Introduction to Workers’ Liberty study course

Workers’ Liberty

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Introduction

This course is intended as an introduction to the ideas of the Alliance for Workers’ Liberty.

What you need:

- To do this course you will need:
- A copy of these notes
- A copy of our books: *Can Socialism Make Sense; Democracy, direct action, and socialism*; and *Why socialist feminism*
- You may also find it useful to have a copy of: *Why the left is in disarray* and *Two Nations, two states*
- A way of making notes

Course structure:

This course is 13 sessions long. Each session will probably be at least an hour long, but you may want to take more time. The course is designed to be flexible, so you could combine some sessions, or add in extra sessions on some topics. It is ok to go off on a tangent and study some things in more depth or study things not in this course, but you should aim to cover all 13 sessions so you get a comprehensive introductory knowledge of our ideas.

Each session has some core reading and some suggested further reading. Suggested further reading ranges from short articles to large books, it is meant as a pick and mix of readings that you could use to broaden your knowledge on the topic or for more in depth study of the topic at a later date. This is by no means an exhaustive list and a comrade may be able to suggest other further reading. Further suggestions, including on topics not covered in this course, are available at: www.workersliberty.org/study

Each session has some suggested activities to do, you do not have to do any or all of these activities. Each session also has some possible questions to think through and discuss.

Educators’ notes are included at the back of this study guide with suggestions on how to run the course. These are useful for both educators and students to read.
Session 1

Why socialism?

Reading:

*Can Socialism Make Sense: Poems Labour* (page 1) and *We only want the Earth* (page 400), Introduction (pages 5-6), Capitalism and Socialism today (pages 8-14 of ‘an unfriendly dialogue’), Factfile (page 395), Why socialism by Albert Einstein (page 305).

You could also read: *What is German Boshevism* by Rosa Luxemburg (page 311), and *What’s in it for me?* (pages 130-141 of ‘an unfriendly dialogue’); *What would a socialist america look like* by James Cannon (bit.ly/CannonUSA)

Key ideas:

- Capitalism
- Socialism
- Class
- Democracy
- Society
- Marxism
- Class consciousness

Possible activities:

- Make a list of all the things that are unjust, irrational or destructive in Capitalism
- Discuss (perhaps using the questions below) what socialism would look like in contrast
- Make a list of the arguments right-wingers use in favour of Capitalism and discuss the arguments against
- Write an article, or a speech, making the case for socialism aimed at an audience that is interested in an alternative to capitalism but doesn’t know much about socialism. If appropriate read out your speech and discuss with the group.

Questions to consider:

1. What sort of period are we living through?
2. Why is the 2008 economic crash so significant?
3. Can you define capitalism?
4. What is wrong with capitalism?
5. Why has socialism been eclipsed?
6. What is our conception of socialism? Why are there so many different conceptions?
7. Why are we publishing, selling and studying this book?
8. Why does Einstein believe socialism is the answer?
9. What does Luxemburg argue a socialist society will look like?
10. How does Einstein’s ‘socialism’ differ from Luxemburg’s formulation?
11. How does the socialist goal guide day-to-day politics?
Session 2

Is socialism against human nature?

Reading:

*Can Socialism Make Sense: Socialism and human nature* (pages 89-130 of ‘an unfriendly dialogue’), Planning: what, how, and whose? Debate between David Marsland and Martin Thomas (page 373)

You could also read: Is socialism utopian? Debate between Kenneth Minogue and Sean Matgamna (page 360); Norman Geras, Marx and Human Nature: Refutation of a Legend, (Verso: 1983)

Key ideas:

- Scientific socialism
- Human nature
- Competition and innovation
- Production
- Division of labour
- Planning

Possible activities:

- In groups/with your partner discuss the following: 1. What can’t humans do without? 2. What are humans naturally? 3. What are the (human nature) arguments used against socialism? 4. Are these arguments true? 5. How might humans be different under a different form of society?
- Think about something you’re really motivated by, and then listing what motivates you to do it.
- Think about something which involves lots of competition in your life. How does it change the activity?
- List everything that has ever been thought impossible due to “human nature”. How much of it still seems impossible?

Questions to consider:

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

Democracy, direct action and socialism

Reading:

*Democracy, direct action, and socialism* (primarily the Introduction and Preface on pages 3-21, Michael Foot’s article on pages 22-42, and Sean Matgamna’s reply on pages 43-83).

