

You Don't Have to be a Saint to be a Socialist

by Edwin L. Laing

What if the world were a place where everyone had the comfortable essentials of a full life, including satisfying work, housing, food, clothing and health care? Plus the opportunity to learn and develop into all she/he could be? A world where neither the environment nor people were exploited?

Democratic Socialism is the exciting, life-affirming idea for a world that works for everyone, a vision whose time can come.

This pamphlet is for people who know a little about socialism but have questions about it.

WHAT IS DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISM?

Democratic Socialism extends democracy from the political system to the economic system. A democratic political system is a system of government controlled by the people. Socialists want to extend that democratic control to the way goods and services are produced. We want to change from a form where production is for profit (capitalism) to a form where production is for the use of all, in harmony with the earth (socialism).

CAPITALISM

What is wrong with a system where profit is the purpose of production?

A great many things.

For example, to maximize profits, *unemployment* is necessary in order to weaken the bargaining power of working people seeking higher pay or better benefits and working conditions, because workers know that others are competing for their jobs. Unemployment creates *insecurity and poverty and pits worker against worker*, often along lines of *race, ethnicity or class*, where those who are lower on the economic ladder or differ in some way are made to appear your competitors or willing to work for less.

Even without unemployment, the profit system results in *absurd differences in wealth*, where a few at the top have more than they can ever use, and enormous numbers of people are left with not enough or in poverty.

At the same time, capitalism's race for profits requires enormous expenditures for advertising (*paid for by the consumer*) with its manipulation of our wants and fears and the *downplaying of our critical capability* (which ability is crucial in a democracy), since all we need to do is respond at our primitive level to this *commodification of life*.

Maximizing profits results in *exploitation of workers, the environment and the consumer*. Capitalists can make more money for themselves if they *pay* their workers as *little* as they can get by with. The same if they *use up* the environment rather than respect it and husband it. And the same if they make products that they can *control* the *price* of.

But I thought that capitalism is based on *competition* so that *prices* are controlled by the *market*. Capitalists tell us that *producing more cheaply* and *defeating competitors* is good for the *consumer*.

These are two of the utopian ideas of capitalism. In practice many markets have *no real competition*. And a huge part of the world's poorer population is *left out of the market* altogether. Further, producing more cheaply often does not result in lower prices but only increases profits; the saving may not be passed on to consumers or workers.

But the *real goal of competition* is to *dominate* or monopolize the market so that *competition disappears* and prices can be *set high* or market share be increased. Then when market control expands far enough, prices can be expected to be raised as much as the market will bear. Put another way, the final purpose of competition in capitalism is to end or reduce competition!

And we must remember that "defeating competitors" often results in the defeated competitors losing their money and their workers losing their jobs (or being squeezed to accept less pay and benefits so as to make it easier for the boss to compete). *A system based on losing money or defeating the ability to earn a living is a wasteful system harmful to people.*

This wasteful and destructive nature of capitalism is what *Albert Einstein, a socialist, called "economic anarchy"*. He described capitalism's monopolistic nature as "an oligarchy of private capital the enormous power of which cannot be effectively checked even by a democratically organized political society." ("Why Socialism?" Monthly Review, May 1949)

SOCIALISM

So what do you mean by a *socialist form* – where *production is for use and not for profit*?

Socialists will not settle for less than a system where fundamental human needs of all are fully met: food, housing, health care, life long learning and the opportunity to become the person you can be. People will decide democratically what things and services they really need and want – not wants and wishes created by advertising – and those will be produced in workplaces where workers are treated and paid fairly and participate in decisions about working conditions, safety, health, retirement etc. This kind of treatment and participation is the main idea of extending democracy to the workplace. Quoting Engels, Rosa Luxemburg said the choice for humanity is "socialism or barbarism."

How do you know this will work to meet society's needs as democratically decided upon?

Because society as a whole will have decided to do things this way, and, from workers' viewpoint, people want to have the secure, participatory kind of life where they engage in *satisfying work in safe, rewarding conditions*, rather than being at risk for the dangers and exploitation in a capitalist system.

I also mean how do you know this will work to actually produce what is really needed and wanted?

Decentralized democratic decision making by the people as a whole will constantly monitor and change the production process to be sure it is performing to meet requirements.

And yes, we can afford to treat all of us fairly:

First, the enormous resources, technology and production capabilities of today can easily generate a fair standard of living for all, especially if the enormous profits going to the very top capitalists under the present system are no longer a burden.

