

# The Death of Communism?

by Phil Jackson

The world movement for freedom and democracy includes some unlikely people.

There's George Bush, the man who once ran the American version of the KGB and who appears to believe that freedom flows from the barrel of a gun, preferably an American-made one. Mikhail Gorbachev is another friendly figure who, surprisingly enough, used to head the Soviet version of the CIA, and is not adverse to shooting a few Georgians or Latvians if the need should arise. These are the players at the top of the "freedom and democracy charts" at the moment.

Following hot on the heels of the big two is that mildly insane but quintessentially 'freedom loving' guru of the New Right, Margaret Hilda Thatcher. Thatcher, as many readers are undoubtedly aware, is single-handedly responsible for everything that has happened in Eastern Europe in recent months, from the Berlin Wall to the Romanian revolution, and the elections. It's all the work of Thatcher.

Without fear of reprisal or imprisonment, Thatcher has selflessly braved all to "light a beacon in Europe." Her success is quite remarkable, especially when you consider she never had to leave her drawing room. It is perplexing how this mythical "freedom" bonfire managed to stay lit considering that many Britons now compare her unfavourably with the deposed East German Iron Man, Erik Honnecker, and considering that just across the sea, the remains of the occupied North of Ireland resemble the Nagorno Karabach.

Last, and in many ways least, in the "Star Chamber" of freedom and democracy in the 1990s is our own fearless leader, Brian Mulroney. A man known and respected in the free world for his honesty and integrity, Mulroney has shown great tact in his dealings with Eastern Europe. His subtle diplomacy was perhaps seen most clearly in the thoughtful way a CANDU Nuclear reactor was sold to Romania, the only country in the Eastern Bloc with a large enough slave labour force to build it on the cheap.

Ever the prudent investor, Mulroney followed one smart business move with another, when, in a heart warming show of support to the Polish "Solidarity" government, he donated a staggering \$50 million (roughly the price of a small loaf of bread and half a kilo of sausages in inflation hit Poland).

Lech Walesa, in accepting the money during a recent visit to Canada, thanked Mulroney profusely, comparing the gift to 'giving a beautiful silk tie to a corpse.'

Both Thatcher and Mulroney have also been curiously quiet on the rights of the Baltic states and other oppressed nationalities within the Soviet Union. Could this be because one of them has been imposing a military occupation for 20 years, while the other has refused to recognize the land claims of its Native population for even longer and has trouble even recognizing one of its troublesome 'republics' as 'distinct'?

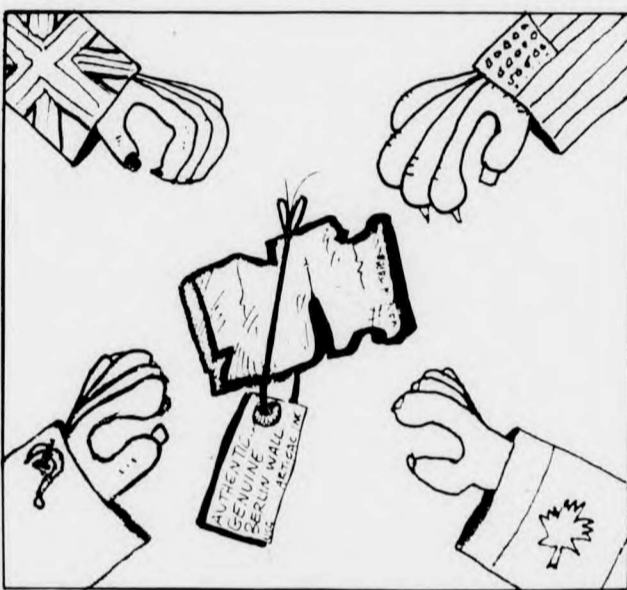
The truth is that the leaders of the Western states have, not surprisingly, behaved like total hypocrites. They have all used the revolutions in Eastern Europe for their own purposes, claiming that the wonderful events which have taken place prove once and for all the supremacy of their capitalist system. The death of communism has been heralded loudly and repeatedly.

One should pause for thought, though. Not one of these so-called "worker states" was ever formed by the workers themselves. In not one of these regimes did ordinary people have a say in the direction of the country. The majority of citizens were totally excluded from political and economic power. Does it matter that this process of exclusion was carried on visibly via the mechanisms of the state rather than 'discreetly' through the interaction of private business of the state (as in El Salvador, Guatemala, etc.)? Was not the effect the same? The state capitalist regimes of the East Bloc did not have a monopoly on the label "authoritarian." One might equally apply it to regimes such as Chile, Honduras, South Africa, etc.

The notion that capitalism and democracy are some duo that have been touring the circuit for years is a total myth. The limited democracy we

enjoy in the West was not handed down benevolently from on high. Rather, it was fought for by past generations of workers and political activists. Working people forced the tiny area of freedoms we have today from the hands of the elites. Working people in Eastern Europe have done the same. Did not the Eastern ruling elites have their own hunting lodges, country mansions, and private schools (for their offspring who in later life would 'inherit' their parents' influence and prestige)? They drove around in Mercedes, ate the finest foods and drank the finest wine. And they did not accumulate such wealth alone. Within each country, whole layers of managers and technocrats made it possible, and they too creamed off their fair share of what the working people produced.

