

# Historical Materialism

*Understanding and Changing the World*

*A scientific Marxist-Leninist explanation of mankind's development from primitive society to socialism and today's world*

(First published August 1995)

## Foreword

With the pamphlet 'Historical Materialism: Understanding and changing the world', the Workers' Party of New Zealand begins carrying out an important task. This is the presentation for New Zealand workers and progressives of the main features of the theory and practice of socialism (covered in our heading under the title of Pro-Mao, Marxism-Leninism) in a series of easy-to-read pamphlets in a simpler form than is usually available, yet without any oversimplification. Most such courses tend to be above the heads of ordinary workers. With this series we hope to overcome this problem although it has meant some extra length in exposition.

The present pamphlet, the first in the series, shows how and why the theory of Scientific Socialism as developed by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels became the guiding star of the international working class up to Engels' death in 1895.

Taken as a whole, the series covers the whole period from Marx to Mao, taking into account developments since the death of Mao in 1976.

Before the advent of Khrushchev in the mid 1950s the world communist movement had a generally cohesive ideological-political line. However, after the split between China and the Soviet Union in the early 1960s followed later by the death of Mao, a situation of ideological-political chaos reigned in the international working-class movement. It is our Party's aim to assist in eliminating this chaos in the interests of achieving a correct proletarian ideology on a world scale.

This course aims at pointing the way forward by avoiding the twin errors of revisionism and dogmatism, explained in the study pamphlets. In our Party's

opinion such errors can only be overcome by mastering materialist dialectics, the method of investigation and solution of problems originally established by Marx and Engels and later brilliantly further applied and developed, particularly by Lenin and Mao.

We believe that this method is poorly understood and applied only superficially on an international level, and therefore have given it particular attention in this series.

---

## **Introductory**

When thinking workers and democrats first begin to study history and social development from the Marxist point of view known as historical materialism it is as if a blindfold was suddenly stripped from their eyes. For the first time the past - and not only the past but the present - begins to make sense, and events and affairs which before were incomprehensible become clear. One can in fact begin to acquire a new insight into political and economic systems, into governments and their policies, into the origins of wars and revolutions, into the activities of nations and the social forces within them: in fact, into all of the major spheres of human activity and knowledge. One can begin to understand, almost literally, what makes the world tick.

The materialist conception of history (historical materialism, for short) was discovered a little before the middle of the nineteenth century by the great German thinker and practical revolutionary Karl Marx. It was the first - and remains the only - scientific view of history.

Although this discovery was a milestone in the development of human thought, historical materialism is not taught in our schools. People who go through them come out with the idea that history is just a jumble of chance events involving 'great men' such as kings or generals. The reason for this is not hard to find. It is because our education system has been developed to serve the interests of the ruling, capitalist class. What concerns these people more than anything else is, maintaining capitalism. They certainly would not allow textbooks which show, as historical science does, that capitalism is not eternal and is due soon to be replaced by socialism; that it is the masses of the people who make history, and not 'great men'; and that mankind's social

development is not the result of 'God's will' but is a material process governed by impersonal, inner laws, knowledge of which can be ascertained by man and as a consequence, put to use by him in the same way, say, as the laws of biology. (The words 'mankind' and 'man' are used throughout to include both men and women).

When Marx was still a young man he wrote: 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.'(1) The value of historical materialism to working people and others who feel and see the rottenness of capitalism is this: that it not only enables them to understand the world of today - it guides them in the historic task of changing it, of making a new world, one free from the exploitation of man by man or nation by nation.

### **Production of Material Needs is Primary**

Historical materialism is based on the idea that 'Mankind must first of all eat, drink, have shelter and clothing before it can pursue politics, science, art, religion etc.'(2)

Simple though this idea may seem to us now, it was very hard for mankind to come at. For many centuries the dominance of religious beliefs made free scientific enquiry into the origins of peoples and their institutions difficult. The general view was that nations and other communities - what is in fact generally called human society - had been created with all existing institutions such as churches, laws, courts, armies etc. ready made.

Marx belonged to the materialist school of philosophical thought; that is, he held that being, matter and nature were primary, while thinking, mind and spirit were secondary, derivative. The philosophical idealists held the opposite view. Thus, the great idealist thinker Georg Hegel who developed dialectics (of which more will be said further on) asserted that society was ruled by divine will.

Before Marx, the most able materialist thinkers (the French materialists of the 18th century) were only able to reach the view that 'ideas ruled history'. That is, people in some way or other got an idea that something should take place and then did it, thus bringing about an historical event. Not only was it impossible for this view to explain how an idea came into existence, it was

also impossible for it to explain why this or that idea or event should emerge at the particular time it did. Only historical materialism can give a proper answer to these questions. The very emergence of historical materialism can be explained only by - historical materialism itself!

## **Origins of Historical Materialism**

In the first half of the 19th century great changes were sweeping Europe. Under the impetus of the industrial revolution, factory production was advancing in leaps and bounds, and with it, the economic power of the manufacturers. They became the most active section of the class of owners of capital, standing at the head of the other sections, the merchants and financiers, in a general struggle against the landowning aristocracy for the position of ruling class. This class of capitalists had grown up since feudal times out of the small masters or 'burgesses' of the cities and is also known by the French word 'bourgeoisie'.

