

# THE SACP'S RESTRUCTURING OF COMMUNIST THEORY

## A SHIFT TO THE RIGHT

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In January 1990, Joe Slovo, General Secretary of the SACP, published a lengthy discussion paper entitled 'Has socialism failed?' (Slovo, 1990). The purpose of this paper, prompted most immediately by the collapse of the 'Communist' regimes of Eastern Europe, was to grapple with and explain the incredible circumstances that led to the popular overthrow of the SACP's counterparts. This painful task was undertaken to enable the party and its supporters to come to terms with what had gone wrong in the Soviet Union and other Eastern bloc countries, and accordingly restructure its theoretical paradigm and practice in order to avoid the pitfalls that eventually engulfed much of the socialist world.

Slovo's intervention provoked a surprising number of incisive and innovative responses. But the one that clearly stands out is Pallo Jordan's 'The Crisis of Conscience in the SACP' (1990).<sup>1</sup> Jordan's principal critique of Slovo is that he confines himself to a mere description of the crises and the atrocities of Stalinism. Yet the task facing Marxists is to 'uncover the reality that lies hidden behind appearances', and to explain what had led to the atrocities we now condemn. In attempting to fulfill this task, Jordan draws extensively on the analysis of the Soviet oppositional movements to Stalin that collected around Trotsky/Zinoviev and Bukharin in the 1920s and 1930s.

For Jordan, it was 'the uncanny synchronisation of chance and causality' that led to the dictatorship of Stalin. Utilising the tools of historical materialism, he explains the emergence of the phenomenon of Stalinism as the product of the imperatives of primitive socialist accumulation. The low level of economic development in the Soviet Union, the disintegration of the urban proletariat through war and famine, the outlawing of factions in the Bolshevik Party, together with accidents of history such as the death of Lenin, all contributed to the emergence of a bureaucratic stratum, which, while not owning the means of production, nevertheless controlled and consumed the social surplus produced by the working class. This bureaucratic caste ruled in the name of the working class, and eroded its confidence in the party. It is this lack of legitimacy in the

party that constitutes the essential core of the crisis faced by the Communist regimes of Eastern Europe (Jordan, 1990).

But whilst 'The crisis of conscience in the SACP' is an impressive alternative analysis of the emergence of Stalinism, it is not a complete critique of 'Has socialism failed?' Jordan purposefully limited his critique to providing an alternative analysis of the bureaucratic degeneration of the October Revolution and the emergence of Stalinism. He did not subject Slovo's immediate proposals for the SACP to a critical review. But this is imperative, for Slovo's task in trying to understand the failures of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union is to learn from these lessons and restructure the theory and practice of the SACP.

The objective of this paper is to analyse this restructuring of communist theory and practice. Attempting to build on the critique of Jordan, it subjects Slovo's theoretical and practical proposals for the SACP to a critical review. In its attempts to identify the major features of this theoretical restructuring, it does not only confine itself to 'Has socialism failed?' but also looks at other documents and statements of the party and its leadership.<sup>1</sup>

### **The SACP: reassessing communist theory and practice**

The reassessment of Communist theory and practice has been prompted by the desire to distance the SACP from the heritage of Stalinism over the last few years. In 'Has socialism failed?' Slovo blames Stalinism for the tattered condition of the 'socialist world'. Stalinism, viewed by Slovo as 'socialism without democracy' (Slovo, 1990:12), is seen as having deprived producers of real control and participation in economic and political life, and thereby entrenching a form of 'socialist alienation'. It is this 'socialist alienation' that lies at the root of the structural crises that confront the socialist world today.

This rejection of Stalinism has forced the SACP to come out clearly and unequivocally in support of inner-party democracy and political pluralism. Rejecting those that defend Stalinism as a dying breed, Slovo, in 'Has socialism failed?', commits his organisation to the principles of inner-party democracy. This commitment was reaffirmed in a recent issue of *Umsebenzi* which argued forcefully for the right of criticism, self-criticism, free and fair elections to leadership, and the maximum possible information flow and consultation within the organisation. The journal goes on to say that 'it is vital that the spirit of democratic tolerance should be understood and practiced by every member at whatever level of our structures' (*Umsebenzi*, nd:3).

