



U.S. FRIENDS OF THE SOVIET PEOPLE

"CONTINUING THE WORK OF THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF AMERICAN-SOVIET FRIENDSHIP"

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Social Democracy, Soviet Socialism and the Bottom 99 Percent

By Stephen Gowans

The Soviet Counter-Example.



It is instructive to consider Soviet social welfare, to understand what capitalist democracies once competed against, and to appreciate its breadth and depth. Although it is certainly unfashionable in capitalist democracies to say so, it is true all the same that the Soviet Union was organized to serve the interests of the mass of its people, and not to enrich an elite of bankers, major investors and corporate titans, as is true in our own societies, and in Russia and other countries of the former Soviet Union today.

Some will object that the USSR was organized to serve the interests of the Communist Party elite, and that it too was divided between the 99% and the one percent. To be sure, the Soviet Union was not built along anarchist lines. There was an elite, but the advantages the elite enjoyed were picayune by the standards of capitalist democracies. The elite lived in modest apartments and had incomes relative to the average industrial worker that were no greater than the incomes of physicians in the United States relative to the average US industrial wage. Top Communist Party officials did not own productive property and therefore could not transfer it, and neither could they transfer position or privilege, across generations to their children. Moreover, the very mild level of income disparity in the Soviet Union was mitigated by the reality that many necessities were available free of charge or at highly subsidized rates.

Employment in the USSR was guaranteed – indeed, obligated (an important point to correct one of the cruder misconceptions that socialism amounts to the unemployed collecting welfare cheques.) Work was considered a social duty. Living off of rent, profits, speculation or the black market – social parasitism – was illegal. Education was free through university, with living stipends for post-secondary students. The USSR had a lower teacher to student ratio than the United States. Healthcare was free, and drugs prescribed in the hospital or for chronic illness were also free. The Soviet Union had the greatest number of doctors per capita of any country in the world and had more hospital beds per person than the United States or Britain. That US citizens have to pay for their healthcare was considered extremely barbaric in the Soviet Union, and Soviet citizens “often Questioned US tourists quite quite incredulously on this point.” (Continued on Page 3)



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Credo of U.S. Friends of the Soviet People

U.S. Friends of the Soviet People is dedicated to supporting struggles to restore socialism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. USFSP is the U.S. Affiliate to the International Council for Friendship and Solidarity with the Soviet People. The International Council carries on the traditions of the "Hands Off Russia" Committees that were established internationally in 1918 to help protect the young Soviet Republic from foreign intervention. The aim of all Friends of the Soviet People is international cooperation in building socialism and solidarity with the anti-imperialist forces of the world who are struggling against U.S. Imperialism - the main enemy of humanity.

U.S.F.S.P. acts as a unifying force to help consolidate and coordinate the anti-imperialist forces of the world with the ongoing movement to restore the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe as socialist states. We act as a unifying front, but are not a forum for ideological debates. The people of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe themselves will chose their paths toward socialism.

(Continued From Page 1)

Soviet workers received an average of three weeks of paid vacation per year. Necessities, such as food, clothing, transportation and housing were subsidized. By law, rent could exceed no more than five percent of a citizen's income, compared to 25 to 30 percent "often or more in the United States. Women were granted paid maternity leave as early as 1936. The constitution of 1977 guaranteed that "The state (would help) the family by providing and developing a broad system of childcare...by paying grants on the birth of a child, by providing children's allowances and benefits for large families." All Soviet citizens were eligible for generous retirement pensions — men at age 60, women at 55. Concerning women's rights: "The Soviet Union was the first country to legalize abortions, develop public child care, and bring women into top government jobs. The radical transformation of women's position was most pronounced in the traditionally Islamic areas, where an intense campaign liberated women from extremely repressive conditions." (7) The work week was limited to 41 hours and overtime work was prohibited except under special circumstances. Night-shift workers worked only seven hours per day (but were paid for eight), and people who worked at dangerous jobs (coal, for example) or jobs that required constant alertness (physicians, for example) worked shorter shifts but received full pay.

