

# "Reassessing the Eastern Bloc" (1988)

This editorial from Socialist Organiser no.371, 15 September 1988, declared and explained our formal discarding of the "degenerated and deformed workers' state" formula for the Stalinist states which we had "inherited" from our "orthodox Trotskyist" background.

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The most common idea on the left is that the USSR and the East European states it controls are some sort of socialist societies.

We, however, don't think so — never have. We have subscribed to the so-called 'orthodox Trotskyist' notion that the Stalinist states are best categorised as "degenerated and deformed workers' states" — far from socialism because of their bureaucratic regimes, but an advance on capitalism because of their nationalised economies.

We have long said that the "degenerated and deformed workers' states" formula was unsatisfactory. By now, most supporters of Socialist Organiser no longer believe that the designation "workers' state" — degenerated, deformed, or whatever — makes any sort of sense.

The paper's National Editorial Board voted last Sunday to review our nominal adherence to that formula, and to open a discussion in the paper on the Eastern Bloc states. This editorial explains why.

## **Our programme**

We are for workers' liberty East and West. We are for working-class self-liberation East and West. We are with the workers when they demand the right to organise and speak freely, the right to freedom for individuals and for nationalities, and the right to control economic affairs — East and West.

We are with the workers when they fight for wages and conditions — East and West.

We are therefore with Solidarnosc — for its right to operate and its fight for the wages, conditions, and liberties of its members — against Poland's rulers. We are with Solidarnosc even when, as at present, its leaders call for a market economy.

The official trade—union organisations in the Eastern bloc are not real workers' unions. They are agencies of the factory managements and the government.

We are therefore for trade unions in other countries breaking links with those state unions, and establishing links instead with Solidarnosc in Poland and the pioneer free trade union groups elsewhere.

We are for the democratic right to self-determination of nations, as the only basis for international workers' unity. In accord with that principle, we have opposed the USSR's military occupation of Afghanistan.

We are for:

- Disbandment of the police and armed forces, and their replacement by a people's militia.
- Breaking up the bureaucratic hierarchy of administration, and replacing it with a democratic regime of councils of elected and recallable workers' delegates, with freedom to form many political parties.
- Workers' control in industry.
- Free trade unions.
- Abolition of bureaucratic privileges; reorganisation of the economy according to a democratically-decided plan.
- Abolition of the bureaucracy's monopoly over information; freedom for working-class newspapers, meetings, radio and TV stations, etc.

We are for nationalisation of the major means of production. But what exists now in the Eastern Bloc is no form of socialism. Nationalisation is a means to an end — working-class liberation from the economic exploitation of those who control the means of production.

That is not achieved when the nationalised economy and the monopolising state are in effect the property of a ruling elite whose upper layers lord it over society as the aristocrats and capitalists do elsewhere.

We advocate the replacement of the system of nationalised economy under a state-monopoly bureaucracy with a socialised economy under the democratic control of the working class.

## **Trotsky's approach**

All these positions follow from our basic goal of working-class self-liberation, and our belief — based on the evidence of the Russian Revolution of 1917, France 1968, Portugal 1974-5, Hungary 1956, Poland 1980-1, and many other struggles — that the working class can liberate itself and reconstruct society on socialist lines.

None of these positions depends on, or is affected by, precise sociological definitions of the states with nationalised economies and structures similar to the USSR's.

Whatever progressive significance we attach to the fact of nationalised property — even if it is a large one — it cannot outweigh our allegiance to the living struggles of the working class.

In taking this approach, we follow Trotsky:

"The primary political criterion for us is not the transformation of property relations in this or another area, however important these may be in themselves, but rather the change in the consciousness and organization of the world proletariat, the raising of their capacity for defending former conquests and accomplishing new ones..."

"The stratification of the means of production is, as we said, a progressive measure. But its progressiveness is relative; its specific weight depends on the sum-total of all the other factors.