This re-emphasis on democracy also extends to the organisation's external relations. *The Path To Power*, the programme adopted at the 7th Congress of the Party in 1989, argues that

a Communist Party does not earn the honoured title of vanguard

by proclaiming it. Nor does its claim to be the upholder and custodian of Marxism-Leninism give it a monopoly of political wisdom or a natural right to exclusive control of the struggle. At each stage of its political life, guided by a correct application of Marxist revolutionary theory, a Party must win its place by its superior efforts of leadership and its devotion to the revolutionary cause (1989:43).

Slovo carries a similar message in 'Has socialism failed?', when he says (1990:28):

...because experience has shown that an institutionalised one party state has a strong propensity for authoritarianism, we remain protagonists of multi-party post-apartheid democracy both in the national democratic and socialist phases.

But what is the nature and form of this political pluralism? Indications of what is meant are expressed when Slovo questions (but does not refute) the historical validity of the dictatorship of the proletariat in the transition to socialism. It is further suggested, when he argues that should there exist real democracy in the post-apartheid society, then 'the way will be open for a peaceful transition towards our ultimate objective - a socialist South Africa.... It is perfectly legitimate and desirable for a party claiming to be the political instrument of the working class to lead its constituency in democratic contest for political power against other parties and groups representing other social forces' (1990:28).

The essential message that Slovo tries to impart here is that it is possible to achieve socialism through participation in a real democratic political process. But what does Slovo mean by the existence of 'real democracy'? Posing this question is imperative, for the concept of democracy has today become a political whore passionately embraced by ideological clients of all political persuasions.<sup>2</sup>

In any event, does Slovo's use of the term denote 'bourgeois democracy' in the form of a representative system - a system on which the advanced capitalist democracies of the 'First World' are modelled? Or does Slovo use the term to mean a form of working class or socialist democracy which is based on the delegate system and allows the producers of society unfettered control over the economic and political destiny of that society? If Slovo used the term to mean the latter, then this form of democracy is only truly attainable within a socialist society. However, since Slovo attempts to distinguish between a post-apartheid and socialist South Africa, it seems fair to presume that he uses the term to denote some form of bourgeois democracy that guarantees all citizens, without exception, the right to vote and elect representatives to the governing political structure.

The essence of Slovo's message then is that it is possible to achieve socialism

through participation in the channels of a 'normal' bourgeois political process. The conquest of state power is conceived here as occurring primarily through winning a substantial majority within parliament. This line of thinking seems to be in accordance with that of the majority of the SACP leadership. The latter, when confronted with the question of the viability of the parliamentary road to socialism after the achievement of national liberation, responded by saying:

the struggle against capitalism and for an advance to socialism, will obviously be taking place in a completely new context.... the parliamentary road can never be separated from extra-parliamentary struggle, but it is certainly a possible projection (*WIP*, 60).

Clearly then, the organisation views a parliamentary transition to socialism as a concrete possibility if 'normal' democratic rights are achieved within a post-apartheid society.

The revision of Communist theory, however, is not only limited to strategies for the transition to socialism. It also extends to the form and nature of the socialist society itself. In an article published in the *Weekly Mail*, Slovo argues that 'if we have learnt anything from the economic ravages of capitalism and the economic failure of existing socialism, it is surely that the "plan" and the "market", seen as exclusive categories, have fallen on evil days'. He goes on to suggest that we should now search for a mix between the two, 'although the balance between the "market" and the "plan" must accord pride of place to the latter' (Slovo, 1990a:2). This view is clearly in line with that of the dominant thinking in the Soviet Union. Perestroika, the official economic policy of the Soviet leadership, envisages precisely this mixture between the 'market' and the 'plan'. This is what distinguishes it from 'market socialism', for unlike the latter, its use of market mechanisms in the economy is subservient to its overall commitment to central planning.<sup>3</sup>

In any case, Slovo's commitment to the Soviet leadership's current economic programme is clearly evident when, in arguing against critics of the latter economic policy, he accredits Perestroika and Glasnost by describing them as diagnosis and prescription for the ailments of socialism. And he is not alone in this view. The SACP, as an organisation, seems to hold a similar perspective when it suggests that Glasnost and Perestroika 'make the passage to socialism easier, less hazardous....' (*Seventy Year of Workers Power*, 1989:28).<sup>4</sup>

Slovo's and the Party's reassessment of communist theory and practice, then, has resulted in the establishment of a new path of politics for the organisation. This new path contains an emphasis on inner-party democracy, a commitment to a particular interpretation of political pluralism that leads the organisation to consider the parliamentary road to socialism as a viable strategy and a reassessment of the nature of the socialist economy which is now viewed as taking the form of one dominated by central planning, but making substantial use of market

mechanisms. The question that now confronts political commentators and activists is, how viable is this new path of politics? In order to answer this question, it is imperative that we first critically reflect on the foundation of these proposals, namely, the organisation's understanding of Stalinism.