But the industrial revolution which pushed the manufacturers to the front also brought an increase - and a far greater one - in the number of factory workers. It gave birth, in fact, to the modern working class. Formed out of the propertyless wage workers of the towns, the working class or proletariat, (as Marx called them) soon began to take the stage as an independent political force. In Britain it formed itself into the first modern workers' political party, the Chartists, whose struggles in the 1830s. and 1840s shook the established order. On the Continent it played an ever more prominent role in the decade from 1831, when the first working class rising took place in the French city of Lyons. This was the decade when in all the advanced countries of Europe massive class struggles took place between the working class and the factory owners, even while the bourgeoisie was moving to political supremacy.

Thus the class struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie forced itself to the forefront in all spheres of life, and in doing so compelled European thinkers to consider history anew.

Already a revolutionary democrat, Marx was impelled by the great social movements of the period to make a profound study of the different forms of human society which had existed up to that time. He showed for the first time the overriding importance of economic development as the underlying

cause of all important historical events and movements, singling out the class struggle as the motive force of history. In the course of his investigation and writing, he established and stated the main social and economic laws of development, which we will summarise further on.

An excellent statement of the main principles of historical materialism is given by Engels in his popular exposition of Marxism: 'Socialism, Utopian and Scientific.' Here is a brief extract from it: 'The materialist conception of history starts from the proposition that the production of the means to support human life and, next to production, the exchange of things produced, is the basis of all social structure; that in every society that has appeared in history, the manner in which wealth is distributed and society divided into classes or orders is dependent on what is produced, how it is produced, and how the products are exchanged. From this point of view the final causes of all social changes and political revolutions are to be sought, not in men's brains, not in man's better insight into eternal truth and justice, but in changes in the mode of production and exchange. They are to be sought not in the philosophy, but in the economics of each particular epoch.'

(3)

The great revolutions of history have always remained a mystery to bourgeois historians. Only historical materialism can explain them, and why they broke out when they did. In one of his letters Marx explains the economic evolution in Britain which pushed forward the new capitalist mode of production until its further advance was being strangled by the restrictions of feudalism. He says: 'Hence burst two thunderclaps - the revolutions of 1640 and 1688. All the old economic forms, the political system which was the official expression of the old civil society, were destroyed in England.'

(4)

Similarly, only historical materialism can explain the great French revolution which broke out in 1789; the bourgeois revolutions in most Continental countries in 1848; the first partially successful workers' revolution, the Paris Commune of 1871; the Russian bourgeois-democratic revolutions of 1905 and of March 1917; the world-historic Russian Socialist Revolution of November 7, 1917 - the first lasting socialist revolution in history; and more recently, the great Chinese revolution which came to fruition after World War II.

Each of these great revolutions marked the partial or complete overthrow of an outworn and decaying mode of production by a vigorous new one representing new social forces which played the decisive role in changing the social order.

According to historical materialism, each main epoch in the development of human society constitutes a specific mode of production, or socio-economic formation, of which five are now known; they are: Primitive Communism, Slavery, Feudalism, Capitalism and Socialism (that is, the lower stage of Communism).

Let us now briefly sketch the main features of these successive socio-economic formations which show man's social development from the point of view of historical materialism.

## **Social Systems Past and Present**

### (1) Primitive Communism

Man truly sets himself apart from the animals only when he starts producing (and reproducing) the necessities of life, commonly called the means of subsistence. Early man -and it must be remembered that modern man has a very long ancestry - lived in what are called hunter-gatherer societies, hunting wild animals for food and searching for grain and edible plants. In order merely to survive in their struggle against nature using just sticks and stones as tools, men were forced to work together. They could exist only in sizeable groups - tribes, for single families or individuals had little chance of survival.

For many thousands of years existing tribes were based on a primitive communal form of social organisation. Even though new implements were gradually developed and invented, using stone, wood, horn and bone to make axes, knives, clubs, stone-tipped spears, chisels, fish hooks etc., and men learned how to make and use fire, the level of the productive forces was still very low. This necessitated common labour. Common labour entailed common ownership of the means of production, with relations of equality, co-operation and mutual assistance amongst members of the tribe. Likewise, the products of people's labour were shared equally.

What is decisive here is the common ownership of the means of production. Hence the description: 'Primitive Communism'. Because there was no surplus product, no individuals could appropriate it and turn it into private property in the means of production. Thus there was no exploitation of man by man, and therefore no economic classes of exploiters and exploited. In one of the first works of mature Marxism, the 'Communist Manifesto' of 1848, Marx and Engels begin: 'The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles'. As the authors later pointed out in a footnote to this statement: 'That is, all written history'. Almost nothing was known of prehistory in 1848. The publication of the book 'Ancient Society', by the great American anthropologist and archaeologist Lewis Henry Morgan in 1877, changed all that. Morgan had lived among the Iroquois Indians for 25 years, researching their way of life. Engels comments that Morgan's book 'was not the work of one day. He grappled with his material for nearly 40 years until he mastered it'. Engels also remarks in a preface to his own masterwork 'The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State', 'Morgan's great merit lies in having discovered and reconstructed this prehistoric foundation of our written history in its main features ...'

This work provided Marx and Engels with the scientific basis for establishing 'primitive communism' as the socio-economic formation which preceded slave society. Engels makes the point concerning tribal life that 'In each such community there were from the beginning certain common interests the safeguarding of which had to be handed over to individuals, true, under the control of the community as a whole: adjudication of disputes; repression of abuse of authority by individuals; control of water supplies, especially in hot countries; and finally, when conditions were still absolutely primitive, religious functions.'(5)

Primitive Communism as a social system lasted far longer than any of its successors - from early man almost to the beginnings of civilisation. The principal productive force then, as now, was man with his production skills and techniques. Still, despite its very good side in the close-knit social life of the tribe and the equal social relations between people, primitive communal life was no golden age. Living was just bare existence, while mental life was ruled by naive religions, superstition and customs - some of them very backward.