You could also read: Other sections of *Democracy, direct action, and socialism; State and Revolution* by V I Lenin

Key ideas:

- Bourgeois democracy
- Parliamentary democracy
- Labour movement
- Class struggle
- Extra-parliamentary activity
- State
- Revolution

Possible activities:

- While reading Foot’s article make a list of his arguments, see if you can come up with your own response to each one. Then when reading Matgamna’s response write down his response to each of Foot’s arguments. You might find it easier to do this in a table.
- Make a list of the positive gains of bourgeois democracy, and make a list of the limitations.

Questions to consider:

1. Why did this debate come up in the ‘80s? And how and why were things different than today?
2. Who was Michael Foot, and what did the Labour Party and the Labour left look like?
3. Is this debate still relevant? Why?
4. What is the relationship of socialism to democracy?
5. What is the role of the state in bourgeois democracy?
6. Why does Matgamna argue that Foot is an elitist?
7. Is socialism possible without a revolution?
8. Should socialists use parliamentary methods or work within bourgeois democracy?
9. What is Matgamna’s argument for why Foot has given up on socialism?
Session 4

Democracy and socialism

Reading:

*Can Socialism Make Sense?: Democracy* (pages 63-89 of ‘an unfriendly dialogue’), The metaphysics of democracy by Leon Trotsky (page 321), Democracy and class rule by Vladimir Lenin (page 325), Fighting for a more generous democracy by Leon Trotsky (page 329).

You could also read: 1917 was a democratic revolution by Max Shachtman (bit.ly/MS1917); *The Fight For Socialism* by Max Shachtman Chapter V: The Government and Democracy (bit.ly/MSgov)

Key ideas:

- Bourgeois democracy
- Parliamentary democracy
- Liberty and freedom
- Class struggle
- Soviets
- State
- Revolution

Possible activities:

- Draw a concept map to show how democracy works in bourgeois society
- Make a list of the limitations of bourgeois democracy
- Going back to your article/speech making the case for socialism – could you add anything you have now learnt about democracy? Can you make the case for revolution?

Questions to consider:

1. What is the difference between democracy and liberty?
2. What is freedom in a capitalist society?
3. How is democracy linked to class rule?
4. How does the ruling class manufacture consent?
5. What can we learn from the evolution and history of democracy?
6. Why do Marxists fight for and defend democracy under capitalism?
7. What sort of democracy do we counterpose to bourgeois democracy?
8. Why is pure democracy impossible?
Session 5

Socialism vs Stalinism: The lies against socialism answered

Reading:


You could also read: Sections of CSMS from session 4; Workers’ Liberty’s books: The Fate of the Russian Revolution volume 1 and The Russian Revolution: When workers took power (upcoming); The revolution betrayed and History of the Russian Revolution by Leon Trotsky.

Key ideas:

- Stalinism
- State
- Class
- Bureaucracy
- Democracy
- Nationalised property
- Post-capitalism

Possible activities:

- Make a table with three columns headed: Capitalism, Stalinism, and Socialism. Fill in the table with descriptions of the three systems, aiming at direct comparisons (eg. Who is the ruling class in each one?).
- With a partner role-play a scenario in which either: 1. One of you argues Stalinism=socialism or 2. One of you is defending Stalinism while the other argues against.

Questions to consider:

1. Why is it important to understand Stalinism as a class society?
2. Is socialism discredited by Stalinism?
3. Is public ownership inevitably bureaucratic and inefficient?
4. What is the place of Stalinism in history?
5. To be rid of Stalinism, don’t we have to reject Bolshevism-Leninism as well?
6. Did the collapse of Stalinism in 1991 eclipse socialism?
7. What is meant by “post-capitalist” and why were the Stalinist states not this?
8. Were the Eastern European revolutions peaceful?
9. Why did the collapse of Stalinism prove it was a class society?
10. How did the Communist Parties differ from real Marxist parties?
11. Does the collapse of Stalinism vindicate social-democratic reformism?
Session 6

Socialism vs Stalinism: Did Bolshevism lead to Stalinism?

Reading:

*Can Socialism Make Sense: October 1917: the workers’ revolution* by Hal Draper (page 169), 1917 was a democratic revolution by Max Shachtman (page 180), Stalinism and Bolshevism by Leon Trotsky (page 187), Their morals and ours by Leon Trotsky (page 201).


