



Following the publication of *Has Socialism Failed?*, New Era sent questions to SACP General Secretary **Joe Slovo**. We asked him about the future of socialism both internationally and in South Africa:

# Slovo speaks

**NE: Why was *Has Socialism Failed?* released at this point? What are its objectives?**

**JS:** It is clear that, world-wide, confidence in socialism has been badly shaken by the events in Eastern Europe. We felt it was imperative to open discussion on the significance of these events, and in doing so to avoid falling into one of two extremes: either a blinkered dogmatism that refuses to learn, or a paralysed defeatism that fails to take on the now rampant imperialist propaganda.

This propaganda offensive is attempting to conflate the distortions of socialism (which have led to the present crisis) with the *essence* of socialism. The pamphlet's central point is, precisely, that the present failures are not inherent in socialism.

It was, of course, written essentially for discussion within our own Party and broad liberation movement. As it happens, it seems also to have provoked a lot of interest within our Southern Africa region and in Europe.

All of this justifies, I suppose, the inevitable risk involved in writing in the very thick of a fast-changing situation. But that, surely, is what political interventions are all about?

Speaking personally, what a relief it is to live in the age and spirit of *glasnost*, in which every word uttered by a General Secretary is not expected to be infallible! The expectation of infallibility is a burden that can only produce stagnation.

**NE: *The Path to Power* underplays the failures of socialism, and gives the most cursory attention to perestroika. This is redressed by *Has Socialism Failed?*, but the two documents do not sit happily alongside each other. Would the acceptance of the perspective in *Has Socialism Failed?* not necessitate a**

**rewriting of the Party programme?**

**JS:** Our Party programme endorses the processes of perestroika and glasnost, and it notes some of the historical failures of socialism. In this sense, there is no basic contradiction in perspective between the programme and *Has Socialism Failed?*.

There is also convergence of viewpoint between the two documents in relation to such crucially important issues as the nature of the vanguard party and the necessary link of democracy to socialism.

But of course there are some differences in emphasis. These relate as much as anything to the fact that *Has Socialism Failed?* takes on a single, focussed question and that it is an individual contribution. It should also be remembered that almost a year separates the publication of the two different documents, and that the programme was a collective endeavour based on discussions throughout our ranks over more than a year before our 7th Congress.

A lot has happened in the last 12 and 24 months, and a lot more information has come to hand. But, yes, of course, our Party must certainly be alive to the possibility of a revised edition of the Programme. Not only because of events elsewhere, but most importantly because of the rapidly changing situation within our country.

For the moment, *The Path to Power* remains an important analysis and guide to action. Its perspectives have been confirmed since its adoption last year.

**NE: Although *Has Socialism Failed?* has elicited great excitement and relief, there has been disquiet about certain silences and perceived weaknesses in the paper. In particular, the constant assertion of the moral and even economic superiority of socialism relies on an**

**idealist picture of socialism. Idealist because (as the paper shows) existing socialism, despite its achievements, has certainly not proved an all-round superiority.**

**JS:** I would suggest that you are misapplying the term "idealist". If we are to use the term "idealist" in this way, then Marx becomes an idealist, and so does every social scientist who predicts, on the basis of an objective analysis of existing processes, a certain direction and unfolding of events that have not yet occurred.

Moreover, at the ideological level, no major historical change occurs without the broad masses of people being inspired by a vision of a better future. Such a vision, such ideals only become idealism if we imagine that

There have also been enormous objective difficulties. With the possible exception of Czechoslovakia and the partial exception of the GDR, we have yet to witness an attempt to build socialism in a country with even a moderately developed pre-existing economic base, or in which there is at least a pre-existing bourgeois democratic political culture.

Despite all of this, existing socialism has thrown up in its partial, half-realised achievements, evidence of its potential in such vital areas as the quest for world peace, social security, health, education, full employment, and so on.

To cite just one example, in underdeveloped Cuba the literacy rate is higher than in the most developed capitalist country, the United States;

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their attainment is the product principally of ideas acting independently of real material processes.

But, you may well ask, what actual, historical realities do we have in mind when we assert the inherent superiority of socialism?

Well, very briefly, capitalism has been around for nearly 5 centuries, it has failed to meet some of the most basic aspirations of humankind. Today it has projected its internal contradictions onto a global stage, bringing abject squalor into the lives of the great majority of the world's inhabitants, specifically in the countries of the Third World.

