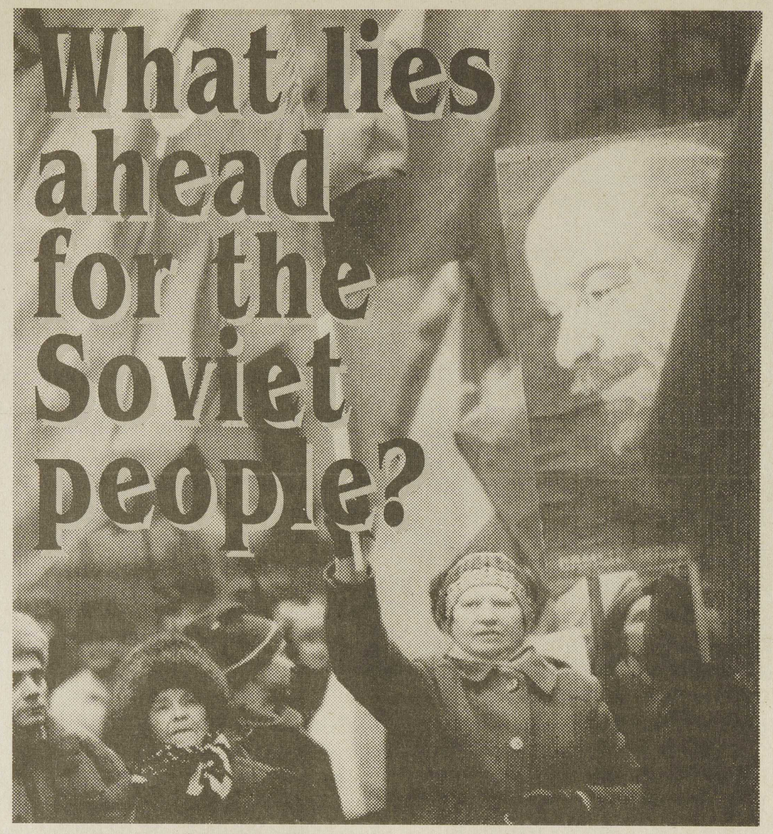
What lies ahead for the Soviet people?



by Mike Davidow

Mike Davidow, Moscow correspondent for the People's Weekly World, has lived and worked in the Soviet Union for 14 years. Following are excerpts from a speech he gave in New York City December 21, 1992.

History is now punishing the Soviet people for the abandonment of socialism by their leaders. What does this mean concretely?

Many visitors to the Soviet Union noted how wonderful it is to be able to walk the streets at night, with no crime. Well, with the first steps toward capitalism let me inform you there is mass crime in the Soviet Union today.

And here was a country without mass unemployment. Now there is large scale joblessness and soon there will be many more millions out of work.

Higher education was free; now it costs 40, 000 rubles for a four-year term.

One of the greatest achievements of socialism, free medical care, is being undermined. They still have free medical care but new paid clinics are drawing many of the best doctors and nurses away from the polyclinics, because that is where the money is.

Or take for example, stable prices. For the 14 years that I was there, the prices of meat and milk and bread were stable, no increases. Now there's a ten and twelve-fold increase in prices! And it only will get worse after price controls are fully lifted in January.

Or take the national picture. I visited the 15 republics. I was in Nagorno-Karabach, the area of the terrible warfare between Azerbaijanis and Armenians, when they lived peacefully side by side. Of course, there were many problems; they were not all solved as we once believed. But there was a certain stability in the relations. This has been undermined.

So the abandonment of socialism means changing fundamentally, in the worst possible way, the Soviet people's lives.

AP photos

Above,the Commonwealth of Independent States meets; top right, a pro-socialist rally in Moscow. Opposite page, scenes until recently unknown in USSR. Top, a child begs in the street; bottom, an elderly woman garbage-picking.

Why setbacks?

What are some of the reasons for this terrible setback? The last word on this has not been spoken. In my opinion the Soviet Communist Party, which is now being reorganized, owes the world and their people, a fundamental, objective analysis.