Key ideas:

- Stalinism
- Bolshevism
- Leninism
- Russian Revolution
- Party
- Soviet
- State
- Fourth International

Possible activities:

- Look up a timeline of the Russian Revolution (one can be found at: [http://www.workersliberty.org/system/files/forr2.PDF](http://www.workersliberty.org/system/files/forr2.PDF)) and annotate it with ideas and comments from the reading.
- Make a list of all the ways Bolshevism is compared to/link to Stalinism and discuss the arguments for and against each one.

Questions to consider:

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?
Session 7

The working class and oppression

Reading:

*Can Socialism Make Sense*: The working class (pages 48-59 of ‘an unfriendly dialogue’); Why socialists look to the working class as the force for social progress by Hal Draper ([bit.ly/2jlOSeJ](bit.ly/2jlOSeJ)).


Key ideas:

- Class
- Racism
- Sexism and women’s liberation
- LGBT+ liberation
- Structural oppression

Possible activities:

- As you read Matgamna’s and Draper’s arguments make a list of the arguments for why the working class is central
- List examples of working class solidarity with oppressed peoples. How and why did these events occur?
- Write a speech to deliver to a meeting on a university campus about why the working class has the potential to end oppression.

Questions to consider:

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. If you’re a Marxist, don’t you have to reduce all oppression to economics?
4. Is class just another oppression amongst others such as oppression of women, racism etc?
5. Does this mean the working class are not sexist, racist, not homophobic etc?
6. What does Hal Draper mean by his argument about “good and bad men”?
7. Why and how should we challenge sexism, racism, homophobia?
8. Is there a link between working class organisation and reactionary ideas?
Session 8

Why socialist feminism: how and why are women oppressed?

Reading:

*Why socialist feminism*: Pages 3-68


Key ideas:

- Patriarchy
- Intersectionality
- The welfare state
- Sex positivism
- Culture
- Religion
- Dual systems

Possible activities:

- Make a list of the ways women are oppressed in society and discuss.
- Use role plays to practice arguments around the following topics: sex work, pornography, reproductive freedoms, violence against women, the role of the welfare state.

Questions to consider:

1. How and when did women's oppression start?
2. How does capitalism enable it/encourage it to continue?
3. Is women's oppression bound up with capitalism? Give a convincing argument for socialist-feminism as opposed to feminism in general.
4. Is religion the source of women's oppression?
5. Is 'selling sex' inherently oppressive? Does porn cause violence against women?
6. Does sex work differ fundamentally from other kinds of work? Can sex work be consensual?
7. Why do we talk about violence against women? Is the violence women face different?
8. Why do we argue for reproductive freedoms? Is this different from the right to an abortion?
9. What are the strengths and limitations of "dual systems” theories?
10. Is patriarchy a useful concept? Is it a structure similar to capitalism?
11. Is there a "hierarchy of oppression” or a "hierarchy of privilege”? How does this interact with intersectionality as a concept?
12. Can men be feminists, if they benefit from women's oppression?
Session 9

Why socialist feminism: how can we end women’s oppression?

Reading:

*Why socialist feminism?: Pages 69-102*


Key ideas:

- Socialist feminism
- German SPD
- Russian revolution
- Patriarchy
- Dual systems
- Labour movement & sexism
- Social reproduction

Possible activities:

- Write a set of demands of a working women's movement
- Write a speech about why you are a socialist feminist to give to a feminist conference.

Questions to consider:

1. Why did Zetkin argue for autonomous women-only groups to remain in the SPD? Are these necessary in our movement today? Why did the SPD national executive refuse to organise a women’s congress in 1910?
2. Alexandra Kollontai thought that if women’s issues were ignored, women would not join class struggle. What would this mean for a group of revolutionaries?
3. Should the care of children be a public matter? Would the family continue under socialism, except with greater equality and more leisure time? Should children be raised by trained professionals?! Why was there such an emphasis on childbirth from the Bolsheviks after the revolution?
4. How can we fight sexism in the labour movement? Why is it important to do so?
5. Why are we ‘against religious fundamentalisms’?
6. How does ‘no borders’ relate to feminism?
7. How do LGBT issues integrate with feminism?
8. If we are not “dual systems” feminists how do we see the link between capitalism and women’s oppression? What do we take from Lise Vogel?
9. How is the revolutionary party relevant to a book about socialist-feminism? What is the role of the revolutionary party in agitating for socialist-feminism?
Session 10

Globalisation, nationalism and imperialism

Reading:

*Why is the left in disarray?*: Imperialism part one, and part three: How anti-imperialism became reactionary anti-capitalism.