To be sure, life could be harder in the Soviet Union compared to what it was for middle-and upper-income citizens of the rich capitalist democracies (but not the poor of these countries nor the millions of Blacks and Hispanics in US ghettos nor the denizens of the capitalist global south, i.e., the bulk of humanity.) Housing was guaranteed and rents extremely low, but the housing stock was limited.

The Nazis had destroyed much of the country's living accommodations, and the USSR's emphasis on heavy industry slowed the building of replacement stock. Incomes, too, were lower, but the Soviet Union had started at a particularly low level of economic development, and despite rapid gains, had not caught up to the West at the point of its demise. Still, life was more certain more certain. And on such human development measures as infant mortality, life expectancy, doctors per capita, adult literacy, daily calories per person, and educational attainment, the Soviet Union and other communist countries performed at the same level as richer, industrialized capitalist countries, and better than capitalist countries at the same level of economic development. but didn't the But didn't the Soviet Union come to an end because its publicly owned and planned economy broke down? Not at all. Excluding the war years, the Soviet economy grew every year from the point socialism was introduced in 1928 until the last Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, began to dismantle it in the late 1980s. And for most of those years it grew faster than the capitalist economies of North America and Western Europe. Indeed, by the mid-1970s, there was serious concern in Washington that the Soviet economy would soon surpass that of the United States.

The Soviet Union's demise is more aptly described as a capitulation (some say suicide) rather than an economic collapse. The torrid pace of Soviet economic growth began to slow in the 1970s, for a variety of reasons. An exhaustive examination of all of all the reasons would require more space than is available here. But there is one reason worth quickly mentioning. The country's efforts to keep pace militarily with the United States and NATO monopolized research & development, depriving the civilian economy of the fuel it needed to innovate to overtake the US economy (Complaints may have frequently been made the quality of Soviet consumer goods, but no one complained about the quality of Soviet



military hardware. If the Soviets failed to surpass capitalism, or worse, fell behind, the commitment of Soviet citizens to socialism would weaken. What's more, the country's ability to defend itself would either atrophy, or the country would be called upon to allocate increasingly larger proportions of its budget to defence. Neither option was sustainable. To address these looming problems, Gorbachev formulated a two-prong solution. First, he would yield to the Americans on a number of foreign policy fronts. Second, he would reduce the role of planning in the economy in favour of enterprise autonomy and markets. The first prong would reduce military tension with the United States and lessen the burden on the Soviet economy of military spending and aid to national liberation movements and socialist allies. The second, it was hoped, would kick the economy into a higher gear. Neither worked. Gorbachev's capitulations on foreign policy and abandonment of socialist allies emboldened counter-revolutionary forces in Eastern Europe and dispirited Communist parties on the USSR's western borders. Eastern Europe's governments fell. The successor governments reoriented their economies to the West, disrupting the Soviet economy, which had been tightly with them. At the same time, the abrupt transition to enterprise autonomy and markets sent the Soviet economy into a tail-spin. GDP fell sharply not because the socialist economy had broken down, but because it was being torn apart. Gorbachev's conciliation with US foreign policy and steps toward market socialism transformed a manageable difficulty into a catastrophe. As one wag put it, Stalin found the Soviet Union a wreck and by building socialism left it a superpower. Gorbachev found it a superpower and by abandoning socialism left it a wreck.

The point, however, isn't to explore the reasons for the Soviet Union's demise, but to show that while it existed, the USSR provided a successful counter-example to capitalism. The ideological struggle of the capitalist democracies against the Soviet Union entailed the provision of robust social welfare programs and the translation of productivity gains into a monotonically rising standard of living. Once the ideological struggle came to an end with the closing of the Cold War, it was no longer necessary to impart these advantages to the working classes of North America, Western Europe and Japan. Despite rising productivity, growth in household incomes was capped, and social welfare measures were systematically scaled back.

Social democracy did nothing to reverse or arrest these trends. It was irrelevant. When strong social welfare measures and rising incomes were needed by the top one percent to undercut working class restlessness and the Soviet Union's counter-example, these advantages were conferred on the bottom 99 percent by both social democratic and conservative governments. When these sops were no longer needed, both conservative and social democratic governments enacted measures to take them back.



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