### What is Stalinism?

Joe Slovo (1990:12) views Stalinism as 'the bureaucratic-authoritarian style of leadership (of parties both in and out of power) which denuded the party of most of its democratic content and concentrated power in the hands of a tiny, self-perpetuating elite'. Stalinism, then, is 'socialism without democracy'.

Two problems exist with this definition. The first, which underlies Jordan's critique of 'Has socialism failed?', is that Slovo's definition is abstracted from a historical materialist analysis of Soviet society. Slovo views Stalinism as a distortion of socialism amongst higher echelons of the party or country's leadership. But this is an inadequate portrayal of Stalinism. It is unable to account for the duration and depth of the phenomenon, and falls into the trap of bourgeois thought by explaining the degeneration of the Soviet Party and state through the mere actions of 'great men'. However, presenting an alternative, materialist, analysis of the phenomenon of Stalinism need not detain us here, for it is already impressively conducted in Jordan's 'The crisis of conscience in the SACP'.

The second problem with Slovo's definition is that it views Stalinism only in an organisational aspect. But Stalinism, as a political counter-revolution, occurred at both an organisational and ideological level. With the rise of the bureaucracy in the Soviet Union, the theoretical premises underlying the October Revolution of 1917, were disfigured so as to justify and legitimate the new ruling stratum. This process began in 1924 when Stalin challenged the Marxist commitment to proletarian internationalism with his theory of 'socialism in one country'.<sup>5</sup> Until then almost all Marxists were unanimous in the belief that for the final victory of socialism, the efforts of one country would be insufficient and that the efforts of the proletarians of several advanced countries would be required. Stalin's thesis suggested that socialism could be realised in the Soviet Union because of its immense riches and the support the revolution generated. The theory of 'socialism in one country' promoted Soviet national messianism which justified the subordination of the interests of world revolution to that of the supposed interests of the Soviet Union. Mandel argues,

The conservative character of the bureaucracy, its fear of the international repercussions of any advance of the revolution elsewhere in the world, its awareness that the passivity and depoliticisation of the Soviet proletariat constituted the foundation of its power and privileges, and the risk that this passivity

and depoliticisation could be placed in question by any major progress of the world revolution - all these factors inclined the bureaucracy towards a policy of peaceful coexistence with imperialism, attempts to divide the world into spheres of influence, and determined defence of the status quo (1979:117).

It was in fulfilling this policy of peaceful coexistence that the bureaucracy proceeded to reverse the theoretical advances made by the Bolshevik Party in the long build up to the Russian Revolution. One of the first such reverses related to the nature of the transition to socialism. In 1928, the Comintern, which by then had been completely cowed into submission by Stalin, reverted to the previous Menshevik position of the transition to socialism occurring over stages. This position argued that it was incorrect for a Communist Party in a 'backward country' to try and lead a socialist revolution. The strategy was: first achieve national liberation, and then we can begin the battle for socialism.<sup>6</sup>

This theoretical position was transported to the Communist parties affiliated to the Comintern. The bureaucracies of these parties submitted blindly to the orders of the Comintern for they saw no alternative either because of their political and material dependence, or because of their view of medium-term national and international perspectives. These Communist parties were instructed, in line with the theory of revolution by stages, to form popular fronts with the national bourgeoisie. This entailed the submerging of the Communist party's programmes to that of the national bourgeoisie with disastrous results.<sup>7</sup>

Stalinism, then, cannot simply be reduced to an undemocratic and bureaucratic style of leadership. Stalinism must be seen as the usurpation of political power by a bureaucracy that enables the latter to direct the planning of the economy in a direction that benefitted it materially. This ruling stratum produced an ideology to achieve and justify its goals. The theory of 'socialism in one country', the strategic conception of socialism being a product of revolution in stages, and the tactic of the Popular Front as a particular form of alliance, are all inextricable parts of the Stalinist whole. Stalinism must be viewed as a counter-revolution which has developed its own organisational practice, political programme, strategy and tactics. The task then, of destalinising the Communist movement must be based on this understanding of Stalinism.

