

The need to renew our theory

Letter to the editors of ISF

Dear comrades,

Thanks to the help of friends from London, I have received numbers 1 and 3 of ISF, which have been of great interest. I found No. 3 particularly interesting, especially the serious theoretical articles by Cyril Smith, Paresh Chattopadhyay, Istvan Meszaros, as well as the other discussion material. All this is very important, especially for the Russian reader.

Since the collapse of the USSR and the demise of official Soviet "Marxist-Leninist" ideology, Russian socialists have been in an ideological dead-end, or perhaps a vacuum. The new rulers of Russia began to force down people's throats the dogma that socialist ideology and the teachings of Karl Marx had failed. This was based in turn on another, Stalinist, dogma, i.e. that Marxist socialism had been built in the Soviet Union. But the construction of socialism in a single country – an economically and culturally backward country – could not be explained from the point of view of Marxist theory. Theoretically that left a choice of two alternatives: either to accept that Stalinist socialism was right and good, which would mean rejecting the historical materialism of Karl Marx; or to accept the teachings of classical Marxism, accept historical determinism – and reject Stalinist socialism. Stalin made it very simple: all those who thought differently from him, or thought at all, were sent to the Gulag. That's how the development of socialist theory and of socialist ideas in general was killed off for a long time in Russia.

Now, an intensive process of rethinking history is underway. Stalinist dogmas and falsifications are being destroyed. People are seeking answers to many questions about what to do. They are not satisfied with the conceptions of old official Soviet ideology, which took the country into a dead end. Among the majority of working people there is also disillusionment, even irritation, with the new bourgeois ideology, which is being exported here so energetically from the west.

People want a new ideology, a new social theory. In my opinion, this need can only be satisfied by modern-day socialist theory. But the only books and articles printed in large numbers in Russia today are those of liberal, bourgeois ideologues such as Ludwig von Mises and Frederik Hayek, or the historian Richard Pipes. You can find their books everywhere: they are printed in large print runs, sold all over the country and recommended to students at most universities. At the same time, it is almost impossible to find books by socialist thinkers and writers, by western Marxists. In fact the present-day rulers of Russia are terrified to

publish even the works of the European social democrats and "revisionists". World capital is stifling ideas in the new Russia.

Why are questions of theory so important? Because at the moment Russian socialists have only two social theories to choose from: the old Stalinist one and the new bourgeois one. Neither is any use to the genuine left. And the absence of anything else is one of the main reasons for the disorganisation of the socialist and workers' movement in the country. It has no constructive socialist theory, no clear perspective.

In this situation any help that can be given to Russian socialists in terms of theory and research is very important – that is what makes journals like ISF so useful here. Through discussions such as yours we will be able to develop a new socialist theory and an ideological orientation for the socialist movement.

I have a particular request. As I mentioned above, in Russia it is practically impossible to get hold of Marxist books published in the west. It would therefore be extremely useful if your journal could regularly include reviews and surveys of new Marxist and socialist literature – and in this way help Russian readers to overcome intellectual isolation from socialist thought elsewhere.

Another request. In all countries there are many academic conferences and discussions on the development of Marxist and socialist theory. It is very difficult for Russian socialists to take part even in a few of these. For this reason receiving information about such discussions is all the more important. It would be very useful to see reports of such theoretical discussions in the pages of the journal.

Today the most important thing is the development of socialist theory. The break-up of the USSR and the destruction of Stalinist "socialism" has given rise to the most favourable conditions for this development. But for this we need journals, discussion, a constant exchange of information. I hope that ISF will play a significant role in this work.

Yours faithfully,
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