

Why Socialism Now?

By David A. Hacker

Back in 1990, after the fall of the Communist states in Eastern Europe, there was much rethinking and new thinking about the meaning of socialism and whether it had been discredited. Jewish Currents, a progressive secular magazine that evolved from a Communist Party line publication to democratic socialism, asked its major contributors whether these events had changed their own view of socialism and whether they still considered themselves to be socialist now. As a member of the magazine's Editorial Advisory Council and its Indexer and unofficial historian, I was among those whom were asked to write a 250 word response. I believe that my brief essay is still very relevant today in explaining why we in the Social Democrats, USA still believe in the concept of democratic socialism/social democracy and remain proud to call ourselves socialists. The following was my response to the question "Why Socialism," written for the November, 1990 edition of Jewish Currents:

"Michael Harrington, in his final book, *Socialism: Past & Future*, pointed out the main dilemma facing the concept of socialism. "The rise of Communist states," he wrote, "dictatorships with centrally planned, nationalized economies – did more to distort and confuse the meaning of socialism than any other event in history. It is an intolerable irony that societies that are anything but socialist should thus define what socialism is in the eyes of so many. It is an irony that has to be undone."

"Today, a revolutionary crisis is going on in that system some of us called bureaucratic collectivism, others Oriental despotism, others state capitalism. The media in the West have interpreted this to mean the end of socialism. This is just what the apologists for capitalism want us to believe. Socialists have to reply to this charge by loudly declaring that socialism does not now, nor has it ever, existed in the so-called "Communist" world. We should understand why so many people in Eastern Europe and elsewhere are currently being attracted to capitalism. They are reacting against the old terrible system and embracing another system they do not know. But will it last? They reject the word "socialism" and "Marxism," which were constantly forced down their throats in the dictatorships they lived under. However, the class struggle has not disappeared. Neither has the capitalist business cycle, with the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank ready to "help" Eastern Europe . Therefore, as a socialist, I believe that the struggle of working people for a better society (socialism), by whatever name they want to call it, has not gone away. When the people in the "Communist" world discover the economic problems of capitalism, they will like it the less.

"In fact, it could be argued that we are in the era of the end of totalitarian collectivism and on the eve of the final crisis of capitalism. True, capitalism and Stalinism were deadly enemies. But overlooked was the fact that their relationship was basically symbiotic. The horrors of Communism were the strongest argument that capitalism had against socialism. Now that this argument is gone, what reason do democratic socialists and trade unionists have to hold back and be defensive?

"At the same time we must admit that Stalinism has done terrible damage to the image of socialism that might take long to repair. The Stalinist mode of 'socialism' has set back both socialism and the labor movement about 50 years. Only by emphasizing the primacy of democracy, i.e. social democracy, will the concept of socialism be accepted by society."

Sixteen years later, Eastern Europe and Russia has gone through shock therapy economic reforms to quickly transfer their economies to capitalism with disastrous results. However, even the reformed former Communist parties, remade into Social Democratic parties with membership in the Socialist International have embraced basically a free market economy. The 1990s was an era of free trade and globalization.

In the first decade of the 21st Century, however, a counter reaction to globalization has created a revival of the Left in Latin America, including the recent re-election of President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela, under the slogan, "Socialism for the 21st Century." While the experience of the past, should make democratic socialists in the U.S. skeptical of any leader's claim of building socialism in his/her country, by noting whether the new "socialist" government is emphasizing the primacy of democracy in its philosophy and in actual practice, because we do not need another authoritarian example of socialism to discredit it further in the eyes of the American public. Nevertheless, we may be seeing a socialist revival in the first decades of our new century that begins in Latin America and will then spread elsewhere. Now, with the recent financial crisis hitting the United States and the developed world, Right Wing politicians are again using the negative image of socialism to tar Barak Obama and anyone else who is trying to develop a progressive economic program to resolve this crisis. In this new environment, it is vital that there exist a organization such as Social Democrats, USA / the authentic historical Socialist Party, U.S.A, with its history of anti-Communism, to carry the banner of democratic socialism in the 21st Century to the American people. But it can only do so under the principles spelled out in our (Ok, my) Manifesto and our short statement of principles. Its message, reflecting the history and notables of the past in our Party, is the only one that would be able to reach out and be acceptable to a majority of the American people, with its emphasizes on the primacy of democracy.