

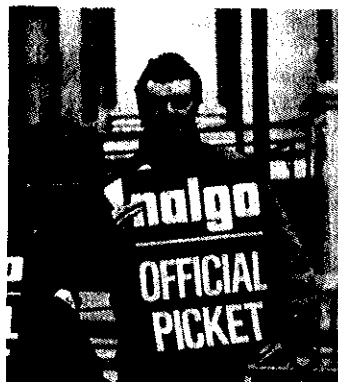
How not to fight the poll tax

It seems almost incredible that it took until late June 1990 for a national conference of trade unionists against the poll tax to be held.

It was well over a year after the poll tax came into effect in Scotland, and nearly three months after it was introduced in England and Wales.

Millions of people are refusing to pay, and impressive anti-poll-tax unions exist in working-class communities and estates. But trade union action has been sporadic and uncoordinated.

The main blame, of course, must lie at the door of the TUC and the national union leaders, who have consistently urged compliance with the law. But *Militant* and the All-Britain Anti-Poll-Tax Federation also bear responsibility.



They have a one-sided, simplistic strategy for beating the poll tax — Don't Pay. They talk for the record about trade union action, non-collection and non-implementation. But in practice they pay virtually no attention to fighting within the unions and make non-payment a panacea, ignoring its limitations and difficulties, and channelling the anti-poll-tax movement away from concern with the trade unions.

Take the case of the CPSA, a union of central importance to the implementation of the poll tax and one, moreover, where *Militant* supporters play a key role.

In late 1989 a number of social security offices in London took unofficial action against registering claimants for the poll tax. It was the first time workers had struck against the tax. The right wing union leaders denounced the strike as "illegal" and ruled out of order any discussion of non-implementation or non-payment within the union.

And the response of the *Militant*-dominated Broad Left was not much better. They made no attempt to encourage or spread the strikes. *Militant* supporters in some regions even refused to debate motions calling for non-cooperation with the tax for fear of the NEC's reaction!

At a small Broad Left meeting in February 1990 *Militant* supporters overturned existing Broad Left policy, instead voting for a policy which in effect calls for any strike against the poll tax by CPSA members to be conditional on the success of a mass non-payment campaign. Talk about putting the cart before the horse!

But that is typical of *Militant*: fine words, grand slogans, but when the going gets tough they make for the nearest bolt-holes.

It was exactly the same back in June and July 1984, when the *Militant*-dominated leadership of Liverpool City Council backed away from making a second front against the Tories with the miners, and instead cobbled together a squalid deal with the government to increase the rates by 17 per cent.

And it was the same after the Trafalgar Square riot in March 1990. Steve Nally and Tommy Sheridan, the *Militant* leaders of the All-Britain Federation, went on television promising to "go public and name names" of rioters — that is, to turn their names over to the police. A bit of hostile pressure from the police and the media, and "super-Marxists" Tommy and Steve buckle.

True, Nally and Sheridan later retracted their statements, but only after an outcry from anti-poll-tax campaigns up and down the land.

The other characteristic of *Militant* is their unwillingness to enter into united activity with other people on the left — or even to debate seriously with other socialists.

All too often anti-poll-tax federations are packed out with "delegates" from groups representing little or nothing on the ground, while representatives of genuine local groups are excluded just in order to maintain *Militant* control.

The November 1989 'All Britain Anti-Poll-Tax Federation Founding Conference' was turned by *Militant* into a self-congratulatory rally. The June trade union conference was originally proposed by the Socialist Movement and the Federation's own (non-*Militant*) trade union officer as a united effort with the Federation.

The Federation leaders (i.e. *Militant*) decided to go it alone rather than organise a conference with other socialists.

No-one can deny the energy and commitment which *Militant* supporters have put into the poll tax struggle. But their simplistic over-emphasis on non-payment, their lack of concern with trade union action, and their unwillingness to work with broader forces, are in danger of leading the struggle into a blind alley.