From the beginning of perestroika there appeared two trends. One was for correction, and the other was for rejection, of socialism. Very powerful forces were involved from the beginning in the forces for rejection. Gorbachev must be understood as of one who vacillated between them and then surrendered to the rejection trend.

The question is, why did the forces of rejection triumph and what were the reasons that counterrevolution—which is what it is—could triumph temporarily?

I believe the revolutionary energy of the Soviet people was exhausted, exhausted by ordeals. Look at what they went through in the course of an ordinary lifetime: a revolution, civil war, the Stalin period of repressions, World War Two, where they lost 27 million people. It's not only the deaths and the destruction of the cities, but the moral and psychological scars left on generations that followed.

The Communist Party was the backbone of Soviet socialism, with a glorious history both under Czarism and socialism. But they ignored one of the basic warnings by Lenin, that when the party has state power, the main danger is careerism and corruption. This happened on a terrible scale, and now the chickens are coming home to roost.

This created a fertile soil for the forces of counterrevolution, which focused on all the negative features of Soviet history. And you have to live in the Soviet Union and watch television or read the press to get the full impact of six years of unremitting, negative, distorted propaganda.

Much was done to discredit socialism in Gorbachev's last three years. He was the head of the Communist Party and therefore the CPSU was held responsible for the empty shelves in the stores, for the crime that began to appear, for the national strife that tore the country apart, for the disintegration of the whole Soviet Union.

Of course Gorbachev did certain things that were positive, particularly in the beginning. He opened up the process of democratization; that was a positive thing. But he let it run out of control to the point where it became its opposite and practically undermined the whole fabric of society.

Will socialism be undone?

Already they're saying here that Yeltsin's unpredictable. But he's predictable in one sense—he's determined to eradicate socialism and restore capitalism. He's going to have one hell of a job because it's not just up to him. The socialist economic structure—and it is still socialist for the time being—constitutes his major problem. And he will have a conflict with the mass of the Soviet people when he tries to undo this socialist structure and replace it with capitalism, which in the U.S. just put 70,000 GM workers out of work.

They avoid the word "capitalism" like the plague, because if they would say, "We want to restore capitalism!" they would get very little support. Therefore they speak about this mysterious, magical "market economy" cure-all. But the people are not buying it, because what they've experienced from just the beginnings of the market economy has them worried.

So there's going to be a critical period in which the class struggle is sharpening, because you have the creation of a sizable capitalist class, which is ready and willing to sell off the country piece by piece.

Now, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union has been outlawed by edict, by Boris Yeltsin. The Party has been stripped of all its assets: its money, its buildings, its schools, its press, even its typewriters. It has literally no place to meet right now. No court, no legal body decided this. One man was given emergency powers and this is the way he abused it.

Communist refoundation

But there has developed a movement for the reorganization of the Communist Party. One group, which I would call the most promising, is the Communist Workers' Party of Russia. This group is overwhelmingly working class though it also has sections of the intelligentsia. It will have, in my opinion, about a million members in Russia. Another group is called the Union of Communists. They're very close to the first group, very similar in program. Then you have a third group, which I would describe as left social democratic, with many who are Marxist-Leninist oriented.

I think there will be a left bloc in which these groups will work together on the economic crisis, the defense of socialist gains and the fight to reestablish the USSR.

100,000 rally in Moscow

I want to tell you about a development that is most inspiring. This Nov. 7, the anniversary of the revolution, was the first in 74 years not observed by the government. Everything was done to erase it from the memory of the people. But the Moscow Soviet of Workers spread a leaflet all over the city and 100,000 peopleturned out. As we left the subway, the whole train came out with us, and this happened all day long. They poured out from all over the city.

There was such enthusiasm, such resolve. The slogans they had "Down with Privatization," "Down with Capitalism," "Down with Yeltsin," "Down with Gorbachev," and it resounded throughout Red Square.

What is developing now is the reorganization of a Communist Party stripped of a lot of the negative features. It will be much smaller, but much more of a Communist Party. I wish you could see some of these people. There are faces that nobody ever knew before.

The struggle that lies ahead will be a very difficult one. But the process is already taking place. The roots of socialism are very deep. The people know what socialism means to them. They were stunned by all these developments, but now they are moving and they need our support.