Second, production requirements will be *smaller* than in the *wasteful capitalist system* we now have, where production must constantly expand in a cancerous way or die. (In fact it is now expanding but without fair treatment of working people, so there is overproduction but not enough people with enough money to consume it).

A major example of wasteful capitalism is the *enormous war machine*, which sucks up national wealth in "welfare for arms makers". This makes crazy sense for a capitalist system that must seek to "project political power militarily" (i.e. kill people) to dominate the rest of the world in order to control markets and resources to accumulate great wealth. It makes no sense to socialists, who, putting aside actions by the United Nations, believe in letting other nations be independent and have fair trade with us. What if these enormous war machine *resources were put to work instead in meeting social needs* – building housing etc.?

You say "decentralized democratic decision making", but how can overall needs be met if each locality is making its own decisions independently?

A federal system with democratically chosen representatives may be the best way to insure that we don't work at cross purposes or selfishly but have a big picture constantly in mind. Those representatives would be charged with carrying out corrections to make the whole society benefit.

So is this central planning?

Mixed with multiple local planning, yes. But remember, any nation has economic planning; it is only a matter of who does the planning, how well, and *in whose interests!* Capitalists do a lot of selfish short term planning to maximize their own immediate profits, often at the expense of the society as a whole. Long term planning for the whole society may have to *emphasize education, energy and infrastructure such as mass transit*, and it will pay off in the long term.

A while back you said socialism aims to provide "satisfying work in safe, rewarding conditions". Not all work is like that.

You are right. People might decide that some dull, *alienating work* would be shared around or evaluated to see if that service or product were really needed or if there is another way to do it. Brute efficiency can be traded off for a way of doing things in a humane way. And if workers are hurt on the job they would not need to fear they could not afford treatment or would be abandoned by society.

What do you mean by "alienating work"?

Sacrificing the worker's intelligence, creativity and social involvement for machine-like "efficiency." "Alienation" means cut off from. Marx pointed out that under capitalism, workers generally are cut off in four respects.

1. They are alienated from their *productive activity*, from meaningful participation in decisions about what to do or how to do it, how fast etc.

2. They are alienated from the *product* of that activity, having no control over what is made or what happens to it.

3. They are alienated from other human beings, *isolated from each other* with competition replacing most forms of cooperation.

4. They are alienated from *their potential* individually and in a shared community.

It is exactly these four failures that socialism is dedicated to erasing.

I don't understand why you say socialist production is not for profit; don't the social benefits etc. that you want require profits?

There has to be enough paid in from consumers/taxpayers overall to support the costs of production and provision of services. In that sense of course there is profit. But the socialist goal is to produce for use, that is for reasonable, necessary wants and comfort, and any "profits" would go back to replenish worn out equipment etc., and to the people in whatever fair manner they democratically determined.

The important difference is that the capitalist system is built on sucking out private profits at whatever cost to the environment, wages etc. in order to give great wealth to a few; a socialist system starts from the principle that *people's needs and development* in harmony with the environment are always the primary goal and that profit must always serve that alone.

What do you mean by "people's needs and development"?

Socialism will strive to provide the conditions and opportunity for each person to reach his/her full potential as a human being in all respects. This is the great fundamental vision and goal and cannot be overemphasized. Full individuality of each. (Not individualism, which instead would seek to defeat others to aggrandize the self.)

Socialist society is based on *cooperation and respect* for others, not competition in the sense of defeating others. Ample opportunity for people to excel will be available in every field and *not be limited to an elite.*

But some people say socialism has failed.

Real socialism has never been tried. Or a start has been attempted briefly in places like Chile in the early 1970s and overthrown by the capitalists/armed forces, abetted by the United States government.

Here we get into labeling. For example an accurate description of the former Soviet Union may be bureaucratic centralism, state capitalism, capitalism without capitalists or something else, but it was never socialist (except perhaps at the start) *in the great tradition of left humanist radical democratic thinking.*

A lot can be said about this, but it's a rather pointless sidetrack. The real point is that we can build a society that has the values and forms I have described, one that is democratic and not capitalist. The historic name for such a society is socialist. (Capitalists have tried to make this a dirty word by attaching it to all manner of other things – regulation of industry, limits on land use, the welfare state, taxes or even any attempt to make the government responsive to the needs of ordinary people.)