Turning to the societies of existing socialism (and let us not forget that in world-historical terms, socialism is in its infancy), there have been immense problems. There have been some truly horrendous subjective errors.

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**NE:** Gorbachev, in his book *Perestroika*, asserts that while the profit/market mechanism provides the dynamic in capitalism which constantly advances technology and production techniques, socialism has developed no such mechanism. Many economists in the socialist countries insist that perestroika will not succeed unless the market comes to play an even greater role relative to the plan. The dividing line between socialism and social democracy is therefore being blurred not because of an illegitimate flirtation with capitalism, but because of economic necessity. In this respect, *Has Socialism Failed?* is relatively silent. It asserts that the basics of

**socialism remain valid, and that it was the lack of democracy that resulted in distortions. But the failure of the planned economy was not simply because of the absence of democracy.**

JS: The essence of socialism is not the plan *per se*. Socialism is a transitional phase, on the way to communism, in which the means of production are increasingly owned and controlled socially, and in which the working people are politically empowered. Socialist planning must be designed to progressively advance this process.

In relation to capitalism, the core of Marx's scientific breakthrough was precisely to uncover, beneath the appearance of the capitalist free market, the essential mechanisms of class exploitation.

The difference between socialism and capitalism lies in the critical difference between *different relations of production* - the one non-exploitative, the other based root and branch on class exploitation. The dominant role of the free market under capitalism is designed to keep exploitative relations in place.

The contrast between the plan and market must be seen in this context. On the one hand, no modern economy - capitalist or socialist - can function without some degree of centralised planning. On the other hand, capitalism can claim no monopoly on markets. Markets existed historically a long time before the advent of capitalism. And within existing socialist countries, as you note, there is now a much more realistic appreciation of the positive role the market mechanism can play in certain important areas.

Another problem which is being addressed is the premature elimination of different forms of property and a mechanical approach to egalitarianism in underdeveloped economic conditions. Neither of these correctives constitute an illegitimate flirtation with capitalism if they do not result in the reintroduction of a system of exploitation.

The economic restructuring occurring, for instance, under perestroika in the Soviet Union is according a much greater role to the market mechanism in the relationship between different socialist production units (factories, farms, power stations etc.).

It is also according a much greater role to the market mechanism in the relationship between productive units

and the consumers. A committee of bureaucrats in Moscow will no longer attempt in some 5-year plan to decree the quantity of shoes required from each individual factory.

The effectiveness of a shoe factory will no longer be determined simply by its ability to produce a certain gross quantity of shoes regardless of quality, style or demand - but by its ability, on the market, to respond to, and even anticipate, the needs and preferences of the people.

I fail to understand how, or why, any of this constitutes "an illegitimate flirtation with capitalism", or a slip-page into social democracy. It would only be so if the adoption of the market mechanism was calculated to reintroduce a system of exploitation of person by person.

It is also important to realise that the concept of economic planning itself is not flawed simply because planning of the commandist bureaucratic kind has failed. There is no way, for instance, that in a liberated South Africa the immense socio-economic problems of housing, employment, education and health-care can begin to be addressed without a significant degree of central economic planning - although such planning should be flexible and democratic.

On the global plane, the major socio-economic challenges confronting humanity - for example the massive debt-burden and the dangerous trade imbalance between North and South, the destruction of the environment, the need to redirect nuclear technology to peaceful ends, the grave threat posed by the spread of certain infectious diseases like AIDS - all of these cannot rely for their solution on the play of the free market forces. The free-marketeers like to present themselves as the very latest word in economic rationality. In fact, measured against the challenges of the modern world, it is the free marketeers who are the ones lost in a time-warp.

**NE: Nonetheless, is the dividing line between socialism and social democracy not being blurred by events in Eastern Europe? And, in this connection, can we really say that socialism is economically and morally superior to social democracy? The poorest sector of the population in the social democracies enjoys a better standard of living than the poorest in the socialist countries, and appears to**

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**have had greater democracy too.**

**JS:** In the past, communists have been guilty of treating social democracy as an undifferentiated whole. We have often failed to distinguish between different strands in social democracy. We should concede that social democracy is part of a broader tradition in the quest for socialism.