"Thus, we must first and foremost establish that the extension of the territory dominated by bureaucratic autocracy and parasitism, cloaked by 'socialist' measures, can augment the prestige of the Kremlin, engender illusions concerning the possibility of replacing the proletarian revolution by bureaucratic manoeuvres and so on. This evil by far outweighs the progressive content of Stalinist reforms..."

"In order that nationalised property in the occupied areas, as well as in the USSR, become a basis for genuinely progressive, that is to say socialist development, it is necessary to overthrow the Moscow bureaucracy".

We also follow the Trotskyist movement of 1948.

"It will be necessary to continue this revolutionary class struggle consistently and uninterruptedly in the case of the occupation of any given country by the Russian army, even though the revolutionary forces clash with the Russian army, and also in spite of the military consequences which this might entail for the Russian army in its operations against the imperialist military forces.

"In any case, the use of military means remains subordinated to the necessities of the revolutionary class struggle of the proletariat in whatever countries it may be. Thus, our defence of the USSR remains identical in all cases with the continuation of the revolutionary class struggle..."

### **'Deformed workers' states'**

After 1948 the Trotskyist movement went off the rails. It lost its clear focus on the working class as the agency of socialist politics.

Often it looked instead to a vaguely-defined 'process of world revolution'. Working-class action was desirable for this process to go forward rapidly and healthily, but the world revolution could very well progress without or despite the working class.

Undeniably, this wavering of focus accompanied the Trotskyists' codification of a new analysis of the Eastern Bloc states, as "degenerated and deformed workers' states". We have accepted that codification, but dissented from the conclusions that most of its adherents have drawn from it.

Trotsky, right up to his death, regarded the USSR as a "degenerated workers' state". He considered that its nationalised and planned economy, created by the workers' revolution, defined it as a form of workers' state — a society beyond capitalism — but that economic base was combined in a contradictory and unstable structure with the totalitarian rule of a vicious bureaucracy, "different from fascism only in more unbridled savagery".

The bureaucracy had all the vices of a ruling class, but had not yet demonstrated the stability and substantial historical role of one.

Such an attitude did not lead Trotsky to waver in any way in his political focus on working-class self-liberation.

In 1945-9 the Trotskyists saw the basic economic forms of the USSR - those which had for Trotsky defined it as a sort of workers' state - established in many other countries. Political régimes similar to the USSR's were so established in those countries.

If the USSR was a degenerated workers' state, then these countries must also be some sort of workers'

state. They could not be called "degenerated", because they had been bureaucratic police states from the start. So they were "deformed" workers' states - states in which Stalinist political formations or the USSR's army had created as much as survived of 'the conquests of October 1917', together with a Stalinist regime.

On the face of it, this conclusion need not lead to any weakness in our allegiance to working-class self-liberation in the states thus designated "degenerated and deformed workers' states". If it means that we call the workers' anti-bureaucratic revolution there "political" rather than "social", then - as Trotsky explained back in 1939 - the difference is in terminology rather than programme.

### **Perspective**

The Trotskyists in 1945-51 were in part influenced by issues of broad historical perspective, If the Stalinist states were "degenerated and deformed workers' states", then the following perspective could be deduced.

Capitalism must be in extreme decay: that was why post-capitalist states had been created even under bureaucratic leadership and therefore in such aberrant forms.

The aberrant forms were inherently and acutely unstable. A world of collapsing capitalism and unstable aberrant bureaucratisms put workers' power, on the agenda as soon as the necessary political leadership came forward.

In 1939 Trotsky had written: "The historical alternative, carried to the end, is as follows: either the Stalin regime is an abhorrent relapse in the process of transforming bourgeois society into a socialist society, or the Stalin regime is the first stage of a new exploiting society". Now the alternative was posed not only for the USSR but also for Stalinist states covering one third of the world.

If these were not workers' states, then what were they? They must be new exploiting societies, and new exploiting societies of undeniable dynamism. Capitalist development was leading not to socialism but to a new, revived form of capitalism (state capitalism) or to a new form of exploitation (bureaucratic collectivism). Where did this leave socialists? As helpless utopians?