But the Soviet Union and others used the term socialist.

They sure did. However, you simply can't have socialism without democracy. This is emphasized by the term "democratic socialism", but that is really surplusage; the kind of society I am advancing has nothing to do with the authoritarian states who hijacked the name for demagogic purposes. What I have described earlier as socialism obviously cannot exist without a democratic form.

And there is no reason to believe that we can't have such a society. But it is a fallacy to pretend that every country's experience will be like a certain other country's just because they used a common label to describe themselves.

But aren't there socialist countries like Sweden and Cuba?

The accurate term for Sweden is social democracy, a capitalist mixed-economy welfare state. (Most of the productive capacity in Sweden has always been in private ownership.) You don't get socialism by simple "tax and spend on social benefits" although that certainly has been a lot better for most people in Sweden and some nearby countries than the unbridled capitalist control such as the U.S. has. The alienation etc. mentioned above remains in a mixed economy state such as Sweden, whose welfare has been eroding under international economic pressures.

Cuba is an undemocratic, or partly democratic, anti-capitalist state (perhaps becoming capitalist) with amazing health and education benefits for its repressed people, but it cannot be described as socialist under the analysis I have given.

Although Solidarity and other groups do have a socialist program, too often political parties around the world that have the word socialist in their names do not have socialist programs and if in power merely administer capitalism, as in some countries in Europe. They are merely trading on the enormous appeal and popular identification made by invoking the liberating, egalitarian tradition that working people understand and want; how many political parties are there with "capitalist" in their name? (Hitler's National Socialism [the Nazis] of course had nothing to do with socialism and a lot to do with capitalism.)

Well, since socialism has all these other connotations, why not use another term?

Fine! How about economic democracy? The point is that the whole humanist democratic anti-capitalist intellectual history uses the term socialism and that is the one I prefer because it locates us more accurately and historically. But as soon as you call it economic democracy or good-ism or anything else, people will say – as they should – hey that's really socialism, isn't it: are you trying to pull the wool over my eyes? So let's not!

How does the term communist fit in?

All over the lot! One meaning is the possible stage of egalitarian cooperative society beyond socialism, perhaps like the early Christians or present day convents but with a democratic form etc. Historically Communists opposed Socialists. And of course it is used as a swear word worse than socialism because of its association with authoritarian countries like the Stalinist Soviet Union. Like democracy it has a wide range of meanings; it has to be specifically nailed down in each context in order to know which meaning is intended.

FOLLOW UP QUESTIONS

You mentioned being in "the great tradition of left humanist radical democratic thinking". My mother told me not to be a radical!

We use the term in its strict dictionary sense – to go to the root. This is an essential idea for socialism. We don't want to just make capitalism less bad, as liberals want, because we realize that the system itself is the problem.

For example, a capitalist welfare state (where taxes support a large social welfare program) still presents the four kinds of unacceptable alienation of human beings I referred to earlier. And the capitalist system requires that natural resources be used heavily, that labor be squeezed, that consumers buy more and more high profit items out of needs "manufactured" by advertising – all requirements that come from the nature of capitalism.

Liberals whack away at capitalism's abuses, but capital will never willingly give up enough profits to provide a full life for everyone, nor can it change its essentially exploitive nature.

You locate socialism in the humanist tradition. I am religious.

Great; *there is no conflict*. In fact democratic socialism is a natural method to install *fairness and love* as the very basis for society. Socialists advance the humanist emphasis on each individual's dignity, worth and capacity for actualization. (Of course religious hierarchies have often allied themselves with wealth and privilege; when that happens socialists will oppose those policies, as we will oppose attacks on religious freedom for all.)

The core values of the great religions can most easily find expression in democratic socialism because of its insistence on individual worth and providing the conditions for each person to get past economic limitation in a way that demeans and exploits no one and that opens the door to whatever spiritual life that person chooses.

The same goes for most "New Age" thinking, feminism and populism. As each gets around to seeking the socio-economic framework to maximize, practice and develop their values, here it is! *Personal development* alone is not enough; we "walk on two legs", the personal – which won't change the social framework – and the socio-economic system that can carry out and protect those personal values for all.

Patriarchal capitalism exploits and discriminates against women. So *feminist analysis* is embedded in socialism, as is *anti-racism*, because of our insistence that past wrongs must be righted and that all receive equal treatment. And the *Populist* battle against the hydra-headed monster of corporate domination opens the door to next address the underlying support system of capitalist exploitation itself.