The Maoris and other Pacific peoples, both Polynesian and Melanesian, lived under forms of primitive communism before the incursions into their lands by European countries, sparked off by the development of capitalism.

### **Cause of Decline**

What caused the decline of primitive communism? Ultimately, it was the development - over a long period - of new and more advanced productive forces. Metal tools and implements replaced those of stone and wood: the wooden plough with a metal ploughshare, bronze and iron axes, iron spear tips and arrowheads; these, along with pottery, made labour far more productive than formerly. Herds of domesticated livestock could be raised, and crops grown by settled communities. These two pursuits - stock raising and agriculture - became separated from each other in the first great social division of labour, some tribes concentrating on stock raising, others on agriculture. Later on, handicrafts such as metal working, tool and weapon making, and the making of clothes and footwear, also became separate branches of production.

With more advanced productive forces regular surpluses were possible in production. Regular exchange of products also developed, first between tribes or communities and then within them, a system of production of things for sale, commodities, leading to the break-up of tribal society and a separation into families, each with its own head and each with its own means of production. Mostly, clan leaders within tribal society stood at the head of groups of families, constituting themselves a kind of tribal nobility. They appropriated to themselves the main means of production - the land; herds of sheep, goats and cattle; and tools. Thus was born private property and with it, the division of society into classes, one of which owned means of production and used them to exploit those who had none.

It was on the basis of a higher productivity of labour that slavery arose. Only when it became possible for a slave to produce more than the cost of his own upkeep could slavery become economic and be a source of wealth to the slaveowner. With the development of bronze and iron weapons, those who possessed them were able to wage war on less warlike peoples, taking prisoners who were forced to labour for their captors as slaves. Thus slave society was born out of the break up of primitive communism. The new



society was based on the first antagonistic classes of slaves and slaveowners.

## (2) Slavery

Despite the brutalities of the slave system, it gave rise to new and more advanced productive forces. The part-wooden plough became the iron plough. Canals and irrigation devices were built. Grain milling, ore mining and smelting developed, and with them, the new tools they required. New crafts developed: weaving, tanning and carpentry which also helped on the development of construction and shipbuilding. With these, there came a growth of commerce and new towns, and at some point, written languages.

The means of production now included slaves, people, who were the actual property of the slaveowner, as were his tools. The small populations of the new slaveowning societies did not allow for more than a few slaves from within them. Hence, war became the main source of slaves, to meet the requirements of the slaveowners for greater supplies of labour. While the level of the productive forces made exploitation possible, it was still relatively low, so the slaveowner left the slave only enough to keep him from starvation, appropriating the main part of the slave's production.

In time, however the economic basis of slave society, that is, the production relations of the main opposing classes of slaveowners and slaves, exploiters and exploited, which formerly enabled the growth and development of the productive forces, now became a brake on them. The slaves themselves had no incentive to make full use of new methods of production. They received nothing in return for their labour except hardship. Slave revolts became more and more frequent. The great slave empires which grew up in Asia Minor, on the banks of the Nile, and later in Greece and Rome, were rent with divisions. There were sharp divisions between the small peasants and landowners, between the property owners and the propertyless; but the basic and main contradiction was between the two main classes of the period, the slaveowners and the slaves. The latter, along with the land, were the main source of wealth.

While 'antiquity did not know any abolition of slavery by a victorious rebellion', (6) the rebellions of slaves and subject nations seriously weakened the slave societies and finally left them (Ancient Rome, eg), unable to resist

external invasions.

## **Slavery and History**

Why did slavery arise, why did it exist, what role did it play in history?

“When we examine these questions, writes Engels in ‘Anti-Duhring’, ‘we are compelled to say -however contradictory and heretical it may sound - that the introduction of slavery under the conditions prevailing at that time was a great step forward. For it is a fact that man sprang from the beasts, and had consequently to use barbaric and almost bestial means to extricate himself from barbarism. Where the ancient communes have continued to exist, they have for thousands of years formed the basis of the cruellest form of state, Oriental despotism, from India to Russia. It was only where these communities were dissolved that the peoples made progress of themselves, and their next economic advance consisted in the increase and development of production by means of slave labour.’(7)

What is the connection of slavery with today’s world? Again Engels answers:

‘It was slavery that first made possible the division of labour between agriculture and industry on a larger scale, and thereby also Hellenism, the flowering of the ancient world. [Hellas = Greece. ed]. Without slavery, no Greek art and science; without slavery, no Roman Empire. But without the basis laid by Grecian culture, and the Roman Empire, also no modern Europe. We should never forget that our whole economic, political and intellectual development presupposes a state of things in which slavery was as necessary as it was universally recognised. In this sense, we are entitled to say: Without the slavery of antiquity no modern socialism.’(8)

### **(3) Feudalism**

The new productive forces acquired under the slaveowning mode of production demanded for their further progress a new type of society, a new framework of property relations in which they could develop unhindered. Such an organisation capable of forming the basis of a new society, feudalism, lay ready to hand in the gentile military organisation of the barbarian Germanic tribes which finally overthrew and defeated Rome, the hub of the Roman Empire which was also the main stronghold of slavery throughout Europe.