Jim Denham



Jewish refugee ship, 1942

Trotsky on Zionism

In an article in *Socialist Organiser* (No.388, 9 February 1989) John

O'Mahony stated: "At the end of his life he [Trotsky] believed that the persecution of the Jews and the effect of that persecution on the consciousness of the Jewish people had made the creation of some sort of Jewish state an inescapable necessity. He did not support the Palestine programme of the Zionists, or anyway not as conceived by them. But — his train of thought is clear — he was for a Jewish state nonetheless."

The quotes given for Trotsky's views are from 1937. However, Trotsky's final views on the subject were given in 1940.

Based on the following discussions between Sam Gordon and Leon Trotsky and an extract from his writings it is my contention that at the end of his life Trotsky opposed a Jewish state.

"Gordon: What tactical approach would you suggest [towards Jewish workers in the USA]?"

"Trotsky: That is another thing. I am not informed very well about that phase. The first thing is to give them a perspective, criticise all the past, the democratic tendency, etc. To pose for them that the socialist revolution is the only realistic solution of the Jewish question. If the Jewish workers and peasants asked for an independent state, good — but they didn't get it under Great Britain. But if they want it, the proletariat will give it. We are not in favour, but only the vic-

torious working class can give it to them."

The above is from a discussion between Sam Gordon and Leon Trotsky on 15 January 1940 (*Writings of Leon Trotsky 1939-40*, Pathfinder Press, 1973, p287).

"The attempt to solve the Jewish question through the migration of Jews to Palestine can now be seen again for what it is, a tragic mockery of the Jewish people. Interested in winning the sympathies of the Arabs who are more numerous than the Jews, the British Government has sharply altered its policy towards the Jews, and has actually renounced its promise to help them found their "own home" in a foreign land. The future development of military events may well transform Palestine into a bloody trap for several hundred thousand Jews. Never was it so clear as it is today that the salvation of the Jewish people is bound up inseparably with the overthrow of the capitalist system."

The above is an extract of Trotsky's writings published in *Fourth International* December 1945, p379.

From what I have read on Trotsky's views on the question of the Jewish state it appears that at different times he had different views as to whether or not there should have been such a state. However, John O'Mahony was clearly wrong not to have provided readers of *Socialist Organiser* with Trotsky's 1940 position.

Readers who wish to study Trotsky and the Jewish question should read *Trotsky and the Jews* by Joseph Nedava, obtainable through your library. *Leon Trotsky on the Jewish Question* and *The Jewish Question* by Abram Leon are also required reading. The last two publications are available at left bookshops.

Barry Buitekant

Hitler, Stalin and art

The last issue of *Workers' Liberty* contained an article outlining Stalin's effect on Soviet arts. Stalinist paranoia led to the creation of a cultural bureaucracy which strangled genuine artistic production by insisting on following particular forms and content.

Stalin's basic barbarism was masked by propaganda in favour of expanding artistic production, taking art and culture 'to the people'. The regime was also determined to portray a society which was making great strides forward. This vision was forced on the Soviet people (who were not allowed any choice) as well as being the only picture of Soviet life available to the outside world.

Yet this bureaucratic smothering of the arts came straight after a great flowering of Russian culture. In the decade before the revolution, Russian artists were beginning to use images from their country's history and peasant culture while simultaneously being given access to the Western avant-garde for the first time. Russian artists were at the forefront of developing European artistic discoveries. After the revolution, Russian art again moved forward, putting much artistic theory into practice through painting, propaganda, architecture, posters and radical theatre.

But Stalin crushed those genuine movements, calling them decadent and bourgeois. By contrast, he insisted on a form of so-called 'realism' which was based on 19th century bourgeois culture.

The same cultural 'realism' could be found in Hitler's Germany, around the same time. Like Stalin, Hitler claimed to be bringing art 'to the people' while actually force-feeding them on propaganda and pastiche. As in Russia, the fruits of the artistic explosions of the earlier decade were either suppressed or ridiculed. As in Russia, painting followed a 19th century naturalism, with either sentimental or heroic content. The same is true of film, a medium favoured by both the Nazi and Stalinist regimes.