Do all socialists agree with what you are saying in this pamphlet?

Oh no. I am trying to present a current understanding of democratic socialism. I think it does so fairly, although others would place emphasis differently.

I like the program of the Green Party.

So do I; it has carried forward the defense of the environment which Socialism supports. I hope Greens will come to grips with the systemic character of capitalism's destructiveness. When they do, their program will resemble that of democratic socialists.

Well, how do we get to a socialist society? Is it legal?

First, people have to know about socialism and the nature of capitalism; socialism needs to get on the political menu. This is crucial and is what this pamphlet is about. And yes it certainly is legal to be a socialist in any democracy.

When people actually know what we are suggesting, are rid of their misconceptions and are not tied into uncritical acceptance of capitalism, then *most people will realize that socialism is what they need and want* because it gives them assurance of not only all the basics for a good life, but humane and satisfying work and benign relations with others and with nature, together with the circumstances to develop all sides of their potential.

With this understanding, change is inevitable and events will take their course; I hope and believe it will be in a *democratic way* and in a legal framework that continues the protections against the State found in the Bill of Rights, with a *Constitution* that reflects the core ideas and protections we have been talking about and retains the best of our present Constitution.

Will the corporate news/entertainment media advance this understanding?

Not for the most part. As cigarettes are a nicotine delivery system, info-tainment is a capitalist advertising delivery system. The content must not be unacceptable to business. But some corporate media will do anything for circulation/viewers; they even present ideas that are counter to them if they think that can sell products. Our main opportunity, however, is to work together *apart from the media, both because we will not receive a fair shake there and because this approach creates a genuine movement independent of the corporate world. The Internet will be a lot of help.*

Besides learning, are there steps to take right now?

Many socialists believe that "*non-reformist reforms*" can be begun now to build toward socialism. These are reforms that do not simply make capitalism work a little better for the downtrodden, as liberals often do, but that make changes in social structures and new organizations that will be like ones we can use in a socialist society, such as *groups for mutual aid and networks independent of the capitalist framework.*

As another example, perhaps a *radical variation of "public journalism"* is a step in the right direction. This idea as begun does not have a radical political orientation but approaches journalism in a different fashion that seeks to make decision-making more democratic and informed: to engage communities in public life, *to generate questions about what alternatives exist, what would people like politicians to be discussing, what public/political options exist, what values underlie each choice, etc.*

However, do not expect corporate journalism to be open to radical ideas or even to steer thinking in a way that is not self-seeking; that would be against its nature.

But the advantages of such reforms are that there may be less resistance by the corporate media, at least at the start, and that it *brings people into involvement in their communities and public life, which is what democracy is about and which is necessary for socialism to happen.*

What about violence?

We are totally against violence; it won't work and if it did the lesson of history is that the means become the ends. The result would not be democratic, and it would probably be at least as bad as what we have now.

Will big capitalists hold still for socialism to happen?

What do you think? Maybe they will receive long term bonds in exchange. However, *even former capitalists will be better off* with socialism, unless they are simply greedy or must have power over others.

But won't big capital and the State try to suppress socialists?

They already do, in the sense that they define the acceptable frame of discourse by the pervasive self-censorship of ideas in the corporate media, by which I mean *their exclusion of left ideas in political discussion.* (I include much of public radio/TV in this.) Down the road when there is a real socialist movement they can be expected to try suppression overtly.

Government usually reflects and acts for the dominant economic power. If this happens, socialist solidarity and momentum will come in; people will have a chance to support each other and *act across racial, ethnic, working class and middle class lines,* to create forms of mutual support. *With a mass movement, the polarity will change.*

Middle class, too?

Certainly. You can't have a fundamental democratic change without much of the middle class, and the core problems I have been discussing apply to them, too, even if some of them are better off financially. For example, the *values of capitalism* (competition, maximizing profits etc.) and the way work is now organized and must be carried out are often *destructive of a moral life, family life and good mental health.*

Who is in the middle class?

Originally the term referred to the emerging capitalist class under the feudal system. Now it seems to be merely an amorphous middle layer of income. If a *worker* is one who must sell her/his labor power to someone else for wages or salary, the blue working class collar or white middle class collar matters little. (A capitalist on the other hand lives off ownership of the means of production.)