Key ideas:

- Globalisation
- Imperialism
- Sub-imperialisms
- Internationalism
- Colonialism

Possible activities:

- Make a list of everything you have heard about imperialism (either from the left or in general).
- Draw a table/write a list comparing “Lenin’s imperialism” with how imperialism operates in the world today.

Questions to consider:

1. Has imperialism changed? How?
2. Why is Lenin’s analysis of imperialism not a good fit for explaining the world today?
3. What does the author identify as the three roots of confusion on the left?
4. Why did Trotsky think it was “socialism of barbarism”? If you continued to apply this analysis how might it effect how your viewed the world?
5. Why did Trotsky reserve the term imperialism for monopoly capitalism? Was he right? How did he explain the behaviour of the USSR?
6. Are we absolute anti-capitalists?
7. What does the author mean by “reactionary anti-capitalism”?
Session 11

Israel-Palestine: Two nations, two states

Reading:

Two nations, two states: Introduction (pages 1-3), The case for a Palestinian state (page 4), Unravelling the issues (pages 17-22), Boycott? A Jew-hunt won’t help the Palestinians (pages 23-24), and What is “left antisemitism”? (pages 46-48).

You could also read: The rest of Two nations, two states, and sections from Why is the left in disarray? on antisemitism and the left, Workers' Liberty 3/12: "Solidarity yes, boycott no" (bit.ly/2mPl8gR), Workers' Liberty 3/13, "Trotskyists and the creation of Israel" (bit.ly/2nzIBRI), Workers' Liberty 3/15: "How can we best help the Palestinians" (bit.ly/2nLuucw), Israel and Palestine: Reappraisals, Revisions, and Refutations by Avi Shlaim.

Key ideas:

- Nations
- Self-determination
- National oppression
- Antisemitism
- Boycott, divestment and sanctions
- Imperialism
- Zionism

Possible activities:

- As you read make a list of key terms and attempt to define them.
- From the reading make a list of the key issues, under each write arguments relating to that issue (this could also be done as a concept map).
- Look at the population statistics on page 15, discuss the implications or significance of these statistics.

Questions to consider:

1. What is the case for two states?
2. What is the "in essence" solution to the conflict for most of the left?
3. Why are we not for a one-state solution? Are there different versions of the one-state solution?
4. Is Israel "unique"? In what ways is it treated as "unique"?
5. What is the historical context of the dispute? What bearing does this have on the position we now take?
6. What is the right of self-determination? Who does it apply to?
7. What is the right of return? Should it be supported?
8. Why do we not describe Israel as being like apartheid South Africa?
9. Are boycotts effective? Are they politically useful?
10. Is there a problem with antisemitism on the left?
Session 12

What is Trotskyism?

Reading:

*Why is the left in disarray?: Chapter 2 (pages 62-78).*


Key ideas:

- Trotskyist
- USSR
- Stalinism
- Fourth International
- Orthodox and heterodox Trotskyism

Possible activities:

- Draw a timeline of the development of ideas on what the USSR was. Include branches for different ideas if you think needed.
- Make a list of key terms and define them.

Questions to consider:

1. How was Trotskyism the direct inheritor of the Russian Revolution and the history of the socialist movement until that point?
2. Why the name Trotskyism?
3. Until his death how did Trotsky assess the USSR? Did his view of the USSR change? What direction was it going?
4. What was meant by calling the USSR a degenerated workers' state? What is meant by post-capitalist?
5. Why did Trotsky hold onto this idea of the USSR?
6. Did Trotskyism post-Trotsky continue the same line of thinking as Trotsky?
7. Who were the “other Trotskyisms”?
8. Are these debates between different Trotskyists relevant?
Session 13

Why you should join Workers’ Liberty

Reading:

*Can socialism make sense?:* What socialists do, and why we do it by Sean Matgamna (page 331); The Party we need by Max Shachtman ([www.workersliberty.org/node/27263](http://www.workersliberty.org/node/27263)); Plekhanov on agitation and propaganda ([bit.ly/2kkdzNa](https://bit.ly/2kkdzNa)).