Both Russia and Germany were home to tremendous film-making talent. Eisenstein in Russia made such films as 'October', 'Battleship Potemkin' and 'Ivan the Terrible'. He used Russian history (ancient and modern) as his subject, and a visual style — montage — which focussed on



The "socialist-realist" worker is from a Nazi poster

repeated movements and images for impact. Probably the most famous Eisenstein sequence, from 'Battleship Potemkin', is of a pram with a baby in it rolling down the Odessa steps. Soldiers march inexorably down, step after step, cutting the mother off from the pram. The camera shows the pram wheels, over and over again, bouncing down, with anonymous soldiers' feet and legs behind it.

In Germany, the expressionists produced films of terror and distortion, such as 'M', 'Nosferatu' and 'The Cabinet of Dr Caligari'. These films also use historical themes, but tell of a divided self rather than a divided society. They make use of fantastic, gothic sets and lighting, folding and twisting the buildings and faces like a hall of mirrors. German expressionism was a powerful influence on the paranoid Hollywood 'film noir' and is still an influence on film today — for example, 'Blade Runner', 'Black Rain' and many horror movies.

But Hitler and Stalin ridiculed and condemned these films, preferring second-rate, bland propaganda features. Even the best

of Stalinist or Nazi film-making (eg. 'Chapayer' or 'Triumph of the Will') cannot compare with even the most hackneyed Hollywood piece. 'Chapayer' (a Russian civil war story) is well made, and 'Triumph of the Will' (about Nazism) likewise. But in both, the film-makers' talents are used only to get the ideological message across. The style is naturalistic — except where the content requires something more dramatic and theatrical. In both films the 'action' (which is very slow) is occasionally halted for a trite, theatrical pose of hero against the sky to be fully exploited.

There is far more in common between 'Chapayer' and 'Triumph of the Will' than either has in common with Eisenstein or German Expressionism. Yet the two former films were supposed to be in essentially national styles.

The visual arts of both Nazism and Stalinism focused on the rural as opposed to the urban, on national rather than international, and both made ordinary people (peasants, soldiers, housewives) into heroes. Under each regime the image of the Leader as both a historic figure of great impor-

tance and a simple, caring man is common.

Architecture followed the same broad pattern of 19th century classicism in both countries. Stalin built less than Hitler but his urban centres are scaled down models of Hitler's monumental colonnades. Both leaders favoured stylised 'traditional' pageants and military-style parades. Both used endlessly repeated symbols — the red flag, hammer and sickle, (identical) statues of Lenin, swastikas, 'perfect' male figures.

In neither case have the artistic forms proved enduring. Stalinist art and literature was largely ignored by the Russian people in favour of those classics which were available. German architects quickly abandoned classicism for modernism after the war. The best of the artists had either left, gone underground or been persecuted under Stalin and Hitler so that artistic innovation shifted to other countries, notably the USA. Far from bringing art 'to the people', Stalin and Hitler sent it abroad, or killed it, so denying it to the people for decades.

Elizabeth Millward

A symposium on Stalinism

The last Workers' Liberty carried a symposium of different revolutionary socialist assessments of the Stalinist systems. Oliver Macdonald put the "workers' state" position; Robert Brenner argued that Stalinism constitutes a distinctive form of class society, neither capitalist nor proletarian; Frank Furedi argued that there was simply no ruling class in the Stalinist states; an Iranian Marxist contended that the former "degenerated workers' state" in the USSR had degenerated to the point that it was no longer a workers' state, though it was not capitalist either; and Martin Thomas put Socialist Organiser's general position that the Stalinist societies are exploitative class systems roughly parallel to capitalism.

Here we print a short symposium of opinions on the question held by supporters of Socialist Organiser and Workers' Liberty. Collectively we believe that the Stalinist states are a form of class society which, in history, parallels capitalism, and is in no sense post-capitalist. We advocate that the working class in those societies should make their own socialist revolution.