Economic forces also underlay the decline of Roman power. The great slaveowners' estates fell into the hands of a few big land and money owners. Plundered and tribute corn brought about a lack of demand for Italian corn, and much land was converted into grazing-land. Large-scale agriculture worked with unproductive slave labour - for slaves could not be trusted with breakable, costly tools - became no longer profitable. Small-scale farming again became the only profitable form. Engels comments that estates were parcelled out among tenants and farm managers. 'Mainly, however,' he notes, 'these small plots were distributed to coloni, who paid a fixed amount annually, were attached to the land and could be sold together with the plots. These were not slaves, but neither were they free... They were the forerunners of the medieval serfs.'(9)

Over a period of about four hundred years feudalism gradually became established throughout Western Europe. The Germanic conquerors of Rome adapted their gentile constitution to the actual condition of the productive forces then prevailing. Kings and a landowning nobility arose, seizing land and re-allocating part of it to dependent peasants and serfs who, in return, worked their landlord's land for nothing except the right for each to work a small plot for himself and his family, and for 'protection' by his ruler from other predators, including greedy officials and usurers. These conditions became general in view of the greater productivity of serf-peasant labour over that of slaves, and also through the extension of Germanic rule over other territories.

Despite the fact that serfs and small peasants were exploited by landowners, because they could in a small way own their own means of production - a plot of land and tools to work it - and also own their own product, they had much more incentive to labour than slaves. They looked after and improved their tools, and sought to improve their methods of production. Agriculture was improved by wider use of fertiliser, the use of animal power for ploughing and transport, and the development of the three-field system; handmills were supplemented by water and windmills. New crafts developed: iron was produced from pig-iron; paper, gunpowder and printing were invented (or re-invented, having first appeared in China). The craftsman, often originally a serf, obtained increased status.

With greater production under the new system, trade increased, leading to the growth of new towns as trading centres. Artisans could own their own

tools and products, and took the trouble to improve techniques. The towns played an ever more important role in feudal society, becoming havens for runaway serfs and centres of the new, developing industries out of which capitalism was born.

Under feudalism, production was very largely individual, each producer working for himself where possible, owning his own means of production and as well, the product of his labour which he could exchange for other products necessary for subsistence. (We must again note that for simplicity the masculine pronoun, except where specifying a particular person, is used throughout to include the feminine. Ed.).

There was frequent conflict between the main classes of feudal society, the landowners, (usually nobles) and the serfs or, if serfdom had died away as in Britain by the 14th century, the small peasants. The exploitation of the serf-peasant masses by the landowning aristocracy gave rise to frequent peasant uprisings right across Europe, highlighted by the great rebellion of 1381 in England, led by Wat Tyler; the Jacquerie in France in the 14th, and the peasant wars of Germany in the 16th century. To increase his wealth, the landowner constantly encroached on the peasant's own time to work on his personal holding, demanding, backed by force, ever greater labour services and special taxes, intensifying his exploitation, but also at the same time, the class struggle of serf-peasant against landowner.

Arising from a lack of cohesion because of their individual mode of production, and lacking also the ability to maintain an army in the field all year because of harvesting and family needs, the peasants were unable to succeed in their revolts.

As the centuries passed, however, the growing middle class of the towns (middle because between the aristocracy and the peasants), the burghers or bourgeoisie, strove for independence from feudal rule. As trade and manufacture grew in importance, so too did the bourgeoisie. But their economic growth and hence their political strength, was constantly blocked by the special privileges of the nobles and the church - which was also one of the greatest feudal landowners.

The new productive forces introduced in the towns included the system of manufacture - that is, simple co-operative labour in production instead of

each individual working as an independent producer. Most labouring people, however, were serfs and peasants who were legally and traditionally tied to the land. To provide labour for manufacture, this connection had to be broken, and was.

Also, manufacture needed foreign trade, overseas markets, but feudal economy was closed, more or less self-sufficient. Thus the productive forces more and more came into conflict with feudal restrictions, through which they had to push their way.

During the 16th century capitalism underwent a rapid expansion, stimulated by the great explorations which vastly expanded trade and commerce. The bourgeoisie, enriched by this and by the slave trade and the development of manufacture, began to challenge the feudal monopoly of political power. In England they placed themselves at the head of the main force of discontented peasants and town artisans, pressing for the rights of parliament to determine taxation; and in the 17th century they challenged the absolute monarchy. They overthrew feudalism in two revolutionary civil wars: the first, the revolution of 1640 - 1649, when they executed Charles I, the second in 1688 when a constitutional monarchy was put in place, under control of parliament.

Thus England was the first country to establish capitalism on a national scale. Later they were followed by France and all Europe.

### **Review questions for self-study**

1. Why are changes in the mode of production and exchange decisive for society and for social changes. (See Engels' summary of the principles of historical materialism on pages 4 and 5)
2. What social relations existed between people during the epoch of primitive communist society?
3. What brought about the breakup of primitive communism?
4. Why was slavery a step forward from primitive communism?
5. Why was feudalism an advance on slave society?

6. How did the needs of manufacture lead to the overthrow of feudalism in 1649 and 1688?

---

#### (4) Capitalism

The growth of the bourgeoisie and its power during feudal times were accompanied by a forcible seizure of peasant lands carried out under a series of Enclosure Acts dating from Henry VII, which enabled big landowners to seize not only the common land used for pasture, firewood etc. by small peasants, but also small-peasant landholdings as well. The dispossessed peasants and their families were forced either into vagabondage, where their lives were forfeit (Henry VIII had 72,000 hung for being vagabonds), or into the towns and cities where they became the necessary labour force required by the urban bourgeoisie for the expansion of production in their factories. Thus, tens of thousands were turned into urban wage-labourers, without whom capitalism could not have grown and become the dominant system.

