

Can Socialism Make Sense?

An unfriendly dialogue

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AWL education guide

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Aims

This course requires you to read the introduction to the book, *Can Socialism Make Sense?* and selected chapters. This will provide an overview of the work and help you understand the texts and debates in the rest of the book.

The specific aims of this course are:

- To understand the strengths and limitations of working class socialism
- To explain how and why Stalinism warped socialism
- To understand and respond to the key objections to socialism
- To enable you to make propaganda for basic socialist ideas
- To discuss the lessons the AWL draws from socialist debates

Methods

There are **ten** sessions in this course. You need to read parts of the introduction and then other selected chapters, before having a discussion.

1. Why socialism?
2. Socialism vs Stalinism
3. Bolshevism vs Stalinism
4. The working class and oppression
5. Democracy and socialism
6. Human nature and socialism
7. The lies against socialism answered
8. Debating socialism – part 1
9. Debating socialism – part 2
10. Why you should be a revolutionary socialist

These suggestions are for convenience and clarity – they does not prevent comrades reading the whole book for themselves. Some chapters are not covered in this educational series, but repay reading or re-reading.

Rather than just mechanically going through the questions, it is better for everyone involved to raise their own points and to have a wide-ranging debate.

It is best to have a study copy of the book, with your own annotations, highlights, comments and questions. This will help clarify key points and help those who first complete the course to facilitate it with other comrades and contacts at a later date.

Can socialism make sense?

1. Why socialism?

Read: The poem, contents and introduction pp.3-7
Why socialism? — Albert Einstein pp.305-
What is German Bolshevism? — Rosa Luxemburg pp.311-

Questions:

1. What sort of period are we living through?
2. Why is the 2008 economic crash so significant?
3. Why has socialism been eclipsed?
4. What is our conception of socialism?
5. Why are we publishing, selling and studying this book?
6. Why does Einstein believe socialism is the answer?
7. What does Luxemburg argue a socialist society will look like?
8. How does Einstein's 'socialism' differ from Luxemburg's formulation?
9. How does the socialist goal guide day-to-day politics?

2. Socialism vs Stalinism

Read: Introduction pp.8-48

Questions:

1. What is wrong with capitalism today?
2. Why is it important to understand Stalinism as a class society?
3. Is socialism discredited by Stalinism?
4. Is public ownership inevitably bureaucratic and inefficient?
5. What is the place of Stalinism in history?
6. What is socialism?
7. What replaces the market under socialism?
8. Is the NHS socialist?
9. To be rid of Stalinism, don't we have to reject Bolshevism-Leninism as well?

3. Bolshevism vs Stalinism

Read: An eyewitness account of the October Revolution — Hal Draper pp.169-
1917 was a democratic revolution — Max Shachtman pp.180-
Stalinism and Bolshevism — Leon Trotsky pp.187-
Their morals and ours — Leon Trotsky pp.191-

Questions:

1. Why was the Kerensky's regime not a democratic government?
2. How did the Bolsheviks win majority support among the Russian working class?
3. What was wrong with the Left SRs?
4. Should the Soviet government have dismissed the Constituent Assembly?
5. How does Trotsky argue that Bolshevism did not lead to Stalinism?
6. How does Trotsky criticise anarchism?
7. What lessons did the Fourth International take from Bolshevism?
8. For Marxists, does the end justify the means?
9. Do Marxists have a moral code?

4. The working class and oppression

Read: Introduction pp.48-62

Repealing the anti-homosexual laws — August Bebel pp.314-

The women's struggle and socialism — Clara Zetkin pp.316-

Questions:

1. Why does the working class have the power to make socialism?
2. Why does the working class have the interest to make socialism?
3. The labour movement is too weak to make socialism?
4. If you're a Marxist, don't you have to reduce all oppression to economics?
5. Does imperialism explain the modern world?
6. How did Bebel defend gay rights?
7. Why was it important for socialists to champion gay rights at the time?
8. How does Zetkin explain women's oppression?
9. Is this explanation economic or class reductionist?
10. In what respects is our explanation of oppression different for the classical Marxists?

5. Democracy and socialism

Read: Introduction pp.63-89

The metaphysics of democracy — Leon Trotsky pp.321-

Democracy and class rule — Vladimir Lenin pp.325-

Fighting for a more generous democracy — Leon Trotsky pp.329-

Questions:

1. Surely bourgeois democracy is the best we can hope for?
2. Why do socialists regard the status quo as pluto-democracy?
3. How does the ruling class manufacture consent?
4. What can we learn from the evolution and history of democracy?
5. In what ways are socialists the most consistent democrats?
6. What are the limits of bourgeois democracy?
7. How is democracy and class rule related?
8. Why do Marxists defend and fight for democracy under capitalism?
9. In what ways is a workers' state more democratic than bourgeois rule?

6. Human nature and socialism

Read: Introduction pp.89-130

Questions:

1. Isn't it reformist to suggest that socialism "invades" capitalist society?
2. Is planning impossible in such a complex society?
3. Would planning be inefficient on a world scale?
4. Are humans just naked apes, who can't change for socialism?
5. Doesn't socialism depend on an unrealistic conception of humans are altruistic?
6. People excel only in competition. Won't socialism abolish innovation?
7. Humans cooperate only if they have to. Doesn't socialism assume human virtue?
8. Working-class solidarity is sentimental fiction. Doesn't self-interest rule?
9. How will the dirty jobs get done under socialism?
10. Is there an ecological imperative for socialism?

7. The lies against socialism answered

Read: Fifteen lies against socialism answered — Sean Matgamna pp.345-

Questions:

1. Did the collapse of Stalinism in 1991 eclipse socialism?
2. Were the Eastern European revolutions peaceful?
3. Why did the collapse of Stalinism prove it was a class society?
4. How did the Communist Parties differ from real Marxist parties?
5. Does the collapse of Stalinism vindicate social-democratic reformism?

8. Debating socialism – part 1

Read: Underdogs and elites — Sean Matgamna and Roger Scruton pp.142-

Questions:

1. What are Scruton's objections to 'Leninism'?
2. How are these answered?
3. How can a socialist society prevent the emergence of new elites?

9. Debating socialism – part 2

Read: Is socialism utopian? Debate between Sean Matgamna and Kenneth Minogue pp.360-
Planning: what, how, whose? Debate between David Marsland and Martin Thomas pp.373-

Questions:

1. What are Minogue's objections to socialism?
2. How are these answered?
3. What are Marsland's objections to socialist planning?
4. How are these answered?

10. Why you should be a revolutionary socialist

Read: Introduction pp.130-141

Read: What socialists do, and why we do it — Sean Matgamna pp.331-

Questions:

1. Capitalism is as good as it gets. Socialism can't do better?
2. Won't socialism trample over individual liberties?
3. How can you guarantee it won't end up worse, like Stalinism all over again?
4. Why can't I just get a job and change the world that way?
5. What's the point of being a revolutionary socialist?
6. What lessons can be drawn from working class history?
7. What do Marxists mean by the three fronts of the class struggle?
8. How can the working class movement be transformed for socialism?
9. What is the point of the AWL?