## **Disinheriting the heritage of Stalinism**

How successful has the SACP been in distancing itself from the heritage of Stalinism? Does the establishment of a new path of politics signal the organisation's break with its past history? The SACP would of course answer in the affirmative. It would cite its commitment to inner-party democracy and political pluralism as proof of its efforts of destalinisation.

And to a limited extent this is true. The notions of a party without internal dissent and the single-party state have perhaps been the greatest and most blatant distortions of socialist theory and practise. The organisation's rejection of these notions and its commitment to inner-party democracy, political pluralism, and a non-sectarian attitude to activists both inside and outside the party, is of immense symbolic and practical value and represents some movement towards the destalinisation of the SACP. But the organisation still remains wedded to a conception that views the transition to socialism occurring over stages. The essential content of this strategy, first fully formulated in its present form in the SACP's 1962 programme, 'The road to freedom', views South Africa as a 'colony of a special type', and thus calls for the initial establishment of a national democratic state. 'Has socialism failed?', reaffirms the organisation's commitment to a two-stage transition to socialism - the first being, according to Slovo, the construction of a post-apartheid state, and the second being the establishment of a socialist South Africa.<sup>8</sup>

Whilst Slovo and the SACP have recently begun to refute the theory of 'socialism in one country', they have declined to reject its South African manifestation, namely, the conception of the transition to socialism occurring over stages. And for good cause. Rejection of this strategy would of course require the organisation to jettison the theory of National Democracy. And an abandonment of the theory of National Democracy would immediately compel the organisation to review its strategic alliance with the ANC and abandon its tactic of broad Popular or anti-Apartheid Fronts with bourgeois parties; a tactic to which the SACP is committed. Complete destalinisation by the SACP would lead to abandonment of its current theories, programmes, strategies, and tactics. The entire foundation of its current practise would disintegrate.

### **The move to Eurocommunism**

The SACP's reformed commitment to political pluralism has expressed itself in the organisation's consideration of the 'parliamentary road to socialism' as a viable strategy, should 'normal' democratic rights be achieved. The adoption of this strategy, termed Eurocommunism, is in line with developments in the European Communist parties, which have long participated in the democratic contest for parliamentary majorities. The attractions of this strategy are obvious. It is simple and it seems to contain no messy or violent confrontation with the capitalist class. Yet the viability of this strategy is clearly questionable. Eurocommunism is based on the premise that the state is an impartial arbiter above the selfish contention of classes. It believes that it is possible progressively to empty the parliamentary institutions of their class content so that they cease to be props for the class rule of the bourgeoisie. But this is either a utopian

conception or a deliberate mystification of the nature of the state.

The flaw in the Eurocommunist strategy is that it dislocates the state from the socio-economic environment within which it is situated. It neglects to take into account the bourgeoisie's control of the state apparatus. And it is also deficient in that it underestimates the consequences of the bourgeoisie's command of political and economic power on the proletariat. In capitalist society workers live and act under conditions of material dependence on the bourgeoisie. As Mandel indicates, 'workers' jobs, incomes and living standards are determined in the final analysis by economic mechanisms which function on the basis of the objectives pursued by the bourgeoisie' (1979:192). Just as important is the latter's command of political power which enables it to manipulate the ideological apparatuses of the state so that daily workers are bombarded with ideas, values, and historical distortions, that are compatible with the maintenance of the status quo. It is for this reason that Marx concluded, 'the ruling ideas of each age, have been the ideas of its ruling class' (Feuer, 1984:68).

This of course questions the viability of the Eurocommunist notion of gradually reforming the capitalist system. Workers will often act in unison with their class enemies against their long-term class interests. But this is not to suggest that the hegemony of the ruling class can never be threatened. At precise moments in history, objective conditions weaken the ideological, political and economic hegemony of the ruling class and compels the proletariat to engage in the struggle for state power.<sup>9</sup> But these moments, known as 'revolutionary crises', never last very long. And they provoke extreme tension for they involve attempts to dismantle the mechanisms that run bourgeois society. This, of course, involves a direct conflict with the ruling class; a strategy that Eurocommunism precisely attempts to avert.

The essential kernel of the Eurocommunist strategy is the achievement of a parliamentary majority that would provide Communists with the supreme power to gradually usher forth reforms that will lead to a transition to socialism. But all indications are that even if Communists achieved a majority in parliament, they would still be powerless to determine the direction of that society. Elected chambers of parliament all across the world have very little effective control over what the government does. Much of the running of the state is left in the hands of the permanent administrative bureaucracy who, unlike governments, are not prone to being ousted from power. Moreover, capitalist societies are progressively witnessing power being passed into the hands of the executive. The more representatives of the workers' movement gain admittance into parliament, the more the role of parliament in the ensemble of mechanisms of the bourgeois state tends to narrow. The executive is now becoming the ultimate guarantor of the bourgeois order.



