

The Berlin Wall and socialism



Why socialists should celebrate the end of Stalinist states

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Thirty years ago, on 9 November 1989, the Berlin Wall came down.

It was a wall built through Berlin by the rulers of East Germany, which called itself socialist, to prevent people escaping to West Berlin, which was capitalist and linked to West Germany.

Over its 28 years, about 5,000 people managed to escape over the Wall, and somewhere between 100 and 200 were killed by East German border guards while trying to escape.

In 1991, less than two years later, the old USSR broke up. The system created by Stalin's counter-revolution, which had been the model for states which called themselves socialist like East Germany, and the overlord for many of them, collapsed.

We rejoiced at the coming-down of the Berlin Wall and of the old USSR, and we still rejoice.

We had long said that states like East Germany were no more socialist than the "German Democratic Republic" (East Germany's official name for itself) was democratic. A better word for their systems was: Stalinist.

Stalinism was not socialism. Measured against the ideals advocated by the great socialist movements before Stalin, and by the Bolsheviks who led the Russian Revolution in 1917, it was the opposite of socialism.

Many of us had through the decades championed the underground workers' movements and the oppressed nationalities in the Stalinist systems.

Others in the British labour movement thought that the Stalinist states were socialist at least in some degree. We waged war against that idea.

For the last 30 years we've heard that same idea, from confused would-be socialists again, and also from advocates of the private-profit system who insist that Stalinism was socialism because they want to discredit socialism and bury it.

In fact the system in states like East Germany was one of extreme exploitation of the workers and peasants, run by a backward bureaucratic ruling class with a monopoly of political and social power. It was the bureaucracy that decreed that their state should nationalise and control everything — not Marx, or for that matter Lenin.

Way before, back in the 19th century, socialists in the tradition of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, Rosa Luxemburg and many others had been arguing that "state socialism" (the state owning all industry) could be even worse than the usual capitalism if in the hands of a state controlled by an exploiting minority. We are for public ownership, but with democratic control.

Most important of all, from our point of view, in 1989-91, was that the workers in the Stalinist state gained the liberty to organise, to think, to discuss, and thus to learn..

Neither market forces nor a Stalinist state-monopoly economy serve the working class. The cardinal value for us is the free activity of the working class — even when, in the opinion of those who take the long historical view, the workers are muddled and mistaken. We want the right of workers to have free trade unions, freedom of speech, freedom to have their own political parties.

Of course, the dominance of socialist ideas is never inevitable among workers. And we could see back in 1989 that there were especially great obstacles in the way of workers becoming socialists when they had lived all their lives under a Stalinist system disguised as socialism.

The workers looked to the West and to market economics for their solutions. Mostly they hoped for something like Sweden, with good welfare provision. Because of the weaknesses of the labour and socialist movements in the West, and the consequent general neoliberal drift all over the world, they got a cruder, rawer form of capitalism.

But the workers in East Germany, Poland, and other East European states still have their own labour movements, battered and bewildered maybe, but able to organise, discuss, and debate.