All this was carried on in the name of socialism, the very language of which has become so debased by these regimes as to render it near meaningless in the East. Yet these societies were



first and foremost class-based societies, the lifestyles of the bureaucracy differing little from the lives of ruling elites the world over. These regimes were the very antithesis of socialism, created not by the mass of people but by a blue pencil on the piece of paper that redivided the globe between two super powers in the aftermath of the Second World War.

These may sound like hollow words coming from the pen of a Canadian Leftist, but these words are echoed by a small but growing section of the opposition within Russia and Eastern Europe: people such as Boris Kagarlitsky and the SOTSPROF independent union movement and recently formed committee for a New Socialist Party, the Active Left group in Czechoslovakia, the Polish Socialist Party (DR) and many others.

What the supporters of these groups have in common is a history of active and militant opposition to the old regimes. Many have been imprisoned and have faced separation from their families and dismissal from their jobs. What they also have in common is a belief in a form of democracy far greater than that which has been achieved today, in the East or in the West — the control of all aspects of society democratically and from the grassroots, through local workers councils. They stand for an end to production for the profit of an elite enshrined in the state office buildings or in private boardrooms. Their slogans are for mass participatory democracy and workers control, with production decided by and for the producers themselves. They are the true heirs of a socialist tradition which died not six months ago, but 60 years ago with the rise of the Stalinist ruling class in Russia.

These movements make these arguments because in many of the Eastern European regimes, the top heads have rolled but the factory manager remains the same (in fact in Poland and Hungary many of the old bureaucrats have bought and now privately own sections of industry). The inequality remains. The day-to-day exploitation remains. The poverty and hunger remain. Aside from East Germany, which looks set to be bailed out by the West, the future of Poland, Hungary, Romania, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia looks economically grim. The West cannot and will not forgive

the debts of Poland and Hungary, which both owe \$60 billion each in loans. This is an economic death sentence.

No country of comparable size and productivity has ever paid back this kind of money or gone from such stagnancy, debt and backwardness to healthy growth.

The new government of Poland has shown what the rest of Eastern Europe's workers can expect in the coming years. In the past month, food prices have skyrocketed as the government attempts to meet the demands of the International Monetary Fund to open up its markets. Solidarity's own economists predict a rise in unemployment of up to one and a half million people within the next 18 months. Combined with this, the overall living standard of Polish workers is predicted to fall by 40 per cent. These are the same workers who, in 1981, had the slogan, "enough meat to eat as a police dog." It does not look like they'll be getting it.

Western business people, especially big industrial producers, have offered loud cheers to the democracy movements along with the rest of us. Many though have recently shown themselves to be just as ruthless and oppressive in their business practices in Eastern Europe as they are in the Philippines (paying \$2 a day wages) and other "Third World" countries. While the rest of the world was moved by the heroism of people fighting oppression, the corporate vultures smelled one thing: cheap skilled labour. Ford Motors declared of Poland, rather excitedly, "Where else in Europe can you find labour for \$10 a day?" Perhaps the most poignant example of this mentality was displayed by an American shipbuilding firm poised to buy the Lenin shipyard in Gdansk (birthplace of the Solidarity Union movement). The backers have apparently pulled out this month after failing to secure a 15 per cent wage cut and a promise of non-union labour.

To those who think what collapsed in Eastern Europe were "Worker States," "Socialist Democracies" or whatever other label their rulers and supporters called them, I say ask the workers that live there. To those who think that the free-market can now perform some economic miracle, making Eastern Europe into some prosperous countries of satisfied and contented consumers, I say to you, you are equally mistaken.

Ask yourself just what miracles the market has performed. From a detached house in a Toronto suburb it probably seems like a great deal, but these people are cogs in the system, an infinitesimally tiny percentage of the works of the world market. Even within this city, 30,000 are homeless, tens of thousands more use food banks to survive.

If we move beyond the confines of Toronto and look at the bigger North American picture, we can see that over one in four American children live in poverty, over 50 per cent of black children in the U.S. live below the poverty line, and half a million children are malnourished. There are 200,000 people in Los Angeles living in garages without heat, light or water, and almost the same number live on the street.

In the Harlem district of New York, the life expectancy for black males is lower than that of Bangladesh. All this occurs in the wealthiest country in the world.

On a global scale, one third of this world is on the brink of starvation, while grain is burned in America to keep prices high. Millions are spent on ships that can dump rice in the sea, using the same deadly logic, that of the market. Peasants in Central America are forced to grow coffee on land that once grew food because of the logic of the market. When the price falls, they quite literally starve. There is nothing very free about the market and it will solve nothing in the East. Why the hell should it? It hasn't anywhere else.

I hated the systems that fell in the East as much as anyone else, but pardon me if I don't joint in the smug self-congratulatory praise of our own variant of rule by minority. The people of Eastern Europe have begun to cast off one barrier to freedom. The first phase of their revolution has finished. In the coming years, they will need to fight a second revolution, and hopefully they won't be alone.