Even if Communists captured control of the executive, they would still be unable to initiate substantial transformations of the status quo. This was clearly evident in June 1981 when Francois Mitterrand and the French Socialist Party swept into power and proceeded to implement a programme of large-scale nationalisation. The bourgeoisie responded by refusing to invest, transferring liquid capital out of the country, causing an acute financial crisis. The franc slumped and Mitterrand was forced to surrender by adopting a programme of austere measures involving retrenchments, closures, and cuts in real wages and in welfare services.

But what if these intimidatory tactics had failed? What if Mitterrand held out? Historical experience indicates that the bourgeoisie would have responded with the armed apparatus. That is the principal lesson of the Chilean experience. Here, Salvador Allende and the Chilean Socialist Party came into power through the bourgeois parliamentary game. When workers took the offensive and threatened the material interests of the bourgeoisie, Allende was forcibly overthrown by the military and the revolution crushed.<sup>10</sup> Such is the neutrality of the bourgeois state.

The final flaw in the Eurocommunist strategy is that they view the class struggle purely in its political aspect. As Mandel says, 'relations between classes are reduced to relations between political parties, or rather, between leaderships of political parties. A handful of "chiefs" is supposed to represent and faithfully articulate the social interests of millions of people in all their complex interconnections, solely on the basis of election results' (1979:197). Added to this is the belief that it is this handful of 'chiefs' that will institute measures that usher forth the socialist society. But this is a substitutionist conception of the transition to socialism. Socialism is the product of the self-emanicipation of the working class. The implication of this fundamental premise of Marxism is that no variety of socialism is possible unless through the self-activity of the working class. This is the principal difference between utopian and scientific socialism.

The Eurocommunist strategy then, is a questionable one. Socialism can only be achieved with the forcible overthrow of both the bourgeoisie and its state apparatus. As Engels says, '...the state is nothing but a machine for the oppression of one class by another, and indeed in the democratic republic no less than in the monarchy' (Feuer, 1984:401). At another point in the same pamphlet, he says, '...from the very outset the Commune was compelled to recognise that the working class, once come to power, could not go on managing with the old state machine, that in order not to lose again its only just conquered supremacy this working class must, on the one hand, do away with the old repressive machinery previously used against itself and, on the other, safeguard itself against its own deputies and officials, by declaring them all, without exception, subject to recall

at any moment' (Feuer, 1984:399). The SACP's flirtation with the strategy of a 'parliamentary road to socialism' can but only weaken the working class when the decisive contest for political power emerges. This is the principal lesson imparted by the rich history of the international working class struggle.

### **Redefining the vision of the socialist economy**

The SACP's latest vision of a 'socialist economy' envisages an economy characterized by a mixture of 'plan' and 'market'. Whilst the precise mix between these two categories is as yet unclear, general guidelines espoused by the promoters of this vision indicate that the 'market' will be subservient to the 'plan'. If current experiments in the Soviet Union are anything to go by, then what is envisaged is that while the overall thrust of the economy will be determined by central planning a substantial use of market mechanisms will be made in micro-economic decision-making and day-to-day management of enterprises.

This vision of market mechanisms being an integral part of the socialist economy has been prompted by what is perceived as being the failure of 'socialist planning' in the Soviet Union. The gist of the argument is simple. The Soviet experience indicates that command planning (which is equated with central planning),<sup>11</sup> while achieving structural change, causes stagnation in productivity and living standards. The 'market' is the only mechanism capable of combating this economic stagnation. Being an 'objective' agent, the 'market' will impose an efficiency and discipline on producers and will achieve the variety and quality of goods required to satisfy consumer demands. But because the 'market' imposes high social costs, the use of market mechanisms need to be carefully supervised; thus, the 'market's' subservience to the 'plan'.

Before proceeding critically to analyse this thesis, certain preliminary remarks need to be made. First, defining the nature of the socialist economy is not simply a matter of semantics. The road we adopt to realise our end goal must be informed by an understanding of the nature of our immediate circumstances and the proposed end goal. Thus, a general vision of the socialist economy is a necessary yardstick for assessing current economic proposals and strategies.

