

Socialism Will Be Free, Or It Will Not Be At All!

An Introduction to Libertarian Socialism

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Introduction

Socialism is officially a buzzword again. According to a recent poll, 44% of U.S. millennials “prefer socialism to capitalism”, and even mainstream Democrats are starting to call themselves socialist. As one headline put it: “Socialism is so hot right now.” Used to describe everything from Bernie Sanders to Stalinist Russia, there are few words which inspire such varied and contradictory meanings. Like most buzzwords, socialism’s true meaning has been obscured by its popularity.

But what does socialism actually mean, and what does it look like in practice?

At its core, socialism is the idea that resources and institutions in society should be managed democratically by the community as a whole. Whereas under capitalism, economic and political power is concentrated in the hands of the rich, socialists fight for a society in which the means of producing and distributing goods and services are held in common through the democratic self-management of workplaces and communities.

This article will make the case that *libertarian socialism* represents the most thorough and consistent embodiment of core socialist principles. In essence, libertarian socialism is a politics of freedom and collective self-determination, realized through a revolutionary struggle against capitalism, state power and social oppression in all its forms.

Part 1: Freedom from Capitalism

Socialism vs Capitalism

In order to survive under capitalism, those without property are forced to rent themselves to property owners and be exploited for profit. This relationship between “haves” and “have-nots” forms the very basis of capitalist society – *class exploitation*. In such a society, power flows directly from one’s relationship to property, i.e. one’s class position. While a handful of people own and control society’s institutions, the vast majority of people (the *working class*) are rendered powerless as individuals. As the revolutionary socialist and disability rights activist Helen Keller put it: “*The few own the many because they possess the means of livelihood of all.*”

Virtually nothing happens in a capitalist society unless it makes a rich person even richer. By its very nature, capitalism not only feeds on class exploitation and wealth inequality, but it also requires endless growth and expansion of the economy, resulting in wars, colonialism, and ecological destruction. Corporations will stop at virtually nothing in their pathological pursuit of profit.

Socialists advocate a “class struggle” in which those of us rendered powerless under capitalism organize to shift the balance of power until society’s institutions are brought under democratic control and class-as-such has been abolished. In a socialist society private profit would be eliminated. Instead, the purpose of political and economic institutions would be to sustainably meet the needs and desires of the people through the democratic self-management of workplaces and communities. As the socialist maxim goes: “From each according to their ability, to each according to their need.”

Eliminating the need for a propertied employing class and a propertyless employed (or unemployed) class, workplaces would instead be cooperatively managed by the workers themselves, replacing private business. Public policy would be planned through democratic councils of self-

administration, federated from the neighborhood outward, replacing the centralized state. It's in this original spirit that we define socialism as a revolutionary movement for a classless society.

Socialism vs Social Democracy

This vision stands in clear contrast not only to so-called “socialist” dictatorships in Russia or China, but also to capitalist countries such as Sweden or Norway, often described as “socialist.” These societies (also called “social democracies”) have the same power dynamics as any other capitalist state. Whereas socialism calls for cooperative ownership and direct democracy, “social democracies” maintain concentrated economic power in the hands of the rich, with a powerful central government regulating social programs, thus leaving the class structure of society unchanged. In this sense, self-described socialists such as Bernie Sanders would be more appropriately described as “social democrats” or “liberals” because their end goal is to carry out progressive reforms to make life under the capitalist state more tolerable. Such reforms can improve people's living and working conditions in important ways, but taxes and cheaper healthcare do not constitute socialism. Socialism is the revolutionary appeal for a classless society.

Isn't *Libertarian Socialism* an Oxymoron?

In the United States, the word “libertarian” has taken on the opposite meaning from that of the rest of the world. Strangely, it's become synonymous with advocacy of extreme capitalist individualism, private property and the “rights” of corporations to be “free” from public oversight. But freedom for the powerful is not freedom at all.

Since its origin, libertarianism has been synonymous with anarchism or anti-authoritarianism: the belief that relationships based on domination, hierarchy and exploitation should be dismantled in favor of freedom and self-determination. To anarchists, an individual can only be free in a community of equals. As the 19th century Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin put it: *“Political Freedom without economic equality is a pretense, a fraud, a lie.”* It should come as no surprise then, that libertarians have always been socialists, since capitalism is based on class domination.