The precise scientific characterisation of those states we see as matter for ongoing discussion. A recent Socialist Organiser editorial board endorsed the following definition of how we see the way forward on this question.

"Quite apart from the possible immediate ill-effects of the establishment of a name-tag 'position' by factional vote-out — and because of the wide agreement on the substantive questions that might not be very much — we would pay a very high price. We would choke off a very promising discussion; saddle ourselves with a shibboleth in the form of a name-tag theory; introduce an additional and possibly envenomed element of factionalism into the discussion, especially in the run-up to the vote-out.

Above all, we would be turning our face firmly, and our practice energetically, towards the tradition of sects and shibboleths which has

bedevilled this question since Trotsky died. We would be turning away from the aspiration to an open-ended scientific — that is, Marxist — approach, which is what has guided us on this question for a long time, indeed, since long before we even thought of abandoning the 'workers' state' position".

In the following statements, which have been excerpted from material circulated among SO supporters or from SO, is covered the range of opinion found among SO supporters. Alan Johnson puts one variant of a state-capitalist thesis, Martin Thomas another; Duncan Chapple, Pete Keenlyside, and others defend the degenerated and deformed workers' states position; Stan Crooke puts the "no ruling class" position associated mainly with Hillel Ticktin; and Sean Matgamna argues that the Stalinist states constitute a form of society distinct from both capitalism and socialism.

The earthquake now shaking the Stalinist world throws a sharp new light on the discussion. This small collection records the state of the debate on Stalinism among SO supporters before the earthquake.



National plan, international competition, state capitalism

Workers in the Stalinist societies are wage-labourers, exchanging their labour power to obtain the necessities of life. They receive wages which do not rise over a historically conditioned level of subsistence. They are 'free' wage labourers: free from ownership or control of the means of production and free to move from one enterprise to another. So, in other words, the situation of the Soviet worker is in essence identical to that of the worker under private capitalism.

And what of the position of the bureaucracy? In what sense is it a "collective capitalist"? Isn't it plain that one can't have a capitalist state without private capitalists?

Capitalism is not defined by private ownership of the means of production. Capitalism is defined by the nature of the accumulation process. This is its "central dynamic" which both links nineteenth century private capitalism and twentieth century state capitalism. Peter Binns defines it as the process by which "The direct producers are exploited and the fruits of this exploitation — Marx called it surplus value — is accumulated in further means of production".

In pre-capitalist societies exploitation led to increased consumption (castles, cathedrals and armies). In capitalist society the entire society is subordinated to the drive to accumulation of capitalist means of production: this is made possible by the separation of the working class from ownership and control of the means of production and the fact of competition between those who own the means of production (which compels the individual capitalist to accumulate the fruits of exploitation).

A critical theoretical insight of state capitalism is that as competition drives on the accumulation process, that process reacts back on it and can transform the mechanisms of competition. So Marx and Engels noted the processes of concentration and centralisation of capital leading to joint-stock companies and trusts ("an end not only to private production but also to planlessness" — Engels).

Surely there is no competition within the Soviet Union, so no drive to accumulate? Looked at purely internally this is true. But the Soviet Union is part of the world economy. The accumulation process changes the form of competition also on a world scale.

Bukharin argued in 1916, over 70 years ago, that the formation of monopolies, the domination of money-capital and the world struggle for markets were part of a fundamental change in capitalism. State and monopoly capital were becoming even more intertwined, the nation-state was replacing the individual firm as the organising centre of capitalist production, and accumulation and competition between capitals assuming a military form.

"The state power thus sucks in almost all branches of production; it not only maintains the general conditions of the exploitative process, the state more and more becomes a direct exploiter, organising and directing production as a collective capitalist."

But as plan replaces planlessness on a national scale, "the system of world economy is

just as blindly irrational and 'subjectless' as the earlier system of national economy" wrote Bukharin in 1920. The world market is, therefore, an integrated system of which individual nation-states were component parts. Competition on a world scale, said Bukharin, led to a tendency toward state capitalism within individual national economies.