This new class of propertyless urban workers had nothing to sell but their ability to work and, deprived of their own means of production, were forced to work for the new capitalist class, the owners of the means of production.

Vastly increased output and tremendous technological developments took place as a result of the social production of capitalism replacing the individual production of feudalism. In particular, the industrial revolution put beyond question the supremacy of capitalism over all former socio-economic formations.

The freeing up of the productive forces immediately began to have its effect. Factory production under one roof developed in Britain, then machine industry again expanded production. A key role was played by the textile industry, where numerous inventions speeded production, such as the spinning jenny, Crompton's mule, and the power loom. Water power was in due course replaced by steam power, which ushered in large-scale capitalist machine industry, including a heavy industry of iron, steel and engineering, boosted by the development of rail transport. Marx and Engels put it thus in the 'Communist Manifesto': 'The bourgeoisie, during its rule of scarce one hundred years, has created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together. Subjection of Nature's

forces to man, machinery, application of chemistry to industry and agriculture, steam navigation, railways, electric telegraphs, clearing of whole continents for cultivation, canalisation of rivers, whole populations conjured out of the ground - what earlier century had even a presentiment that such productive forces slumbered in the lap of social labour?'(10)

The main classes of capitalism are, of course, the capitalists and the wage-workers, the proletariat. The wage-worker is no longer direct property as a slave, nor partial property as a serf. But still, he is a wage-slave, forced by the economic whip to sell his labour power, uncertain of his future, producing immense wealth for capital while being confined to wages which represent only the cost of his and his family's upkeep. At any time, as we have seen in New Zealand in the '70s and '80s, he can be sacked or, in the bourgeoisie's tender-hearted phrase 'made redundant', and forced on to the dole. At the time of writing the unemployment rate is about 8% of the labour force. In Britain and Europe the rate is about 11%. Under such conditions growing class struggle is inevitable.

Under capitalism many people do not fall into the category of employers or workers: architects, doctors, small businessmen, working farmers, small contractors etc. Those on big incomes identify with the capitalists, but mostly such people form a petty bourgeoisie - not workers, but not exploiters. They do not and cannot play a decisive economic role. In industrial capitalism, that is played by the industrial working class.

With an exploiting and an exploited class in New Zealand why has there been no socialist revolution as in some other countries? This question is considered in a later pamphlet on 'Imperialism'. Nevertheless, the sharpening of the class struggle is on the agenda in all capitalist countries. Just as slavery had to give way to feudalism and feudalism to capitalism, so does capitalism have to give way to socialism, a system in which the private ownership of the means of production is replaced by social ownership. For the fundamental contradiction of capitalism is that between the social character of production and the private character of appropriation.

There is a fundamental contradiction\* underlying the social production relations which form the basis of the capitalist system. On the one hand, in modern industry, production is social. It is carried on socially, with thousands and sometimes tens of thousands of wage workers whose labour

is interdependent (in multinationals frequently involving a number of different countries) and whose productive activities are meshed to produce a single marketable product such as an automobile.

On the other hand, the producers do not own the product. This is appropriated by the owners of the means of production, whose wealth increases even while their numbers decrease. Thus, there is an insoluble economic contradiction between social production and private appropriation. It is not difficult for the producers - the wage-workers - to see how to solve this contradiction, that is, how to turn private appropriation into the social appropriation which social production demands. It is done by placing the means of production under social ownership by nationalising them under a system of working-class rule. In a word, by transforming capitalism into socialism.

This is not to say that it is just a matter of passing a few laws. Modern history shows that the big capitalists will fight with all the means in their power - ideological as well as material - against even the possibility of socialist transformation, for the victory of socialism means an end to their existence as a ruling and exploiting class, along with all their power and privileges.

The socialist transformation is therefore a matter of long-term class struggle, of carrying the socialist revolution right to the end, which is the content of Mao Tse-tung's 'theory of continued revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat, an important modern development of Marxist theory.'

The basic stimulus to the development of production under capitalism is the hunt for profit. This is the motive that drives the capitalists to improve machinery and methods of production in both industry and agriculture. But the 'free competition' between capitalists that prevailed in the 19th century inevitably turned into monopoly capitalism from the turn of the century as the successful capitalists defeated their rivals or merged with them.

Monopoly capitalism is the main essential feature of present-day imperialism, the highest stage of capitalism. Monopoly itself holds back and hinders the development of the productive forces. Even under imperialism,



however, competition is not wholly abolished, and in certain non-cartelised spheres, international monopolistic competition is very sharp.

Vast and increasing numbers of workers work together in a continually decreasing number of enterprises; the wealth created by the workers is appropriated by fewer and fewer people. Lenin points out: 'The socialisation of labour by capitalist production does not at all consist in people working under one roof (that is only a small part of the process), but in the concentration of capital being accompanied by the specialisation of social labour, by a decrease of the number of capitalists in each given branch of industry and an increase in the number of separate branches of industry - in many separate production processes being merged into one social production process.'(11)

Do we not see throughout the capitalist world - and we do not even need to go past little New Zealand - huge conglomerates consisting of pyramids of enterprises daily taking over new ones, so that to trace the real master of some insignificant company is like tracing one's genealogy back to a distant ancestor? And every huge monopoly concern has dozens, if not hundreds (General Motors and Toyota have hundreds) of sub-contractors dependent upon them, specialising in particular products that go to make up the final product, which belongs to the small class of monopoly owners of the means of production.