Key ideas:

- Revolutionary party
- Agitate
- Educate
- Organise
- Democratic centralism
- Propaganda

Possible activities:

- Make a list of the roles of a revolutionary organisation. How do they cover agitation and propaganda? How do they cover agitation, education and organisation?
- What analogies are there for the relationship between the revolutionary party and the working class? (you can find additional ones in the revolutionary party reading pack) What are the good and bad things about them? Can you think of better analogies?

Questions to consider:

1. Why can’t I just get a job and change the world that way?
2. What’s the point of being a revolutionary socialist?
3. What lessons can be drawn from working class history?
4. What do Marxists mean by the three fronts of the class struggle?
5. How can the working class movement be transformed for socialism?
6. Is Workers’ Liberty a revolutionary party? What is it’s role?
7. What did Plekhanov mean by agitation and propaganda?
Educators' notes

This study guide should provide a framework for you to educate those new to Workers’ Liberty’s politics. We hope you learn something as well.

Being an educator

Being an educator is not a one-way process, you will learn as well as teach, so do not worry that you don’t have all the answers. It is ok if you don’t know the answer to someone’s question, our website and our comrades are a valuable resource that can be used to answer questions.

It is important to read and make your own notes on the reading before you educate someone else on it. You may come up with other questions or activities yourself when reading, it is ok to amend the questions used in this course.

The reading recommended for each session is split into “reading” and “you could also read” sections. This is broadly split into shorter and introductory articles, and longer and more complex articles. However you may want to mix and match articles from both.

Ideas for activities

Included in each session are ideas for activities to do with individuals or as groups. These are meant as suggestions, and can be ignored or adapted. Generally it is good to try and use a diverse range of activities to aid teaching. Some ideas: making lists, drawing concept maps, drawing flow charts, giving definitions to key words, drawing comparative tables, using statistics or diagrams, role plays, writing and making speeches, writing articles.

Ideas to aid reading

Not everyone studying this course will be used to reading longer pieces of political or historical reading, but it is a skill that it is important to develop. Most of the sessions have a variety of reading and further reading, you may want to adapt the reading to the individual or group, or spread some readings out over a few sessions. There are also a variety of videos, audiobooks, and recordings of Workers’ Liberty events you may find useful (http://www.workersliberty.org/audio, https://librivox.org/, www.reddit.com/r/socialistvideos/ - quality varies).

However there are also tips for reading that could be helpful:

- Highlighting and making notes as you read. This is easier to do on a print copy rather than screen-reading
- Making lists of key words
- Writing a list of questions you want to find answers to before you read (and filling in answers as you go)
- Making a list of what you already know before you start reading (this is called activating)
- Summarising text as you go (after a paragraph, page, section or chapter)
- Visualising concepts – drawing concept maps, diagrams, flow charts etc
• Splitting reading between a group so each person does a part and explains it to the others

Further education

We never stop learning, and Workers’ Liberty activists are expected to continue educating themselves and help educate others. One activist calls political education the fourth meal of the day!

The resources page on the Workers’ Liberty website has a whole series of education sources, study guides and book notes. You can find it at: www.workersliberty.org/study

Workers Liberty 101:

This selection of books is recommended reading for activists in their first 6 months of membership.

Communist Manifesto
Wage Labour and Capital
Wages, Price, and Profit
Socialism Utopian and Scientific
Theses on Feuerbach
State and Revolution
Left-Wing Communism
Revolution Betrayed

Workers Liberty's books:

Workers' Liberty has a range of books and pamphlets available, they can be ordered online at www.workersliberty.org/books.

These are:

Why is the left in disarray?
The Russian Revolution: when workers took power
Democracy, direct action and socialism
Lions led by Jackals: Stalinism in the International Brigades
Can socialism make sense?
Why socialist feminism?
The Fate of the Russian Revolution volume 1
The Fate of the Russian Revolution volume 2: The Two Trotskyisms confront Stalinsim
In an era of wars and revolutions: American socialist cartoons of the mid-twentieth century
Class against class: The Miners Strike 1984-5
Working-class politics and anarchism
Gramsci in context
How solidarity can change the world
In an age of barbarism
The new world disorder
The tragedy of Afghanistan
For workers’ climate action