Some Trotskyists in 1945~51 did try to formulate "state capitalist" or "bureaucratic collectivist" analyses. But they dealt unconvincingly with the issues of historical perspective. Most of them became hopeless sectarians.

### **The name-tag and the theories**

But what in fact did the mainstream of the Trotskyist movement achieve with the codification of the "degenerated and deformed workers' state" thesis in 1951 at the Third World Congress of the Fourth International? Not a coherent theory with a grip on reality. They achieved only a name-tag - "degenerated and deformed workers' state" - behind which over the years accumulated a wide variety of different theories.

What the "workers' state" name-tag signified was the acceptance of the Stalinist states as in some way progressive. Within that framework, the description and analysis differed widely in both detail and implications.

For Ted Grant, of what is now the Militant tendency, a nationalised economy was ipso facto a workers' state, no matter how or by whom it was created. For Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel, the deformed workers' states were nationalised economies created by some sort of working-class agency - by the USSR's state authority in Eastern Europe, or by dissident Stalinist parties in Yugoslavia and China which were in fact "deformed workers' parties".

For Joseph Hansen, the "working-class" character of the agency in Yugoslavia and China was defined by the mass pressure on the Stalinist parties - although these parties remained Stalinist, they had been forced to go further than they wanted.

None of these theories was satisfactory. Grant's theory implied that workers' states could be created without, despite, against, or in the absence of a working class. It pointed Trotskyists towards supporting such creation without, despite, or against the working class as a major if flawed step forward towards socialism. It could be sustained only by saying that state capitalism and bureaucratic collectivism were by definition impossible - a view Trotsky never took.

The Pablo/Mandel or the Hansen thesis could be sustained only by gross illusions about the nature of the Yugoslav and Chinese (and later Vietnamese, Cuban etc.) revolutions. These were not workers' revolutions. The social base of the revolutionary parties was mainly peasant; the parties were heavily bureaucratized and militarised; their ideology was Stalinist; and, far from being pushed against their wishes by the working class, they clamped down on the workers.

These theories were advanced by sincere and militant anti-Stalinists. Yet they all led to softness on some bureaucracies, some times - whether it be Grant's steadfast support for the USSR's murderous occupation of Afghanistan, or the illusions of various parts of the Pablo/Mandel/Hansen current (represented in Britain today by Socialist Action and Socialist Outlook) on the Yugoslav, Chinese, Vietnamese, Cuban and Nicaraguan revolutionaries.

Most Trotskyists have wallowed in confusion and vacillation -~ glorifying a succession of Stalinist totalitarian bureaucracies from Tito through Mao to Castro and Ho Chi Minh. One staggering fact: it was 20 years after Mao took power in all of China, clamping down on the workers and jailing the Chinese Trotskyists, before the mainstream of post-Trotsky Trotskyism decided that a political revolution was necessary!

### **The last 40 years**

A number of facts are unmistakable from the evidence of the last 40 years, central to clear assessment of the struggles in the Eastern bloc, yet obscured by or difficult to reconcile with the "deformed and degenerated workers' states" codification.

1. The position of the working class in the command economies is generally worse than in the market economies. Low rents and food rices, and fairly full employment, do make the poorest in the Eastern bloc better off than the poorest in the West. Yet average working-class living standards are lower, even at the same level of general industrial development.

Work conditions, despite the sluggish pace of work in many Eastern Bloc factories much of the time, are worse. *And - centrally - the ruling bureaucracies repress all independent organisation by the working class.*

South Korea is a society based on ruthless exploitation and brutal repression; yet it has allowed some openings for trade unions to develop against the odds. North Korea has allowed no such openings. The contrast between the two Koreas reflects the general picture.

And this is not an extraordinary situation of acute short-term crisis - as the position in the USSR in the '30s could perhaps be viewed at the time. It is a stable pattern for 40, 50 or 60 years.