In the Soviet Union the bureaucracy, unable/unwilling to link its fate to international working-class revolution, had to defend itself by competing with its rivals on the world economy.

So the Soviet bureaucracy stands in a capitalist relation to the Soviet working class and a capitalist relation to the other capitalists and state capitals that make up the world economy: the USSR inc.

From an analysis of the social relations of production, starting with the conditions of the immediate producers, we have seen how the absence of workers' power at the point of production resulted in a subordination to the world capitalist economy, which in turn made necessary the competitive accumulation of capital, which led to intense exploitation of the working class, which required for its enforcement a totalitarian dictatorship and bourgeois relations of production in the workplace.

Alan Johnson, summer 1989.

Deformed capitalist states

The revolutions which created state-monopoly industrialism were all made in under-developed capitalist countries. They were not just capitalist countries, but capitalist countries with a great weight of colonialist or pre-capitalist landlord domination (or, in Cuba, a particularly archaic and stagnant form of capitalism).

The revolutionaries mobilised the masses not against capitalism but against foreign and landlord domination.

The revolutionary forces were militarised. At the head of peasant armies, there were tightly-knit elites of middle-class origin.

The most important capitalists in these countries were closely tied to foreign and landlord interests. No wonder that a section of the — very large — middle classes turned against them, fighting for a better national industrial development. On taking power, the revolutionaries did not want to share their victory with those established capitalists.

The result is a form of economy parallel to market capitalism. Its characteristic divergence from market-capitalist

development are systematisations of divergences imposed ad hoc by many less monopolistic states, concerned to develop a base for national industrial capitalism. So is state-monopoly industrialism a special form of state capitalism?

Objection 1: Capitalism is a market system. A command economy can't be capitalism.

Answer: Notice that the Marxist classics never raise this issue, although their theoretical models of 'state capitalism' are obviously not free-market systems.

For Engels, under state capitalism 'freedom of competition (would) change into its very opposite — into monopoly; and the production without any definite plan of capitalist society capitulates to the production upon a definite plan of the invading socialistic society (but) so far still to the benefit and advantage of the capitalists' (*Anti-Dühring*, p329). What makes this state capitalism still capitalism is that 'The workers remain wage-workers — proletarians'.

Capitalism is the system of exploitation of wage-labour by capital, whether carried out in a free market or a state-controlled economy. And the workers remain wage-workers under state-monopoly industrialism.

Objection 2: The workers are not really wage-workers under state-monopoly industrialism. They are state slaves. Wage-labour implies a more or less free labour market.

Answer: "State capitalism, for the worker, is wage-labour plus control and surveillance," as the Algerian Marxist Benhouria puts it.

But for all that, there are labour markets in the state-monopoly industrialist societies. Instead of being handed rations,

workers are paid wages and buy their subsistence. Indeed, in the USSR, and much of Eastern Europe, enterprises bid against each other by offering bonuses to attract good workers. There is a difference between the situation of the bulk of the workers — wage-workers — and that of the slaves in forced-labour camps.

The connected political question is this: do the state-monopoly industrialisms create a wage-working class of the sort discussed in Marxist theory? A class with socialist potential? Yes!

Objection 3: Wage-labour alone does not define capitalism. It is wage-labour and capital. You need to show that capital exists in the USSR. Machinery and factories are not of themselves capital. Capital is a social relation.

Answer: The record of the last 50 or 60 years is undeniably that the state-monopoly industrialisms aim not just for the production of particular use-values — be they palaces or power stations — but for the production of wealth in general, wealth not limited to any predefined form. That is



capital.

What mechanism drives them to that aim? It is the competition of their national capital on the world market. For some it is direct and immediate competition in world trade.

The USSR and China were long outside world trade. But weren't those state-monopoly industrialisms attempting to prepare themselves to enter world trade without being devastated? Isn't that also a form of competition?

Objection 4: If these state-monopoly industrialisms are just forms of capitalism, then why can't they be ordinary capitalist societies? Why don't they allow trade unions and opposition parties?

