present economic crisis in East Germany, throughout Eastern Europe and in the Soviet Union is a direct product of the Stalinist policy of "building socialism in a single country."

The economy of these degenerated and deformed workers states was isolated from the development of the productive forces, separated from the international division of labor and the resources of world economy. It was squeezed into the economically and historically bankrupt straitjacket of national states. This resulted in ever-sharper economic irregularities, shortages and social antagonisms.

Since the early 1980s, the consequences of the capitalist world economic crisis for the COMECON states—the fall of the price of oil, worsened conditions for export on the world market and, therefore, a drastic decline of foreign currency earnings—destroyed all room for the bureaucracy to manoeuvre and make concessions to the working class. The revolutionary implications of this situation, the mortal danger it posed to the Stalinist bureaucracy, immediately came to light in the mass movement of the working class in Poland in 1980-81.

There are only two ways to overcome this economic crisis in the Soviet Union and the Eastern European countries, which is rooted in their isolation from the resources of the world market.

One is the capitalist way, that is, the reintegration of these states into the capitalist world market through the reintroduction of capitalist property relations and exploitation. This would mean the transformation of the Stalinist bureaucracy, basing itself on the imperialist banks and corporations in the West and on the upper layers of the petty bourgeoisie in their own country, into a new ruling capitalist class.

Or, there is the socialist way, which is the defence of the planned state economy and the purging of all its bureaucratic deformations, by the overthrow of the Stalinist bureaucracy and the extension of the socialist property relations to the rest of the world, through the completion of the world socialist revolution.

The danger of capitalist restoration

The first road, the road of counterrevolutionary restoration of capitalism, is being taken by the Kremlin bureaucracy under Gorbachev, by Jaruzelski in Poland and the Stalinists in Hungary. In doing so, Gorbachev is drawing the conclusions from the events in Poland in 1980-81.

The opposition movement in East Germany, and especially the miners strike in the Soviet Union and the struggles of the Chinese working class,

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demonstrate that the working class in these countries has also begun to break the straitjackets of oppression and national isolation and rise against the bureaucracy.

The most conscious and right-wing elements of the bureaucracy led by Gorbachev are trying to pre-empt this process and to save the rule of the bureaucracy by completing the bourgeois reaction which began with the rise of the bureaucracy during the 1920s and 1930s, but has not yet succeeded in destroying the gains of the October Revolution. They are attempting to reintroduce capitalist property relations and exploitation through integrating the workers' states into the capitalist world market.

With the removal of Erich Honecker and Guenter Mittag, who had been responsible for economy in the government, the SED leadership in East Germany has made it clear that it, too, has begun Gorbachev's course. Based on their long-standing close connections to Western corporations and banks, the new leadership also will try to abolish even the very limited reforms and economic concessions which were bound up with the nationalized property relations and the planned economy, to reintroduce capitalism and, in doing so, to transform the bureaucracy into a new ruling capitalist class.

Already, the bureaucrats in East Berlin, Leipzig and Dresden are using the call for "reforms" to demand "more efficiency" and "incentive wages" in the factories. What they have in mind, however, is not the abolition of the privileges and posts of the bureaucrats, who are not in the least efficient. They speak, rather, about splitting the work force through bonuses and wage differentiation. In this way, they seek to increase labour productivity and integrate the country into the capitalist world market. They are highly conscious of the revolutionary implications of this course and the threat this poses to their rule, which is why they chose the head of the police and security apparatus, Egon Krenz, as their new leader.

The position of the East German economy in the world economy is driving the SED bureaucracy inexorably in that direction. Despite the reactionary Stalinist fiction of "building socialism in one" or rather half, a country, the East German economy, similar to that of West Germany (Federal Republic of Germany, FRG), is highly dependent on export. More than half the national income stems from export earnings on the world market (the world average is 17 percent). Up to now, more than two-thirds of these exports have gone into the COMECON states.

But the USSR, which alone accounts for 40 percent of East German foreign trade, is presently, just like Poland, orienting its foreign trade towards the capitalist West and promoting a capitalist market economy in Eastern Europe. Individual firms are taking the place of the Soviet state planning authorities, whose fixed planning figures used to provide the basis for the development of GDR industry. The new individual firms now demand lower prices and higher quality, according to the levels on the world market. They are not bound by contracts between the states and can, therefore, threaten to break off all trade relations.

In the past, it was the foreign trade with the COMECON countries that enabled the Stalinist bureaucracy to make concessions to the working class in East Germany, as far as living standards were concerned. But the capitalist restorationist course of the Eastern European trade partners is causing this source of income to dry up, and the irreconcilable opposition between the interests of the ruling parasitic layer and the strivings of the working class is coming to the surface.

The fact that East German industry is hopelessly outmoded compared to the world market could be covered up as long as the country still had a relatively higher productivity than its Eastern European partners and would, therefore, always find buyers for its products. But now the COMECON is falling apart, and every national regime wants to import modern technology and machinery from the West. All they still want from East Germany are consumer goods, but there is a great shortage in East Germany itself.

As far as East German industry's internal capacity for innovation is concerned, the "independent development of a mega chip" (which cannot be produced industrially before at least 1992), celebrated by Honecker in a ridiculous television show, cannot conceal that this capacity has dropped sharply due to the isolation from the international development of technology. The existence of the bureaucratic apparatus of parasites, who oppress the working class, turns out to be the greatest obstacle for the development of the productive forces and a harmonious growth of the economy.

The speed with which the Eastern European countries, including East Germany, have followed Gorbachev's course of capitalist restoration demonstrates that the nationalizations and steps towards a planned economy carried out by the bureaucracy in the late 1940s did not in any way represent a final solution to the problems of the working class, but were highly transitory and ephemeral. The fate of these workers states depends solely on the working class and its ability to overthrow the Stalinist bureaucracy in a political revolution, build its own organs of power and unite with the working class in the capitalist West in the struggle against imperialism and its bureaucratic agencies.

To be continued

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