The command economies have built up large and powerful working classes, working classes which have shown tremendous socialist potential. In that sense they have created preconditions for socialism. *But in their repression of the working class they are further away from socialism than many market economies.*

2. The development of the productive forces may be progressive even if the immediate results for the workers are bad. Many post~1951 Trotskyists have let the goal of working-class self-liberation be obscured by the goal of national economic development, because that national economic development is where the "workers' states" are supposed to display their superiority over market capitalism.

Some command economies have indeed developed industry fast. But so - since 1945 - have many market economies. The command economies can certainly show no general, clear superiority over the market economies in developing the forces of production. Indeed, relative stagnation in the USSR and Eastern Europe is now the starting point for Gorbachev's reforms.

The command economies are not a stage beyond capitalism in developing the productive forces. Rather, they have emerged from underdeveloped capitalist societies with a big load of pre-capitalist or colonialist dross, and done broadly the same work as capitalist development.

A cooperative commonwealth - a nationalised economy planned under workers' democracy - will produce more efficiently and distribute more equally than any market economy ever can. We have no reason to doubt that.

*But the sort of nationalised economy that exists in the Eastern Bloc has no superiority over a market economy - neither superiority in the conditions it creates for the workers, nor superiority in long-term development of the productive forces.*

### **The bureaucracies**

3. Outside the USSR, the ruling bureaucracies are not usurpers of the nationalised economies: they created them. They did not create them because mass pressure forced them to do so against their will.

They created them according to their own wishes and their own designs.

Tie bureaucracies are not acutely unstable. For 40 to 50 years they have been stably self-reproducing organisms. If we do not call them "ruling classes", it can only be on a technicality.

Although sometimes when in power the bureaucracies seek to recruit individuals from the working class, the core of these bureaucracies is certainly not a segment or a product of the working class. They come

from the middle class. Perhaps nowhere is this seen more plainly than in Afghanistan, where a very large part of the middle class and the military and technical intelligentsia tried, in the 1978 coup and after, to transform themselves into a bureaucracy on the USSR model.

Trotsky spoke of the Kremlin bureaucracy as balancing between its social and economic base and the pressure of capitalist imperialism.

Such a view is no longer tenable.

The USSR is the second world power. In Vietnam, China and elsewhere the bureaucratised revolutionary forces were able to defeat the old order and beat down the working class *simultaneously*.

Even while they were revolutionary against the old order, they were simultaneously counter-revolutionary against the working class.

4. The USSR does not correspond exactly to Lenin's picture of imperialism in his 1916 pamphlet.

But then neither does any other country today. Today we commonly use the word "imperialism" in a wider sense than did Lenin, for whom "imperialism" started only around 1898-1902. In that broader sense of the word "imperialism", the US, Britain, etc. are imperialist - and so is the USSR.

Nearly 50 years ago Trotsky wrote: "The driving force behind the Moscow bureaucracy is indubitably the tendency to expand its power, its prestige, its revenues.

"This is the element of 'imperialism' in the widest sense of the word which was a property in the past of all monarchies, oligarchies, ruling castes, medieval estates and classes".

Today the USSR has in Eastern Europe an empire with over 100 million people. You can deny that the USSR is imperialism only by saying that imperialism is only the form of monopoly-capitalist imperialism described by Lenin, and nothing else. And that would be to deny the existence of the Athenian and Roman, the Spanish and Ottoman empires, or indeed of the British Empire for all but 70 or so years of its 300-year life.

The conflict between the US and the USSR is chiefly about competition for spheres of influence and control, rather than a dispute of market economy versus nationalised economy.

### **Pessimism?**

One other fact of the last 40 years puts things in a different light. In the 1930s Trotsky saw capitalism in an impasse. The productive forces had ceased to grow. The working class had ceased to grow, and was being eroded by mass unemployment. The USSR, however, was developing.

Call the USSR a new exploiting society, and you said that the contradictions of capitalism led not to socialism but to that new form of exploitation.

Since 1945 capitalism has grown enormously - faster than ever before. The working class has greatly expanded. Dozens of new countries have industrialised. Seen from the perspective of 1988, the USSR's growth in the 1930s looks not like a bold stride beyond capitalism, but like something essentially parallel to the industrial growth of Japan in the same period, of several Latin American economies in the '30s and '40s, and of many Third World countries since 1945.