Hence the ever sharpening contradiction between social production and private appropriation, which inevitably leads to recessions and to major economic crises. For in the hunt for the highest possible profits the capitalists keep the masses of wage-earners to the lowest wages possible. But it is the purchasing power of the masses that forms the main market for capitalist production. Thus, crises of overproduction become inevitable. Suddenly, it turns out that far more goods have been produced than can be sold. Millions of workers are forced into unemployment, factories shut up shop and productive forces are destroyed. Such crises form the economic basis of social revolution.

Capitalist relations of production no longer correspond to the advanced productive forces. Socialised production and labour are in ever-greater conflict with private appropriation of what is produced. Only the most advanced class of society, the working class, can further the development of

the productive forces by carrying out a revolution and a transition to socialist society.

It may be said: Russia and China achieved socialism, but today they have restored capitalism. Does this not show that capitalism is a superior system? More is said on this subject in another section, but we must here answer: no; capitalism is outmoded, and there is nothing whatever wrong with socialism. It had immense achievements to its credit in both countries, and those in the face of unbelievable difficulties. But experience has shown that capitalism is a subtle, cunning and inveterate enemy of socialism and the working class. The capitalists were able to make a comeback in both countries through the emergence -strange as it seems - of a new bourgeoisie consisting of privileged, more highly paid bureaucrats, corrupted Party cadres, administrators, managers and professional people, separated from physical labour and standing above the mass of the workers. Bourgeois ideology too, made a comeback, not openly, but deceptively, still calling itself Marxism-Leninism. The Communist Parties in those countries came under the control of the new bourgeoisie and took the road of restoring capitalism. Is this course inevitable in future revolutions? Not at all. It is possible, once one is aware of the dangers, to avoid them. The working class is undoubtedly capable of learning to do this, and should on no account allow itself to fall prey to pessimism as to the future.

An understanding of historical materialism is of great importance to a Marxist-Leninist, working-class party. If a party's programme and policy are to be correct, they must be based on an understanding of the laws of the development of society. Without a knowledge of these and ability to apply them, it will be groping in the dark, unable to answer the problems arising in the class struggle, the problems of socialist revolution and those of socialist construction.

## (5) Socialism

Marx in his political and economic writings (which battalions of bourgeois scholars are annually paid millions to try to refute), gave a brilliant example of the application of historical materialism to the socio-economic formation of capitalism, particularly in his great 3-volume work, 'Capital'. Giving a short but profound summary of Marx's teachings in an essay entitled 'Karl

Marx', the great revolutionary leader V.I.Lenin wrote in the section headed 'Socialism':

'It is evident that Marx deduces the inevitability of the transformation of capitalist society wholly and exclusively from the economic law of motion of contemporary society. The socialisation of labour, which is advancing ever more rapidly in thousands of forms, and which has manifested itself very strikingly during the half-century that has elapsed since the death of Marx in the growth of large-scale production, capitalist cartels, syndicates and trusts, as well as in the gigantic increase in the dimensions and power of finance capital, forms the chief material foundation for the inevitable coming of socialism. The intellectual and moral driving force and the physical executant of this transformation is the proletariat, which is trained by capitalism itself. The struggle of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie, which manifests itself in various and, as to its content, increasingly multifarious forms, inevitably becomes a political struggle aiming at the conquest of political power by the proletariat ('the dictatorship of the proletariat'). The socialisation of production is bound to lead to the conversion of the means of production into the property of society, to the 'expropriation of the expropriators'. This conversion will directly result in an immense increase in productivity of labour, a reduction of working hours, and the replacement of the remnants, the ruins of small-scale, primitive, disunited production by collective and improved labour.'(12)

The 1917 socialist revolution took place only 4 years after Lenin had written these words. More or less exactly what Lenin had indicated took place. First, revolutionary overthrow of capitalism by the proletariat. Then despite the immense destruction of productive forces by 3 years of World War I and another 3 years of civil war, followed by a capitalist embargo and encirclement, Russia reduced her working hours, enormously expanded production and abolished capitalist exploitation. All this was done under the protective wing of 'the dictatorship of the proletariat'. (See the pamphlet in this series entitled 'The State and the Struggle for Socialism'). While capitalism languished in depression from 1929-1935, with mass unemployment and actual starvation in the richest countries, the Soviet Union forged ahead with 7-league strides. Millions of toilers throughout the world found hope and inspiration for the first time in their lives in the victories of socialist construction in Russia, showing them concretely that

workers everywhere could put an end to capitalist exploitation and oppression.

Marxism was no longer a theory. It was a proven fact. Socialism not only worked. It was a social system which for the first time worked for the benefit of the mass of the people, not just for a small minority class of exploiters.

Disregarding for the present the precise means by which capitalism regained power in Russia from the time of Khrushchev on, and in China likewise from the time of the coup d'état following Mao's death in 1976, we can say that the socialist mode of production proved itself immensely superior to all previous modes.

The greatest test of a social order, of all its human and material resources, is war. The fact is that from a state of terrible backwardness before 1917, Russia under socialism advanced so effectively in all spheres that it was able to defeat the most powerful war machine known to history, that of Nazi Germany.

The monstrous suppression and distortion of the history and achievements of socialism by the political, academic, journalistic and other ideological servants of imperialism is typified in many countries - including New Zealand - by the fact that the vast majority of today's young people are not even aware that the U.S.S.R. participated in World War II, while the names of Marx and Lenin are scarcely known, let alone their works read. It is one of the major tasks of any party claiming to be Marxist-Leninist to combat this falsification of history and to acquaint people with the basic ideas of Marxism-Leninism, proletarian ideology.