What about little capitalists in a socialist society?

Some socialists talk about extending democratic control only to "the commanding heights" of the economy, to socialize big business (bring into democratic production) not merely to nationalize it (capitalism without private capitalists). But isn't it still exploitative of labor etc. and alienating for employees to work for a middle size company based on the profit system?

Small businesses? Mom and pop businesses that do not make money off capital or someone else's labor exploit little, except perhaps themselves by long hours and hard work.

So socialism would not "take my stuff"?

Of course not. "Commanding heights" aside, socialism comes from producing in a humane, green way for the benefit of each other.

What about retired people who live off productive property?

Their welfare would have to be guaranteed in a transitional phase to social ownership of the means of production, and of course when that was complete their welfare would be amply provided along with everyone else's.

Why aren't more people socialists?

Several reasons. *The main one is that people don't know about it or are miseducated about it*, since the corporate media and schools mostly miseducate because they always reflect the going system.

Another is that secretly we *blame ourselves* if we're not "rich and famous"; we believe that in the order of things we deserve what we got – the fallout from the very effective false teaching of utopian capitalism that everybody can be a millionaire if he/she truly deserves it.

Another is that such a fundamental change seems impossible. *Millions of people see the flaws, cruelties and injustices of capitalism*, but they may not have thought about this in a systematic way and may fear that the problem is too big to do anything about. To this I quote Margaret Mead: *"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."*

There are a great many people who are now discouraged about making fundamental social change; they will come forward when the momentum builds. Remember the Viet Nam War. Opponents were a seeming small minority; opposition built momentum and then *one unmarked day the polarity changed and the rest is history*.

Another reason is simply *cognitive dissonance*.

What do you mean by cognitive dissonance?

Cognition is another word for knowing. Cognition consists of our frameworks for understanding the world as formed by our education and experience. We do not make sense of life raw; we understand it by these *frameworks built on our past experience and belief*.

For example, *every day we "learn" uncritically how the capitalist world works*, even if we don't even know what capitalism is. This is the default setting, the conventional wisdom, the mainstream, *"the way the world is"*. For instance, we hear the newscast over public radio report that things are good because unemployment has not gone down so the stock market is up because business costs will not be up (from increased worker demands). We are not told that this – more working people out of work – can be bad for working people!

When we then see that this "world" *doesn't provide for the humane values we have been discussing and that a socialist framework can, two ways of understanding now conflict; if one is "true" the other can't be*.

But we have put our eggs in the present capitalist basket; we are conditioned to that implicit world, feel some comfort in it and make sense of things that way. The conflict shakes up our way of making sense of everyday life; *this conflict is like two musical notes that clash, are dissonant*.

We are stuck between them. Because *socialism threatens these old unexamined assumptions, patterns and assurances* (including *negative assurances*), we experience *cognitive dissonance*.

One result can be to lapse into *denial*, to avoid the discomfort of having to accept our new understanding and its implications.

What are negative assurances?

For instance "rents are high – but that's the way the world is" with the implicit conclusion (negative assurance) that there is really nothing that can be done; it isn't even discussed except in liberal terms such as a long shot at a possible rent control law if the problem becomes extreme. *With socialism the starting point would be housing for all.*

Are people "good" enough to become socialists?

Being "good" (or perfectible etc.) has nothing to do with it! If ordinary people realize what capitalism really does and learn what democratic socialism can do, many will want to try it. People don't have to be intrinsically good; democratic forms will correct their mistakes and excesses.

However, for *capitalism* to function it must encourage personality/behavior that is *aggressive, acquisitive, manipulative and selfish* ("bad"). *But a system based on real human values will reinforce humane behavior* ("good").

I knew somebody who didn't have much but always took strangers in to his home, freely shared everything he had, and was very open and generous. Somebody said he was a real socialist.

Sounds more like a saint to me! I think that's fine, but you don't have to be a saint to be a socialist, nor do you have to live in a hovel and give everything away.

The virtues, and perhaps even the planetary necessity, of "Simple Living" aside, why not have a swimming pool if you can afford it? (Although it would be cheaper to share one!) Even wealthy people can be socialists if they work toward the kind of society we are talking about, but they would be hypocritical if they exploited people at the same time.

With great admiration, this pamphlet is fondly dedicated to Bill and Mae Briggs, socialists and humanitarians.

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