In the first place, this makes nonsense of the idea that "deformed workers' states" develop because of the utter impasse, decay and collapse of capitalism. Look at South Korea, Taiwan, Malaysia and Thailand, and it is hard to argue that China, Vietnam and North Korea could not have developed any further on a market-capitalist basis.

In the second place, it does away with the argument that to call the Eastern Bloc new exploiting societies is to commit ourselves to pessimism about the prospect for socialism, or to abandon it altogether. Whatever we call the Eastern Bloc, we have lived through 40 years of expanding capitalism. A "new exploiting society" may have grown - but the numbers and potential of the working class have grown also.

### **Post-1951 Trotskyism**

In the polemics gathered together in the book *In Defence of Marxism* Trotsky insisted that the discussion on the class nature 'of the USSR could not be about labels only. It was and had to be essentially about the perspectives implied in the different name-tags.

On the level of 'name-tags, the post-1951 Trotskyists were extending Trotsky's theory of the USSR - as a degenerated workers' state in which the bureaucracy was in agonising contradiction with the nationalised means of production - to new "deformed workers' state". This did not square with the facts. The post-1951 Trotskyists tried to ignore or define away many facts; but the facts took their revenge.

The post-1951 Trotskyists retained Trotsky's name-tag. But in fact they threw out his theory and perspective. Under the name-tag, what they described was a new form of society in which the nationalised economy was the creation of the bureaucracy. The bureaucracies were essentially new ruling classes - this would come through unmistakably despite efforts to present them, or some of them, as segments of the working class. And they had the mission of developing backward countries for a whole historic period.

The "orthodox Trotskyists" who continued to mouth Trotsky's formula about the degenerated workers' state were actually describing the sort of "bureaucratic collectivist" society which some of his opponents in 1940 described. Only where Trotsky's 1940 opponents put a minus sign on these new societies and called them barbarism, the neo-Trotskyists put a plus sign and called them the socialist revolution.

That was the essential and only meaning of the "degenerated and deformed workers' states" tag.

Isaac Deutscher made this clear. His writings on Stalin and the Stalinist states greatly influenced the post-1951 Trotskyists. Yet, in a reflective summing-up published just after he died in 1967, he avowed that maybe the bureaucracies were new ruling classes. In substance - there can be no doubt about it - his picture of the Stalinist states was that of new societies which were progressive, but had no 'working-class' imprint on them at all.

This has been the fundamental tendency of all the post-1951 "workers' state" theories. It has been accompanied by another tendency, which Militant perhaps brings out most clearly: to write Stalinism into the socialist programme as a progressive (if limited) and perhaps necessary (if regrettable) stage between capitalism and socialism for underdeveloped countries.

The general pattern of post-1951 Trotskyism's response to Stalinist revolutions has been this: for a period to pretend that the revolutionaries are somehow "working-class" or at least part of the "world revolutionary process"; then finally to recognise that the regimes repress the working class, but to continue to see them as somehow progressive.

History took an ironic revenge on the ghost of Leon Trotsky. His most literal and "orthodox" followers embraced the politics of some of his most despised opponents on the left in the 1930s, the so-called "Brandlerites". These were the "Right Communists", the co-thinkers of Bukharin, expelled from the Communist International after 1929. They were much more numerous than the Trotskyists in the 1930s. They criticised the Comintern and the USSR for specific policies and for lack of democracy, but refused to define the bureaucracy as a distinct social formation and rejected Trotsky's call for a new - 'political' - revolution.

The mutation of neo-Trotskyism into neo-Brandlerism began in 1948. Tito fell out with Stalin. The neo-Trotskyists started to pretend that Tito's regime and Tito's bureaucracy were somehow part of the 'world revolution'. Since then the official Trotskyist movement has combined, in an unstable *mélange*, Trotsky's revolutionary programme for the USSR with a critical-Stalinist reformist programme for a succession of other Stalinist states - Yugoslavia, China, Cuba, Vietnam.