Second, a critique of the SACP's vision of a socialist economy does not automatically mean that an immediate radical suppression of market relations is being suggested. This contribution recognises that socialism is the ultimate product of a long transition process; a process characterized by revolutionary reforms that gradually lead to social control over the economy. Thus, market mechanisms will prevail for a considerable period after the overthrow of capitalist society. On this there is complete consensus amongst the extra-parliamentary left. However, the departure of revolutionary socialists from the

SACP emerges on the issue of the social character of the state on and after the day of liberation. Whilst the SACP remains silent on the nature of the state, revolutionary socialists insist that a pre-requisite for the transition to socialism is the establishment of a workers' state. For revolutionary socialists, liberation marks the capture of state power by the working class which then creates the political and social conditions for the gradual transformation of the economy and wider society.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, for the SACP, market mechanisms are not limited to the transition period. They are now being incorporated in the organisation's vision of the future socialist economy. For a critical analysis a critique of current Soviet thinking about utilising market mechanisms within the framework of the 'plan', commonly known as Perestroika, is pertinent.

According to Abel Aganbegyan, Gorbachev's chief economic advisor, Perestroika is the attempt to replace 'the economy of administrative command and fiat methods of management' by 'an economy with predominantly economic methods of management, a market economy, an economy with developed financial and credit relations' (1988:77). He says, 'from wage-levelling and neglected material incentives, we are working towards an economic system orientated to take due account of economic interests based on economic self-reliance and material encouragement' (1988:77). But this does not convey the overall thrust of the model. A more balanced picture of Perestroika is provided by the documents of the Central Committee Plenum of April 1985 which committed the regime to act against corruption and the black market; to extend the market in agriculture and services; to give priority to technological and scientific development; to promote greater work discipline through the use of material incentives; and to eliminate the middle-level management bodies while simultaneously strengthening the central organs of planning and the powers of enterprise directors. This latter policy, which is the essential kernel of Perestroika, involves the re-organisation of ministries to deal with macro-economic decisions, whilst simultaneously granting individual enterprises greater autonomy with day-to-day management affairs, with the hope that these enterprises will be run 'on the principles of full self-accounting, self-financing, and self-administration' (Aganbegyan, 1988:78).

The essential aim of this managerial reform is to increase the efficiency of individual enterprises in the hope that the economy could be uplifted from the bureaucratic impasse that it has become submerged in. But can enterprise efficiency be guaranteed by simply granting greater powers to local directors? It is extremely doubtful. In capitalist society the motivation to increase the efficiency of individual enterprises emerges from the entrepreneur's ownership of private property. This enables them to increase their personal consumption

and maximise their wealth, all of which they can transmit to their children and other heirs. However, this is not possible in the Soviet Union. In the 'best' of cases, local managers' material remuneration for their enterprise's efficiency would merely be some form of increase in bonuses which would increase their access to consumer goods. But this is an insufficient material incentive to promote the typically entrepreneurial behaviour that would be required to boost enterprise efficiency. As Mandel says, 'the reform will only be effective and coherent if the material interests of managers, linked to profit, goes beyond the realm of current income, and is linked also to the long-term performance of the enterprise as a whole. His fate, as well as that of his children, is tied to the enterprise; he is no longer a manager, but an owner' (1989:155). But this would constitute a reversion to capitalism, a situation that Gorbachev cannot and will not realise.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, the attempt to realise enterprise autonomy within the framework of the Soviet Union's current economic structure is bound to fail. Yes, management will be able to retain a part of the profit for reinvestment. Yes, they will be able to enter into contracts with other enterprises. But their ability to determine the prices of products produced is severely curtailed. The central planning mechanisms still retain the power to determine prices of raw materials. This curtails enterprises' abilities at price-fixing for if they can't negotiate the price of their inputs, then their freedom to determine the price of outputs is severely limited. The same goes for the determination of wages and resource allocation. Both are controlled by the central planning mechanisms, severely inhibiting local enterprises' attempts at achieving self-accounting, self-financing and self-administration.

Thus, Gorbachev's policy of Perestroika, which represents a massive recourse to market mechanisms within the framework of the 'plan', is economically incoherent. It is unable to realise its aims of greater economic efficiency for the simple reason that its two constituent categories, the 'plan' and 'market', continually pull in different directions. The result: much of the practical initiatives embarked upon are often haphazard, contradictory and self-negating. Mandel's warning is incisive here: 'within the framework of planning, the market cannot rule, just as the plan cannot rule within the framework of a market economy' (1989:153).