Though the possible confusion is understandable, libertarian socialism is more of a redundancy than a contradiction in terms. Freedom and socialism are indispensable to one another. Without one, the other loses its meaning. So libertarian socialism simply means “free socialism.” As the anarchist thinker Rudolf Rocker put it: *“Socialism will be free, or it will not be at all.”*

Part 2: Freedom from State Power

Libertarian Socialism vs State Socialism

Historically there have been two general tendencies in movements for socialism, which we can roughly describe as those “from above” and those “from below.” Both sides are dedicated to the abolition of capitalism but they differ crucially in their vision of a future society and how to get there. The key difference between these tendencies is their approach to state power. While state socialists view the state as the means to socialism, libertarians see it as a barrier.

Socialism from Below

Libertarian socialists have long argued that states (or governments) are not neutral institutions, but instruments of class rule, set up to protect a ruling minority through a monopoly on violence. Without police, jails, militarized borders and centralized political control, a state is no longer a state. Such a concentration of power is antithetical to democratic self-management, and therefore to socialism.

To achieve “free socialism,” those of us rendered powerless under capitalism must empower ourselves by organizing where we live, work and go to school, creating popular organizations (ie, rank and file unions for workers and tenants, popular assemblies, mass community organizations) and building the collective power not only to push back against the problems imposed on us, but to bring the institutions around us under democratic control. Eventually, workers can seize their workplaces from bosses, tenants can seize housing from landlords, and indigenous communities can assert sovereignty over colonized territory. If movements are sufficiently organized and united with one another, isolated actions can grow into a full scale social revolution, laying the basis for a new society in which governments and corporations have been replaced by coordinated bodies of self-rule.

Such structures should be based on the principle of *direct democracy*, in which people directly participate in the decisions which affect their lives. Rather than simply electing our own rulers (a.k.a. “representative democracy”), direct democracy empowers people to collectively govern themselves.

The world is complex and the details always depend on the circumstances, but our guiding principles are uncompromising: concentrated power in all its forms must be overcome in favor of freedom, equality and direct-democracy.

Socialism from Above

State socialists take a different view. Rather than seeing the revolution as a wave of transformation from below, it must instead be implemented from above. From this perspective socialism is understood as a science, requiring professional administration. A core of professional revolutionaries (the “vanguard”) must therefore seize control of the capitalist state on behalf of “the masses” (through either electoral or military means) and administer socialism through the existing mechanisms of power. Rather than bringing the economy under community and worker self-management, land and industry are instead nationalized and placed under direct state control.

Revolution vs Regime-Change

There’s no shortcut to socialism. Replacing a capitalist ruling class with a self-proclaimed “socialist” ruling class is not a social revolution, but a coup; a regime-change. State socialism, therefore, is a contradiction in terms, more accurately described as “state capitalism” since the general population is still forced to rent themselves to a boss (in this case the all-powerful “socialist” state).

If the core of socialism is collective self-management, then socialism at gunpoint can’t be socialism at all. Even Karl Marx himself famously said: “the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves.” A society in which power flows from

the bottom upward can only be built from the bottom upward. Therefore, any attempt to impose socialism from above will logically fail at its professed aim. Throughout history, whenever a small group of people take state power in the name of socialism, instead of creating a classless society, the state becomes increasingly centralized, often resulting in a society more oppressive than that which it overthrew.

The Russian Example

The “vanguardist” ideology of state socialism was first developed by Vladimir Lenin during the Russian Revolution, and then implemented once he and the Bolshevik party seized state control in 1917. While a genuine socialist revolution did indeed sweep the country, it was quickly co-opted and overturned by the new “socialist” state. The newly-formed democratic workers councils (*soviets*) and agricultural communes – the very foundations of a socialist revolution – were dismantled by the Bolsheviks and placed under direct state control. While the Russian workers demanded “*All power to the councils!*,” Lenin insisted that: “*revolution demands ... that the masses unquestionably obey the single will of the leaders.*” Countless socialists were jailed or killed in the name of socialism long before Stalin ever came to power.