## **Our politics**

Our political attitude to the workers and bureaucracies in the Eastern Bloc has been quite different from that of other Trotskyists following the 1951 formula of the "degenerated and deformed workers' states". We should have been more explicit and outspoken about Vietnamese Stalinism - we did attack the illusions widespread on the left, but only, so to speak, in footnotes - but beyond that we have nothing to reproach ourselves with in practical politics.

We did not - as did the Healyites - prattle about the danger of capitalist restoration in Czechoslovakia in 1968. We supported Solidarnosc's call for a working-class boycott of Polish goods when martial law was imposed in 1981. We demanded the withdrawal of USSR troops from Afghanistan from day one.

Over the last 30-odd years, many Trotskyists have made many efforts - often very intricate - to formulate better theories to underpin the 1951 codification. But aren't all those efforts scholastic? Isn't the shift of focus from the working class to the nebulous, classless 'world revolution' a logical product of the attempt to define Yugoslavia, China, etc. as somehow distorted socialist revolutions? (For sure the ,working class was not centre stage to make those revolutions socialist. So what was? The 'world revolution'.)

Isn't the great instability of official Trotskyism, its constant wavering in its attitude to the Eastern Bloc states, an inescapable consequence of the unviability of the 1951 formulas?

Increasingly, the formula "degenerated and deformed workers' states" plays no role at all in our substantive political arguments. Our conclusions are derived from factual assessment, and the formula sits uncomfortably on top of that factual assessment as a formula, no more. Isn't it time to reassess?

## **The provisional nature of Trotsky's formula**

Trotsky, and the Trotskyists up to 1948, made it clear that they saw the description of the USSR as a "degenerated workers' state" as provisional - a makeshift term for an unstable contradictory structure.

In *The Revolution Betrayed* (1935), Trotsky's summary definition of the USSR appears under the heading, "The Character of the Soviet Union Not Yet Decided by History". In 1939 he commented on his definition of the ruling bureaucracy as a caste.

"Its relative superiority lies in this, that the makeshift character of the term is clear to everybody, since it would enter nobody's mind to identify the Moscow oligarchy with the Hindu caste of Brahmins. The old sociological terminology did not and could not prepare a name for a new social event which is in the process of evolution (degeneration) and which has not assumed stable forms".

And again: "Symptomatic of his oncoming death agony, by the sweep and monstrous fraudulence of his purge, Stalin testifies to nothing else but the incapacity of the bureaucracy to transform itself into a stable ruling class. Might we not place ourselves in a ludicrous position if we affixed to the Bonapartist oligarchy the nomenclature of a new ruling class just a few years or even a few months prior to its inglorious downfall?"

And in 1948 the Trotskyists wrote:

"Under these conditions, the progressive character of the production relations means nothing else but that a change in property relations is not necessary for the overthrow of the bureaucracy. The production relations and bureaucratic management are more and more inextricably bound up. Consequently, the progressive character of the Russian economy, which is determined by its capacity to develop the productive forces, tends to become eliminated by the bureaucracy. The greatest attention must be devoted to the study of this development..."

"If we continue to apply the term "degenerated workers' state" to this social organism, we are perfectly aware of the necessity to constantly bring up to date the complete and precise meaning of this definition. In reality, it is impossible to give any exact definition of present Russian society without a lengthy description. The relative superiority of this formula in comparison with all the others proposed up till now lies in this, that it takes into account the historic origin of the USSR and at the same time emphasizes its non-capitalist character and the instability of its social relations, which have not yet acquired their final historic physiognomy..."

## **Time to reassess**

"The greatest attention must be devoted to the study of this development..." But the attention has not been devoted. After 40 years - and after many years of increasingly clear political divergence between us and the post-1951 Trotskyist mainstream - it is time to reconsider.