But what are the social implications of this implementation of Perestroika? These are obvious even to the most naive. The systematic implementation of the principle of financial self-sufficiency in individual enterprises would lead to the closure of thousands of factories and the retrenchment of millions of workers. This is already evident. Current Soviet estimates of unemployment have already surpassed the three million figure, and PRAVDA suggests that the

continued utilisation of market mechanisms could see this figure rise as high as sixteen million.<sup>14</sup> The extension of the principle of financial self-sufficiency to the fields of social services (health, education, etc) threatens to further accentuate the immiseration of the Soviet working class. This, together with the fact that subsidies have been eliminated from basic goods and services, is bound to reduce the buying-power of workers and thereby dramatically lower their standard of living.

Workers are aware of this. In general, they have remained sceptical of the economic measures implemented in the Soviet Union. This scepticism is now turning to overt hostility because of the growing poverty that has begun to afflict greater and greater sections of the workforce. In the past two years, the Soviet Union has registered the greatest rise in labour conflicts in a quarter of a century. The first nine months of 1989 witnessed seven million days lost through strike action.<sup>15</sup> At present, more than 40 million people live on or below the official poverty level. For the Soviet working class, Perestroika means nothing more than austerity, greater poverty, greater social inequality, and greater social strife.

Yet it is on this economic framework that the SACP's vision of the 'socialist economy' is modelled. The utilisation of market mechanisms, even if subjected to the framework of a 'plan', works to the disadvantage of the proletariat and accelerates social inequality within society. This is so because it does not provide an alternative logic to the system of bureaucratic rule. On the contrary, it merely attempts to increase the efficiency of that system at the expense of the producers of society. Thus, the SACP's current vision of a 'socialist economy', like that of its predecessor, is a reductionist one that would be unable to realise the Marxist goal of an egalitarian society.

But what is the alternative? The revolutionary socialist alternative is premised on the foundation of an entirely different logic to that of the Soviet system. It is structured to serve, primarily, the interests of the producers of society. This system known as democratic socialism, or what Mandel calls 'self-articulated management', involves the coordinated allocation of resources democratically determined by the producers themselves. A federal body, elected by universal franchise, would be responsible for allocating proportions of the Gross National Product (GNP), according to consciously formulated priorities. Since this would require different coherent alternatives to be presented for discussion and eventual adoption, political pluralism and the enjoyment of all basic democratic freedoms and human rights must be guaranteed. Once proportions of the GNP are allocated, sectorial and territorial bodies would be responsible for the distribution of these resources in their own field. This devolution of power would extend further to provide individual enterprises with the right to organise production as they see fit. The latter would also be given power to dispose of

parts of the current output and social surplus product. To ensure consumer satisfaction, models and quality of products produced would be subject to a veto power by consumers. This entire system, then, is premised on the practice of political pluralism, a serious reduction of the workday, and a precise combination of political and economic mobility.<sup>16</sup> Only such a system, (that allows the producers of society the freedom to choose what to produce, how to produce it, and to determine the destiny of that output), can realise the goal of a classless society. As such, it is the only system that can truly be described as the vision of the socialist economy.

### **The new path of politics: reformism or Marxism-Leninism**

How then should we view the SACP's restructuring of Communist theory and practice? A critical overall assessment of the party's new path of politics indicates that it represents a shift to the right. The organisation's break with Stalinism to date can at best be described as formal. This assertion is easily defensible. Whilst condemning the atrocities of Stalin, and denouncing sectarian practices, undemocratic behaviour and one-party rule, the SACP still remains wedded to crucial pillars of the Stalinist orbit. The theory of 'Colonialism of a Special Type', the strategy of National Democracy, and the tactic of Popular Fronts, all derivatives of Stalin's theory of 'socialism in one country', still remain at the heart of the organisation's programme.

This essential core of the party programme is supplemented by two new features; the adoption of the Eurocommunist strategy of achieving socialism through the ballot box, and the redefinition of the vision of the socialist economy to incorporate market mechanisms within the framework of the 'plan'. Both new features represent a reformist project incapable of realising the socialist order they set as their task. The strategy of Eurocommunism is based on the understanding that it is possible to gradually reform the capitalist state and system without effecting an overthrow of the bourgeoisie's monopoly of political power. However, as mentioned earlier, a critical analysis of this strategy and the results of its consistent application for over 80 years indicates that this is a project that is doomed to failure. Similarly, the SACP's latest vision of the socialist economy is an incoherent economic programme that will accelerate social inequality and inhibit the realisation of the classless society. It would thus be unable to realise the dreams of those countless of fighters for emancipation.