Answer: They are very special forms of capitalism. Trotsky thought state-capitalism would be impossible because the single state capital would be "too tempting an object for social revolution". Engels thought the same: "No nation will be put up with...so barefaced an exploitation of the community by a small band of dividend-mongers".

Trotsky and Engels were not entirely wrong. These regimes are inherently tense and vulnerable.

Objection 5: State-monopoly industrialism is very different from what we know as capitalism in Britain. What is the sense in applying the same term to two such different societies?

Answer: Only in the textbooks does history proceed tidily from stereotype slavery to stereotype feudalism to stereotype capitalism. Each of the major modes of production known to history has seen wide variations. History is full of hybrid and exceptional formations which cannot be slotted tidily into one category or another.

For decades Trotskyists argued that the USSR could be a "degenerated workers' state", despite being utterly different on almost every point from the theoretical norm of a workers' state; why should its rather smaller differences from the theoretical norm of a capitalist state prevent it being considered a "deformed capitalist state"?

Martin Thomas, October 1988

It remains a workers' state

Because the USSR retains the nationalised property forms established by the 1917 October revolution, it remains a workers' state, though horribly degenerated. Since 1933 our movement has stood for a political revolution of the working class against the bureaucracy, and with the Soviet workers in defence of the gains of the revolution against both imperialism and the bureaucracy.

After the war, capitalism was also overthrown in other states. This totally disoriented the Fourth International. The FI considered states like Yugoslavia and China to be run by relatively healthy revolutionary parties.

The same mistakes were made by the majority in the FI when Stalinists and nationalists created deformed workers' states in Cuba, Vietnam and elsewhere.

The states came around because of the growing weakness of imperialism after the war and the absence of Marxists within the international working class movement. They smashed the old capitalist state to develop a dictatorship over the working class based on the property relations as exist in the Soviet Union. They were workers' states, monstrously deformed from birth and modelled on the degenerated workers' state of Stalin, not the healthy workers' state fought for by Lenin and Trotsky.

But why was the mainstream of the FI so wrong? They had abandoned the concept that Stalinism could be simultaneously revolutionary against capitalism and counter-revolutionary against the workers.

Duncan Chapple, Pete Keenlyside and others, early 1990

The loss of political power by the workers to the Stalinist bureaucracy did not mean the restoration of capitalism.

The bureaucracy was not the old ruling class reformed, running a nationalised economy because it happened to be the best way to make profits. Rather, the bureaucracy is a layer of parasites that depends on the nationalised economy, but is unable to exist without it.

In terms of its basic make-up, the USSR is an unstable not natural formation. It was able to duplicate itself because of the weakness in the late '40s of both the working class and the imperialists.

And as we have seen many times, it produced not a cohesive stable structure, but an unbalanced, contradictory kind of society which has exploded time and time again.

The USSR is a society trapped between capitalism and communism. The bureaucrats fight had to keep it away from revolution and counter-revolution. The fact that they have halfway succeeded in keeping that balance does not mean that there must have been some massiven change.

People who argue that the length of time the bureaucrats have held power means that they are now a capitalist or other form of stable class argue against both Marxism and reality.

A relationship between time and change does exist. But it is not the only determinant. Imagine all the things that happen to a tree during a period of time: it can rot or it can continue to grow; it can be chopped down or burned; or it can fossilise or turn to oil.

What is the best way of telling what actually has happened? Looking at the tree or looking at your watch? The answer is clear. The same point is true of the Soviet Union. A state blocked in transition does not automatically turn into another form of society just because of time!

Trotsky argued (in *The Workers' State and the Question of Thermidor and Bonapartism*, 1935) that the nature of the USSR could only be determined by its substance — "its social foundation and economic tendencies". The nature of a state remains the same until something happens to make it change — until a revolutionary force, either the capitalists or the workers, take power.

The way to tell if the class nature of the Soviet Union has changed is to look if its foundations have fundamentally changed. They haven't, at least in the 65 years since the Soviet thermidor began.

As Trotsky wrote, "He who asserts that the soviet government has gradually been changed from proletarian to bourgeois is only, so to speak, running back the film of reformism" (*The class nature of the Soviet state*, 1933).