In this epoch, the class struggle of workers against capitalists is closely, in fact indissolubly, linked with the national liberation struggle of the oppressed peoples to free themselves from imperialist domination. We saw this in action in the struggle against the imperialist invaders and oppressors of Viet Nam - which included capitalist New Zealand.

New Zealand may be a small country, but it has a capitalist mode of production, with developed capitalist production relations. Hence it is economically ripe for socialism. Class struggle and the beginnings of revolutionary struggle are therefore on the agenda for the New Zealand

working people. They are inseparable from the international movement of the working class towards socialism. The study of historical materialism shows that capitalism has long outlived its usefulness to man as a socio-economic formation. Its continued existence represents an immense threat to a human future for mankind.

Review questions for self-study

1. What is the fundamental contradiction of capitalism, and what connection has this contradiction with economic crises?
2. In what way does this contradiction undermine the stability of capitalism and the capitalist class?
3. Why is an understanding of historical materialism vital to a Marxist-Leninist working-class party?
4. Why did Marx and Lenin regard socialism as inevitable?
5. How was it that the Soviet armed forces were able to hurl back and defeat the Nazi German invaders in World War 2?

---

## **People and Objective Laws**

Societies, of course, are composed of people and have to be changed by the actions of people. But people are by no means free agents in determining what sort of society they are born into. Marx was the first to draw attention to the decisive role played by the material basis on which societies grow up. In his previously-quoted 'Letter to Annenkov,' he writes:

'Men are not free arbiters of their productive forces - which are the basis of all their history - for every productive force is an acquired force, the product of former activity... Because of the simple fact that every succeeding generation finds itself in possession of the productive forces acquired by the preceding generation, which serve it as the raw material for new production, a coherence arises in human history, there is formed a history of humanity which is all the more a history of humanity since the productive forces of

man, and therefore his social relations have become more developed... Their [men's] material relations form the basis of all their relations.'

Marx expounded aspects of historical materialism in nearly all his books and many of his letters. In his 'Preface to the Critique of Political Economy' he gives the essence of historical materialism its classical, scientific formulation. Despite its length, because of its importance it is necessary to quote it here:

'In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come in conflict with the existing relations of production, or - what is but a legal expression for the same thing - with the property relations within which they have been at work hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an epoch of social revolution. With the change of the economic foundation the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed. In considering such transformations a distinction should always be made between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophic - in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out. Just as our opinion of an individual is not based on what he thinks of himself, so can we not judge of such a period of transformation by its own consciousness; on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained rather from the contradictions of material life, from the existing conflict between the social productive forces and the relations of production. No social order ever perishes before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed; and new, higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society itself. Therefore mankind always sets itself only

such tasks as it can solve; since, looking at the matter more closely, it will always be found that the task itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution already exist or are at least in the process of formation.' (13)

This is given some further explanation in the next two to three pages. One thing only we should note here, that when the 'economic basis' of society is spoken of, it does not include the productive forces, only the production relations. The productive forces are part of the mode of production, along with the production relations.

We must touch briefly here on the role of ideas. Mind, consciousness, has a very important part to play in the transformation of society. Progressive ideas for basic social change reflect the fact that the relations of production are already holding back the further development of the productive forces. While the laws of development of society are independent of man's will, and social transformations are inevitable, it by no means follows that man only has to sit on his hands and await the inevitable. The difference between laws of nature and social laws of development is that the latter operate not through inanimate matter but through the actions of people in and on society. Socialism is inevitable. But whether it comes in our lifetimes or 500 years hence is a matter of how much people desire it and are willing to struggle for it. The question of active work to bring socialist consciousness to the working class and the masses is decisive in this. Hence the need for a genuinely Marxist-Leninist party.

### **Common Features of Different Social Systems**

In the foregoing sketch of development we have spoken of Primitive Communism, Slavery, Feudalism, Capitalism and Socialism. Each of these social systems consists, like a building, of two closely connected parts, a 'basis' and a 'superstructure'. Let us explain these parts further.

It is a common feature of human society in all periods of history that it can only exist by producing the necessities of life, such as food, clothing and shelter. In this very process of producing, people willy-nilly form definite relationships. These are called 'relations of production' or, more briefly, 'production relations,' and they concern how people stand towards the means of production; whether they own them in common, as under

Communism, or whether one class owns them and can thus exploit another class as under slavery, feudalism and capitalism.

Whatever the epoch, these production relations form the foundation, the basis or economic structure of society. Under communism, primitive or advanced, the basis is classless, because the means of production are socially owned. Under slavery, the basis is the dominant production relations of slaveowners to slaves; under feudalism, it is those of feudal lords to serfs, and under capitalism, those of capitalists to workers.

No country has reached the stage of advanced communism, which is based on infinitely more advanced productive forces than those of primitive communism. All that has existed so far until the comeback of capitalism under Khrushchev in Russia and Deng Xiaoping in China, has been the lower stage of socialism. During this period - a lengthy one, the task is to create an economy of abundance and people capable of overcoming the me-first ideology of capitalism. Accordingly, the principles enunciated by Karl Marx distinguishing the lower from the higher stage of communism are: under socialism, from each according to his ability, to each according to his work; under the advanced stage of communism: from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.