The vision of the classless society can only truly be brought into realisation if our theories, strategies and tactics are derived from the rich tradition of authentic Marxism-Leninism. The failure and collapse of Stalinism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe does not invalidate these tools of thought. On the contrary it re-affirms its historical accuracy for it is the only paradigm that consistently

explained, criticised, and predicted the downfall of this nightmare. The task of revolutionary socialists now is to rejuvenate the authentic traditions of Marxism-Leninism. The SACP's new path of politics does not do this. Its members need to heed the words of Pallo Jordan :

South African Communists would do well to turn to the works of the anti-Stalinist Marxists and Communists to rediscover the true meaning of this vision which has, over centuries, persuaded thousands of militants to lay down their lives; which has inspired thousands with the courage to storm the citadels of power even when the odds appeared insuperable; which moved great artists to create magnificent works. The South African Communist Party owes it to itself and to the cause that it espouses that it boldly grasp this nettle (1990:88).

#### Notes

1. Part of my analysis of the SACP's reassessment of Communist theory and practice is based on Slovo's paper, 'Has socialism failed?'. It could be argued that this is unfair to the Communist Party since the publication of the paper was qualified by the statement that the paper represented only the first reflections of Joe Slovo. However, the central arguments are also contained in an official interview with the party leadership after the 7th Congress in 1989 (see *Work in Progress*, 60).
2. This is easily demonstrated. Many state leaders, such as PW Botha, Margaret Thatcher, and even Ronald Reagan, pay lip-service to democracy, whilst simultaneously committing the most anti-democratic acts against their own working classes.
3. This distinction between Perestroika and 'Market Socialism' is drawn from Catherine Samary (1988).
4. This publication, entitled 'Seventy years of workers' power', was published in 1988. The striking feature of this document is that its analysis of Soviet society from 1917 to the present, neglects to even mention the Stalinist atrocities and distortions of socialism committed by the bureaucracy.
5. This theory was first forwarded in the second edition of Stalin's *Fundamental Problems of Leninism*.
6. The impact of this reversal on South Africa was reflected in the adoption of 'The Black Republic Thesis' by the CPSA. This of course committed the organisation to the slogan 'an independent native republic as a stage towards a workers and peasants republic'.
7. In 1927, the Chinese Communist Party (CPP) was forced to join the Kuomintang under Chang Kai-Shek, who massacred communist cadres and drowned the revolution in blood. In 1936, the Spanish Revolution was similarly defeated. In 1959, when Fidel Castro led the Cuban Revolution, the official Communist Party, under the strict instructions of Moscow, opposed him. When the Sandinistas led the victorious revolution in Nicaragua in 1979, the official Communist Party, under the same instructions from Moscow, once again, opposed the revolution.
8. Slovo's recent publications, and the Party's current programme, 'The Path to Power', have insisted that there is no Chinese Wall between the national democratic and socialist phases. However, both the party programme and Slovo's publications have refused to define the social character of the national democratic state, whose nature would have to be proletarian if the transition to socialism is to be effected (see Slovo, 1986).
9. Examples of such moments were in the Soviet Union in 1905 and 1917, Germany in 1918 and 1923, France in 1968, Chile in 1972/73, Nicaragua in 1979, Poland in 1980, and in Rumania and East Germany in 1989.
10. The defeat of the revolution in Chile plunged the country into a military dictatorship, and submerged the Chilean working class into a vortex of demoralisation and passivity for over 15 years.
11. The protagonists of this argument neglect to consider that central planning does not only take the form of command planning, but can also occur within a decentralised and democratic framework.

12. This position is in line with that of Marx in *The Communist Manifesto* (see Feuer, 1984:69).
13. This is so because a reversion to capitalism would threaten the material interests and existence of a substantial proportion of the bureaucracy. Gorbachev as its representative cannot usher forth its decline.
14. These estimates were published in *Pravda* and *Moscow News*, quoted in Mandel (1989).
15. The most notable of these strikes were conducted by the Ukrainian and Siberian miners.
16. For a greater exposition and explanation of this system, see Mandel (1989 and 1986).

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