The only political, programmatic consequence of dropping the "degenerated and deformed workers' state" codification would be to drop the formula of "defence of the USSR" in war, or, as the Trotskyists of 1948 more precisely put it, "defence of what remains of the conquests of October". But we said long ago that that formula was a "tenth-rate issue" politically. In the era of nuclear weapons, it is difficult to see what such "defence of the USSR" could mean practically.

How can you "defend nationalised property" in a nuclear Armageddon?

It is time to reassess. It is time to examine the idea that the Eastern Bloc states are exploiting economies essentially parallel, as regards the development of the forces of production, to market capitalism.

It is a good time to reassess, too.

Often in the past discussion among Trotskyists on the Eastern Bloc has been stifled by loud noise about "capitulation to imperialism" and "Shachtmanism". Today, when US imperialism and the Kremlin are on better terms than for many years and the bourgeois press is feting Gorbachev, such clamour is more difficult.

No doubt some will try to clamour. But we have learned enough in recent years not to be fazed when we are accused of "capitulation to imperialism" by those who think that supporting Argentina's mini-colonialism or the USSR's imperialism are the height of "anti-imperialism".

And what of "Shachtmanism"? Max Shachtman was a leader of the American Trotskyist movement who split with Trotsky in 1940 over reactions to the Hitler-Stalin pact and shortly afterwards developed a theory of the USSR as a new "bureaucratic collectivist" society.

Shachtman never fully sorted out his ideas on the place of "bureaucratic collectivism" in historical perspective. Initially he saw it as progressive compared to capitalism; later, as utterly regressive and

barbaric. In old age (he died, politically isolated, in 1972) he is said to have supported the US's Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba and its bombing of North Vietnam.

Clearly we do not want to follow Shachtman in those respects. But that is not all there was to Shachtman.

As late as 1948, he was present at the Second World Congress of the Fourth International. The Congress Theses on 'The USSR and Stalinism' made a distinction between 'revolutionary' bureaucratic collectivists - meaning Shachtman - and reactionary bureaucratic collectivists like Dwight Macdonald and James Burnham. There was serious talk of a reunification.

In that period -- there is no doubt about it with hindsight - Shachtman was far clearer and sharper in his assessment of what was happening in the Eastern Bloc than were the official Trotskyists.

There are positive things to learn from Shachtman.

How to discuss We must conduct the discussion carefully. Too often discussion of the command economies on the left has been just a search for a label that can then be wielded as a sect badge. But a label is no substitute for detailed, careful, factual analysis.

We have seen that the substantive theories under the "degenerated and deformed workers' state" name-tag are various forms of "progressive bureaucratic collectivism". Under other name-tags, too, operate a variety of quite different and often incongruent theories.

Take the British SWP as an example. It calls the USSR state capitalist. That is its sect badge.

But read its basic text, Cliff's book of 1947. It says that capitalism is collapsing; the USSR is forging ahead industrially; the USSR's economy is regulated by international arms competition rather than the law of value; not even labour-power is a commodity there; it has no trend to overproduction; and so on. In fact it portrays the USSR as a "progressive bureaucratic collectivism" - a new form of exploiting society productively superior to capitalism. Cliff then evades the logical conclusions of this analysis by sheer moralism.

And what about the other Eastern Bloc states? They are called state capitalist, but no attempt is made to extend to them the thesis that arms competition regulates their economies and makes them capitalist.

In fact the SWP's "state capitalist" label is only a label.

Underneath that label it chops and changes between a variety of substantive theories and political conclusions, with no clear accounting.

We are concerned, of course, to find the best label. Some of us think that some term like "bureaucratic collectivism" is the best approximation. Others would prefer "state capitalism". This must be discussed. But we have no intention, no intention at all, of finding a label according to a pre-set timetable.

Our concern is first and foremost to develop an exact, concrete assessment of the workers' struggles and the bureaucracy's operations in the Eastern Bloc, and to fight for a programme for workers' liberty East and West.

For too long the Trotskyist movement has been dominated by sect labels and shibboleths on the question of the USSR. We intend to break that domination. We hope other working-class socialists will join us in our discussion.