The production relations of each epoch necessarily correspond to a certain level of the productive forces at society's disposal which, as we have already seen, consists of people with their production skills plus the tools or instruments of production. As Marx succinctly puts it: 'The hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill society with the industrial capitalist.'(14)

On the economic basis (the relations of production) a set of political and legal institutions grows up called the superstructure. It includes different kinds of governing bodies - democratic assemblies or monarch's courts, for instance; the state with its armed forces, police and law courts; churches, academies and so on. A set of ideas in regard to politics, religion, law, art and culture, etc. also grows up which forms an ideological superstructure as part of the whole. The purpose of the superstructure is to reinforce the basis. For instance, the monarchy was an institution of feudalism which protected and reinforced the landowning rights of the nobility against the peasants, while the idea of the Divine Right of Kings gave further



(ideological) reinforcement. Similarly, under capitalism the courts protect private property. This is because capitalism is based on private property. The idea of the Rule of Law (which happens to be bourgeois law, of course) gives ideological reinforcement.

The most decisive institution of the superstructure and the principal one on which the political power of a ruling class rests, is the state. In the imperialist stage of capitalism the monopoly capitalists have created a huge military-bureaucratic state machine as an instrument of suppression. In classless society there will be no state, for there will be no classes to suppress.

Under capitalism different political parties may be elected to office in 'democracies'. They may make some reforms, but they cannot and do not make any fundamental change to the basis. For that, something very different is needed - a revolution. 'Labour Governments' come and go. But the capitalist basis remains.

In the physical world surrounding us or, as it is called, Nature, and in human society and human thought as well, change and development take place as a result of constant struggles between opposing tendencies or forces, i.e., opposites. Such opposites are called 'contradictions'. And in human society the basic contradiction is that between the productive forces and the production relations. It is this contradiction that is the motive force which pushes forward the development of society. In a class-divided society such as capitalism the basic contradiction manifests itself as a struggle between classes.

New relations of production when they are established assist the productive forces to develop, but in time they become a barrier to the further growth of the latter. A conflict between the two develops and grows sharper until a point is reached where it culminates in a social revolution, when the old production relations are overthrown and replaced by new ones and society is reconstituted on a new basis. The old superstructure then undergoes big changes to bring it into line with the new basis.

### **Laws of Historical Materialism**

We can now sum up by outlining the following laws:

1. The law of contradiction between the productive forces and the relations of production.

The operation of this law brings about the transformation of one socio-economic formation into another through the sharpening of this contradiction. It is the basic law of social development. In class-divided society it is expressed by the struggle between opposed classes.

2. The law of basis and superstructure.

Every social system consists of an economic basis and a superstructure which is erected upon it. A fundamental change in a social system takes place when a social revolution changes the basis and then proceeds to change the superstructure.

3. The law of class struggle.

In a class-divided society the underlying economic contradictions are expressed in society as a class struggle, which is the motive force of social development. The sharpening of this struggle brings about a social revolution.

As can be seen, these are general laws, not laws solely applicable to capitalist society.

The materialist conception of history is a scientific viewpoint which shows history as a law-governed process of development. It is the only scientific view of history. It demonstrates that the main ideas in society, whether in politics, culture or social life, are determined by the mode of production prevailing in it, and not vice-versa.

This conception for the first time places history on a proper foundation, showing the mass of the people as the real makers of history. It is they throughout history who have maintained society by their productive work; it is they who in earlier generations have been the principal agent, along with scientific experiment, in improving the instruments of production; and it is they who advance society through their actions in class struggle. It is beyond doubt that that struggle will lead, here and elsewhere, to a new, socialist society.

## Review questions for self-study

1. What is the role of ideas in society?
2. What is the connection between the level of the productive forces of society and the prevailing relations between people in society?

## NOTES

- (1) Marx-Engels 'Theses on Feuerbach' No.XI. Selected Works Vol II. Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, 1951, p 367.
- (2) Ibid. 'Speech at the Graveside of Karl Marx' p153.
- (3) Ibid. Engels. 'Socialism, Utopian and Scientific' Section III, p125.
- (4) Ibid. 'Marx to P.V. Annikov, December 28, 1846' p402.
- (5) Engels. 'Anti-Duhring' (Part II, IV; The Force Theory: Conclusion) .p219. 1977 Printing, Progress Publishers, Moscow.
- (6) Engels. 'Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State' Marx-Engels Sel. Wks. Vol II p278.
- (7) Engels. 'Anti-Duhring' pp 221-2.
- (8) Ibid. p221.
- (9) Engels. 'Origin of the Family' etc. p273
- (10) Marx-Engels. 'Manifesto of the Communist Party' Sel. Works Vol.I p37.
- (11) Lenin. 'What the Friends of the People Are' Collected Works, Vol. I, pp175-6.
- (12) Lenin. 'Karl Marx', Pamphlet; Foreign Languages Press, Peking, 1970,pp35-6.
- (13) Marx. 'Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy.' Marx-Engels Sel. Wks., Vol.1 pp328-329.

(14) Marx. 'The Poverty of Philosophy' Chapter II. 'The Metaphysics of Political Economy : Second Observation.' Foreign Languages Publishing House Moscow. p122.

\* By contradiction we mean a 'unity of opposites', i.e., a unity of opposed tendencies or forces within things and processes, the struggle between which leads to their motion and development. (Much more is said on this basic idea in philosophy in a later pamphlet in this series, entitled 'Dialectical Materialism').

Additional reading for further self-study

1. Frederick Engels: 'Socialism, Utopian and Scientific'. The best short exposition.
2. Karl Marx (with Engels): 'The Communist Manifesto'.
3. Lenin: 'The State'. A lecture delivered at the Sverdlov University in 1919.
4. Lenin: 'Karl Marx'. A brief but profound biographical sketch.