Vanguardism in its various forms (Leninism, Trotskyism, Maoism, etc) was taken as an ideological model throughout the 20th century by many who succeeded in taking state power. Unfortunately, due to the model’s success at producing self-described “socialist” regimes (Russia, China, Cuba), the vanguardist ideology has largely become synonymous with revolutionary socialism itself.

Libertarian Socialist Revolutions

Fortunately not all socialist revolutions have been co-opted by authoritarians. From the Spanish anarchist revolution, to the Zapatista uprising and the Rojava revolution in Northern Syria, there are numerous examples of movements reorganizing society along socialist principles without a state. These movements, like any, are not universal models to be replicated, but examples which can teach us important lessons and inspire us with the hope of revolutionary possibility.

Part 3: Freedom from Social Oppression

Solidarity and Collective Liberation

For libertarian socialists, all struggles against oppression are necessarily linked in a broader struggle for collective liberation. A society rooted in self-determination requires the full emancipation of all people – not only from class exploitation and state authority, but from any and all forms of social oppression, period.

As socialists, we believe concentrated economic power and class exploitation are fundamental to the oppression people face today under capitalism. But as libertarians, we also reject the idea that simply “socializing the means of production” would automatically create a free society. Instead, we believe that in any society, capitalist or otherwise, people of all walks of life have to defend their rights against any and all forms of discrimination and oppression.

Fighting against social oppression such as racism, sexism and transphobia should not be treated as an afterthought or side note to the “real work” of class struggle. Instead, it should be understood as central and indispensable to any libertarian socialist project. With a holistic understanding of oppression, we can see that if class struggle means the struggle of working class people for their freedom, then there can be no class struggle without queer struggle, feminist struggle, anti-racism and anti-colonialism. A libertarian socialist society necessarily requires an end to all social oppression because true freedom for anyone requires a dignified life for all. Or as the old Wobbly slogan puts it: “An injury to one is an injury to all.”

Power vs Privilege

For libertarian socialists, collective liberation also requires that we address the root causes of oppression. Manifestations of personal privilege and cultural discrimination should be understood as symptoms of underlying structures in society which determine who has power and who doesn't. The powerful (mostly rich white men) have used their control of society's institutions to shape the dominant culture in their own image and their own interests. Only through shared struggle and revolutionary transformation can we fundamentally reshape these institutions so that they serve everyone's interests.

Part 4: In Practice: Building Power vs Taking Power

How do we fight for socialism without getting caught in the traps of liberalism or authoritarianism? The short answer: by building popular power. Popular power is the opposite of concentrated power. It means building self-managed social movements independent of the institutional left that can win meaningful reforms while laying the groundwork for pushing beyond them.

The question we must ask ourselves is not *who* should sit in the seat of power, but rather how do we shift the balance of power so that the seat loses its meaning. Rather than putting our faith in those who profess to represent us as benevolent rulers (in this society or the next), we should see ourselves as responsible for our own liberation. This is the difference between representative politics and direct action.

Representative Politics

Representative politics requires that most of us take a back seat. By focusing on electing politicians or rallying behind charismatic leaders, we surrender our agency in exchange for promises. In practice, what our “representatives” are seeking is access to state power. This is dangerous because, as mentioned, states are not neutral institutions but instruments of minority rule. States can (and should) be reformed in ways that improve people's lives but the history of electoral politics shows that they will defang, demobilize and create relationships of dependency with social movements rather than strengthen them. If we want transformational change, we have to fight for reforms by building power from below, not by reinforcing it above us.

Direct Action

There's no substitute for popular power. Not parties, nor charismatic leaders. Direct action means fighting for ourselves: uniting with others and fighting oppression with *our own power* rather than through some third party. A strike is the perfect example: workers use their own collective power to simply stop working until their demands are met. Not only is this a more direct and effective means of change, but it's also transformational, emboldening workers towards a future where they could run their own workplace. The same is true of struggles over land, housing, education, etc. Transformational change happens when everyday people discover and exercise their own collective power.

Conclusion

If we take an honest look at the structures and relationships around us today and ask ourselves: "could this be more free, equal and democratic?" our answer will almost always be: "yes." If you take these principles seriously, and follow them to their logical conclusion, you just may wake up and discover you're a libertarian socialist. But fear not! Socialism is not some utopian pipedream. Freedom is possible. And admitting it is the first step of the revolution.

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