

The root idea of socialism

By Max Shachtman

MARXIAN socialism is distinguished from all the others, not in the fact that it holds to the so-called labour theory of value, and not even in the fact that it developed the ideas of dialectical materialism, and not even in the fact that it participates in and prosecutes the class struggle. Its fundamental and irreconcilable difference with all the others is this: Marxism is proletarian socialism.

When speaking of socialism and socialist revolution we seek "no condescending saviours", as our great battle hymn, the *International*, so ably says. We do not believe that well-wishing reformers — and there are well-wishing reformers — will solve the problems of society, let alone bring socialism.

The most profound, important and lasting thought in Marxism, the most pregnant thought in Marxism, is contained in Marx's phrase that the emancipation of the proletariat is the task of the proletariat itself. It is clearly the most revolutionary idea ever conceived, if you understand it in all of its great implications.

That is why we are in the tradition of the Paris Commune, for example, the first great attempt of the proletariat to emancipate itself. That is why we are in the tradition of the great revolution in Russia — the Bolshevik revolution — the second great attempt of the proletariat to emancipate itself. That's why we defend it from its detractors. That's why we are so passionate about it. That's why we are, if you will, so "dogmatic". We know what we are defending even if they do not always know what they are attacking.

And that is what we learn all over again from Trotskyism — what we have begun to forget, what we have begun to ignore, what we have begun to take for granted.

We learned from Trotskyism what we hold so firmly to now: There can be no socialism without the working class of the world, no socialism without the working class of Russia.

We are the living carriers and embodiment of the ideas to be learned from the Trotskyist struggle against Stalinism. We are its living teachers, for those whom we can get to listen in these days of darkness, confusion and cowardice.

We are optimistic because *that* will remain our hope in the greatest hours of adversity, while everywhere else lies pessimism. Our role is to teach Marxism, that Marxism which is proletarian socialism, Marxist politics, socialist politics. Our idea of politics boils down to this revolutionary idea — to teach the working class to rely upon itself, upon its own organisations, upon its own programme, upon its own leadership, upon its own ideas and need for democracy, and not to subordinate itself at any time to the interest, the needs, the leadership, the program, the movement, the organisation, or the ideas of any other class.

That's why we are Marxists; that's what we learned all over again in many intellectual and political battles under that peerless teacher and peerless revolutionary, Trotsky.

And we start by teaching socialists to rely upon themselves.

There is no socialism and no progress to socialism without the working class, without the working class revolution, without the working class in power, without the working class having been lifted to "political supremacy" (as Marx called it), to the "victory of democracy" (as Marx also calls it). No socialism and no advance to socialism without it! That is our rock. That is what we build the fight for the socialist future on. That is what we are unshakably committed to.

Look at what has happened — I hold them up as horrible examples — to all and sundry who have renounced this struggle after having known its meaning. They have no confidence in the social-revolutionary power of the proletariat — that is the alpha and omega of them all. One will embroider it with one colour thread and another with another, but at bottom that is it.

"We know with scientific sureness that no reaction can destroy that social force whose very conditions of existence force it into a revolutionary struggle against the conditions of its existence, the proletariat."

They have been corrupted by that most ancient of corrupt ideas: that as for the lower class, there must always be one; that the lower class must always be exploited and oppressed; that there is no other way. That's their real feeling and that's what caused their renunciation of the struggle.

They are the Stalinists in reverse. They have lost their faith in the socialist faith for that reason, and for that reason primarily and fundamentally.

They have lost their respect for the working class because for so long a period of time it can, and it has, and it does, lie dormant and stagnant and seems to be absolutely passive, immobilised in permanence. In other words, they have doomed it — this working class which has shown itself so capable of so many miracles in the past hundred and two hundred years of its struggle against the bourgeoisie and against oppression in general — doomed it to eternal servitude. That's why they are not Trotskyists; that's why they're not socialists; that's why they're not democrats; that's why they're not people with human integrity any longer.

In all of them the corrupt idea has taken sound and firm roots that the working class will always be oppressed and exploited by

someone or another — that whole theory, the whole snobbish bourgeois theory that goes back to feudalism and goes back to slavery before that: there have to be serfs, there have to be slaves, there have to be exploited workers, and the best they can hope for is that the rulers fight among themselves and that in the interstices of this fight they may be able to promote their own interests just a little bit without ever changing their exploited status.

What is this at bottom but a variety of that notorious philosophy which the Stalinoid intellectuals and apologists used to whisper to us in justification of their support of the Kremlin: "You don't mean to say that you really believe that the workers can emancipate themselves, can themselves take power?... They need a strong hand over them..."

We have nothing in common with such people and want nothing in common with such people, in all their 57 schools.

Although it is silent so often, and silent for so long, and although it is disorientated, this proletariat — today's or tomorrow's, like yesterday's — will outlast this trial as it will outlast its old leaders, and resume its iron march to socialist freedom. Our confidence in it, maintained these 25 years, is undiminished 25 years after we took up the banner of renewed faith in it and renewed willingness to learn from it, as well as to teach it what we know.

For the man who lives for himself, alone like a clod of mud in a ditch, like a solitary animal in a savage forest, 25 years of dedication to socialism is as incomprehensible as it is unendurable. But we are, thank god, not like the clods of mud, the careerists and the opportunists, the philistines of all sorts and varieties. We are people who have been intellectually and spiritually emancipated by the great philosophical and cultural revolution in thought that Marx began and Trotsky so richly expanded. We are not resigned, and know that we need not resign ourselves, to the inevitability of advancing barbarism, to the decay and disintegration of society.

We know with scientific sureness that no reaction — no matter how strong at the moment, no matter how prolonged — can destroy that social force whose very conditions of existence force it into a revolutionary struggle against the conditions of its existence, the proletariat.

We know with scientific sureness that no matter how dark and powerful reaction may be at any given time, it not only generates but regenerates its gravedigger — that same proletariat, the only social force which class society has endowed with infinite capacity for recuperation from temporary defeat.

Extracted from Max Shachtman's speech on the 25th anniversary of American Trotskyism (1953).