Our old blanket terms for social democracy - "traps of imperialism", "traitors to the working class" - must be discarded. I believe that this new perception of social democracy opens the way for some form of collaboration between social democratic forces and communist forces.

There are important positive features of social democracy that must be noted. Social democrats have generally paid greater attention, at least theoretically, than we have to the vital connection between socialism and democracy.

The social democrats, particularly in the Scandinavian countries, have played an enormously important international solidarity role, not least in regard to our own struggle.

In power, social democrats have made positive contributions to ameliorating the conditions of workers within the context of capitalism.

But this "within" remains the operative word. Everywhere, in its practical application, social democracy has not really addressed the question of changing the relations of production.

If socialism means anything it is summed up in the objective of working to end the exploitation of one person by another. There is no example in history where social democracy has gained power and has, in fact, seriously tried to bring about such a transformation.

The positive economic achievements to which you refer must also be contextualised. The relatively positive examples of social democracy are all to be found in the advanced, industrialised countries of the North. Some of the advantages enjoyed in these countries are not unconnected to the wider imperialist international division of labour.

Above all, the major trend within social democracy has been to look upon bourgeois electoral institutions as the last word in democracy. While parliaments and other such representative institutions are important, this is an exceedingly limited view of democracy. It needs to be complemented with another socialist tradi-

tion of democracy.

It is a tradition that we need to rediscover in a certain sense. I am thinking of the tradition of direct democracy, celebrated in Marx's writing on the Paris Commune and in Lenin's reflections on the Soviets or popular councils that emerged spontaneously in 1905 and again in 1917.

This popular power tradition of democracy does not entail the rejection of elected, state institutions, but it extends the notion of democracy far beyond the limits of the liberal (and social democratic) tradition. It calls for the fostering of many centres of power outside of the state, in a host of sectoral organisations, local associations, popular militias, special interest campaigns, etc. In this tradition (a tradition with strong echoes in South Africa's recent mass struggles) socialist state power (exercised through elected, representative institutions) and popular power are complementary. They check and balance each other.

It is along these directions that we need to move in building a fully democratic society. By contrast, the limited parliamentarism, which has become more and more the dominant trend within social democracy, carries with it all the familiar anti-democratic dangers of wheeling and dealing between political elites, of unprincipled compromise and bureaucratism.

**NE: The path of socialist orientation of national democratic states was premised on the existence of a socialist world system into which such national democracies could slot. Perestroika has laid to rest the idea of a socialist world system, stressing instead an integrated world economy. Could you comment on this, and its meaning for South Africa's future?**

**JS:** Because of economic failure, the reality is that there is little left of what we used to call a world socialist economic system. Socialism has, for the moment, proved incapable of competing with the world capitalist sector, for reasons I outlined in *Has Socialism Failed?* - essentially because of various distortions of socialism. This means that we cannot premise future advance in South Africa in the medium term on some kind of integration into a socialist world economy. It is difficult at this stage to speculate on precise policies we will need to pursue. But there are some basic principles that we must already grasp firmly.

In the first place, we will have to cultivate a spirit of self-reliance, a confidence in the necessity of finding our own way. The overwhelming dominance on a world scale of the capitalist sector presents dangers and complexities. We can neither ignore these realities, nor must we become fatalistic. We *will* have options and room for manoeuvre. Our country is, after all, not without many significant resources and our working people are mobilised and politically conscious. The challenge will be to safeguard the sovereignty of our people and our right to move in the right direction. If capital says: "right, we are no longer prepared to invest because of the social direction you are following", we can neither ignore the fact, nor can we

In my opinion it is imperative that our broad liberation movement begins *now* to develop an effective leadership code of conduct that seeks to counter any tendencies towards elitism.

**NE: The rhetoric which abounds in youth and trade union circles about the future of South Africa appears hopelessly out of touch with what will be objectively possible. What problems does this disjuncture between rhetoric and reality pose for the future?**

JS: Mass worker support and enthusiasm for socialism is an entirely positive factor in our struggle. With the possibilities now opened up by our legalisation, the SACP will be working



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Pic: Afrapix

allow it to dominate our policies.

We must also prepare to weather certain inevitable dislocations. All social transformations bring with them such dislocations. The likely hostility of sectors of capital to even moderate measures which we will have to take in order to begin the basic redistribution of wealth will contribute to these disruptions. The only way to cope with a transitional period of dislocation is to take the people with you politically.