August 1989

Neither planning nor market operates

There can be only two possible regulators for the supply and extraction of human social labour: direct social regulation (either 'customary' as in feudalism, or conscious as in communism) or the blind workings of the price-form (ie. where the product of social labour has the commodity form and is an exchange value, as in capitalism).

In relation to the Eastern Bloc

states the problem — both for those attempting an analysis and also for the bureaucracies trying to rule — is that neither of these two possible regulators operates.

The former (direct social regulation) could operate only on the basis of socialist democracy.

The latter (the blind workings of the price-form) could operate only where labour power is a commodity. But for the labour power to be a commodity in the Soviet Union (or anywhere else) it would have to be bought and sold on a labour market, and the wage paid would have to be in return for labour-time.

Such circumstances manifestly do not pertain in the Soviet Union and other Eastern Bloc countries. Workers can move around the country, within limits, but this is not the same as the existence of a labour market; and what the worker receives in the pay packet might be a "wage" in name, but in reality, given the secondary and limited role played by money in the Soviet economy, it is more akin to a ration card for withdrawing from the net product produced.

In other words, and put more plainly:

a) Production in the Eastern Bloc states does not take place on the basis of a plan. There cannot be a plan because there is no democracy. (It is true that orders are given, and that some are partially obeyed, after a fashion. But giving commands about production is something different from the planning of production).

b) Production in the Eastern Bloc states is not governed by the workings of the capitalist "free market". This cannot be the case because there is no market (or any other of the categories of capitalism) in these states.

This explains much about the features of the Eastern Bloc states — the atomisation of the working class, the acute instability of the bureaucracies, the low quality of Eastern Bloc products, the constant failure to meet the "plan" targets, the inherent problems in the introduction of new technology, etc., etc. However, the point at issue here is what the above means with regard to the existence or otherwise of a "ruling class" in the Eastern Bloc states.

Just as the defining feature of society is how unpaid surplus labour is pumped out of the direct producer, so too, it logically follows, the defining feature of a ruling class (i.e. what makes a group of people a ruling class in reality and not just in name) is control over the surplus product.

It is control over the surplus product which is the crucial category, not oppressiveness (all ruling classes are oppressive; but oppressiveness in itself does not make the agents of oppression a "ruling class") nor "ownership of the means of production" (the belief that "ownership of the

means of production" is the criterion of a "ruling class" is a Stalinist invention; Marx himself never said any such thing).

Given that the Stalinist bureaucracy does not, and cannot, exercise control over the surplus product, it cannot be a "ruling class" in any Marxist sense. The individuals who constitute the bureaucracy have no control over the surplus product as individuals. Nor does the bureaucracy collectively have control over the surplus product.

The "system" in the Eastern Bloc states is therefore a historical blind alley. It is a historical blind alley in which the ruling stratum, whilst striving to become a ruling class, can never actually become one, because the "system" over which it presides is one which precludes the possibility of it ever achieving that control over the surplus product which is the criterion of a ruling class.

Stan Crooke, late 1988



A unique way of getting surplus product

It seems to me nonsense to characterise Russia in terms of capitalism.

To take — as some SO comrades do — aspects of capitalist states throughout the world, and of capitalist formations throughout history, and from them to create a kind of pastiche, is a-historical. It loses sight of Russian realities, and it obscures the particular Stalinist socio-economic formation we are examining by pasting a collage of images and, so to speak, historical snapshots over it.

Capitalism is essentially the exploitation of wage labour by capital for the extraction of surplus value, and an economic system that is regulated by the consequences of that fundamental class relationship, by way of a really controlling and regulating market. It is regulated by such facts as that investment is determined by profit, and if you don't make a profit you go under.

That's an abstract model, but it's the essence of capitalism. Today, of course, and for most of this century, you find various inroads made by state activity into the classic model of capitalism, inroads which mitigate the laws and change some of the workings of capitalism.