And this brings me to another major lesson to be derived from the events in Eastern Europe. A differential style of life for the leadership is fatal. If the leadership is living as a privileged elite, you can hardly expect the broad masses of people to accept the objective necessity of transitional hardships in the interests of effecting a real redistribution and transformation.

to extend and deepen this support.

Leaving aside ideological frills, the average worker and youth militant in our country has perhaps a more profound grasp of the utility of a socialist future than many a Marxist scholar. The working people of our country understand the basic truth that, as long as a system based on private profit rules the roost, substantial inroads into resolving their major concerns - housing, education, employment, health-care, social security - will not be possible.

A national democratic victory is an essential step forward, a basis for advance, but we should not by our silences project it as the end of the road. It is crucial that we propagate a socialist perspective now - which is not to say that we can pole-vault into socialism immediately.

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'Despite all of this, existing socialism has thrown up in its partial, half-realised achievements, evidence of its potential in such vital areas as the quest for world peace, social security, health, education, full employment, and so on.'

**NE:** If there was a one-person-one-vote election for a 100-seat Constituent Assembly, the best-case scenario would give the ANC around 70% of the African vote, 50% of the Coloured vote and 30% of the Indian vote. 1% of the white vote would be a fairly optimistic projection. That would still only give the ANC approximately 57 seats. Clearly then, some form of coalition-approach will be necessary. How should this affect the way in which the struggle is conducted at this point?

**JS:** Well that's all a bit speculative. Its far too soon to know whether the transfer of power to the people will occur through a constituent assembly (or some other negotiating mechanism, by mass and partial uprisings, or some combination of all of these.

Nevertheless, long before our ANC/SACP alliance launched the call for a democratically elected Constituent Assembly, we were advocating a broad front of anti-apartheid forces.

In the last years, important gains have been made - our contact with and reach into Bantustan circles, inroads into the white (and black) middle ground, the workers' summits, the CDF etc. All of these are laying the basis for a very broad, democratic national consensus. The importance of these initiatives is more relevant than ever before.

**NE:** How will the Party react to its new legality? Will it remain a vanguard party, or consider becoming a mass party? Will its surface its underground structures, and make its membership publicly known?

**JS:** In the first place, I wouldn't draw such a sharp distinction between a vanguard party (properly understood) and a mass party. I believe the now-legal SACP must continue to play a vanguard role - in the sense that it must seek to mobilise, organise and educate the working people by representing their immediate and long-term interests through all the twists and turns of the struggle.

The concept of the vanguard has been degraded in practise by two tendencies. The one is the shifting of the party's vanguard role from the working class to society as a whole. Once the party claims to be the vanguard of society at large, its a short step to a

constitutionally entrenched one-party system.

In the second place, the concept of the party's vanguard role had, in many cases, shifted away from the idea that this role must be based on a renewable mandate from a working class that is mobilised and active.

In building an above-board SACP, a party that will be able to earn its title of vanguard, we will certainly seek to recruit into our ranks the most dedicated, disciplined militants drawn, in particular, from the ranks of the working people. But our continued emphasis on a vanguard role, and on quality in our membership, must not stand in the way of building a relatively large SACP.

As to the Party underground - for the moment we are not surfacing our underground structures. This is a precautionary measure in a still uncertain situation. It is a matter which we will hold under constant review. But certainly, in organisational terms the emphasis of the SACP will now be on building a mass, above-board party whose membership is not secret.

**NE:** How do the distinct tasks of the Party and the ANC play themselves out in an era of legal mass politics?

**JS:** In the unfolding situation our party's role as a vital constituent of the liberation alliance headed by the ANC and as an independent organisation pursuing the aspirations of the working class is becoming more crucial than ever.

The ANC will remain the overall head of the broad national liberation movement whose task in the immediate aftermath of victory will be to consolidate our liberation objectives. We need now to build an ANC of massive strength, and every Party militant must help to make this a reality.

In the building of a mass-based ANC it is inevitable that some strata with their own agenda will flock into its ranks and will, consciously or otherwise, seek to steer it away from its working class bias.

We should be ready for an inevitable sharpening of inter-class ideological contest in the run-up to victory and in its immediate aftermath. This is not an argument for narrowing the base of the ANC. It is an argument for consolidating and massively extending our Party and the trade union movement - as independent forces and as part of the liberation alliance.