In the USSR it has been a mat-

ter not of mitigations and offsettings of the laws of capitalism, but of a qualitatively different system.

The dominant thing there is the existence of a state bureaucracy millions strong, clustered in and around an all-controlling, all-owning, all-encompassing state, which operates the economy politically. Political, or politico-economic, decisions broadly determine what the spontaneously regulating market determines in the classic capitalist model, and what the market and government intervention on behalf of the capitalist class determine in recent real capitalism.

The Stalinist system is not regulated by anything like 'spontaneous capitalism'. It is different from even the most extreme modification we have seen of spontaneous capitalism — that of wartime Nazi Germany. It is not regulated by any kind of autonomous mechanism, but by state power.

The rulers' real control over what happens in the interstices of the economy has been assessed by socialists since Trotsky's time as blind and feeble. Silt has built up, clogging the arteries of the system, and producing strains and convulsions.

Nevertheless, it has to be either/or. Either there is some broad correspondence between what is decided and what happens, or the system would have collapsed into chaos long ago. Instead of the once-impressive industrialisation achieved in the USSR by the Stalinist system, there would have been a collapse into peasant subsistence economy and the generation of market capitalism out of that.

Even when it ceases to exercise active, centralised, deliberated control, the state bureaucracy squats on the society exercising the control of inertia. Because of it nobody else can move and do things on the requisite scale.

In the totalitarian state monopoly systems the central feature is the preponderance of state power. Therefore to call it state capitalism is to miss the point. It is a distinct form of economy, or rather a distinct socio-economic formation.

In any case, we should not, like vulgar Marxists, try to analyse a society just by saying 'What's the economic mainspring?' We should talk about socio-economic formations. In Stalinist states we have a unique level of bureaucracy and state power, together with the elimination of the old ruling class, or their utter marginalisation and subordination (China). We have a unique way of appropriating surplus product.

How did the Stalinist bureaucracies evolve? If bureaucracies similar to that of the USSR arise in other countries such as Yugoslavia, Vietnam, or Cuba, how do you explain them?

Monopoly capitalism has developed the forces of production on a world scale. It competes with the rest of the world and with its 'other selves' on the basis of vast concentrations of the means of production. In order for backward countries to compete they too must concentrate the means of production, and only the state can do this. So a vast spread of statification occurs.

This happens both in "bureaucratic collectivist" states and in other societies which are quite different and where there is a ruling bourgeoisie. The root cause is the same, though the medium varies — capitalist military regimes, Stalinist peasant armies, hybrid formations like the Syrian and Iraqi factions of the "developmentalist" Ba'ath party, etc.

The end result varies, too, from Egypt, where a military regime conducted a 20-year experiment in almost Stalinist state power, without eliminating the old ruling class, to Mao's China; from the Stalinist, and seemingly durable, level of state control imposed on Burma by the army for 30 years to the looser "Stalinism" of 1960s Cuba.

Those socio-economic formations which are the result of a thoroughgoing "anti-capitalist revolution" in which the old ruling class is eliminated fully, and fully replaced by a new collective ruling elite clustered around the state power, which is its collective state power — those seem to me to be qualitatively different from the in-between and hybrid cases, like 1960s Egypt.

You must divide the states subject to statification into two distinct types. In the first type you have a powerful mass movement which makes a revolution and eliminates the old ruling class. It is simultaneously counter-revolutionary against the working class. That type is Stalinist, in that it has a programme based on the Russian revolution in its degenerate Stalinist phase and creates mechanisms to squeeze the working class. It has a very strong ruling elite and it is very stable, for a long time.

The other variant is where a less powerful, less ideologically motivated group takes power from the old ruling class, usually in a military struggle, and then sets out to develop the means of production using the state. These don't usually destroy the old ruling class.

There is an essential distinction between state capitalism and the Stalinist formations. The distinction lies in the nature of the ruling class and in its relationship to state power and the relationship of state power to society. There are all kinds of halfway houses, but there's no reason to equate the hybrids with the basic distinct species.

Sean Matgamna, Summer 1987.