

Editorial Statement

Just over ten years ago, on the night of August 20-21, 1968, a massive invasion of Warsaw Pact forces stopped in its tracks the Czechoslovak attempt to develop a 'socialism with a human face'. Seasonally, it was the end of summer, with autumn yet to come. Politically, the springtime regeneration which had lasted for nearly seven months, turned to winter overnight, covering the political landscape with a thickening blanket of grey, bureaucratic snow which gradually withered all the shoots of the 'Prague Spring'.

A decade after the events it is valuable to assess the impact of both the Prague Spring and the invasion which ended it. The 1968 events in Czechoslovakia took their place alongside other major developments in that remarkable year, such as the Tet offensive in Viet Nam and the May events in France. The Czechoslovak and French events were of particular importance to the communist and left movements in advanced capitalist countries.

The developments of the Prague Spring showed that there was no inherent conflict between socialism and democracy and that, for all the problems of bureaucracy and repression in Eastern Europe, the system could change 'from within' to a more democratic and 'human' socialism.

The democratic evolution of Czech socialism was undoubtedly supported by the vast majority of the Czechoslovak people. Large numbers of them wanted to see it go further and pushed impatiently for more change, creating difficulties for the party leadership which also felt increasingly the pressures from the Soviet Union for the changes to be stopped and reversed.

The invasion not only put an end to the wishes of the Czech party and people to build socialism in accord with their national needs and traditions. It also ended any short-term possibility of significant evolution of the Soviet bloc to a more democratic socialism which would appeal to the masses in the advanced capitalist countries.

In this respect, Czechoslovakia was a watershed for the communist movements in these countries, both by raising the practical possibility of an alternative to the Soviet model and by forcing them, after the invasion, to elaborate that model themselves, and new political strategies to achieve it. Despite differences of situation, policy and strategy, a number of communist parties in advanced countries have developed similar commitments to socialist democracy and a democratic road to socialism.

The Soviet invasion also brought to a head the conflict between the political needs of the western parties in their own countries and the decades-long loyalty to the Soviet Union. Those parties which saw their prime contribution to socialist internationalism to be the struggle for socialism in their own country had to take an increasingly independent path from the Soviet party, and to make that independence crystal clear to their own working class and people.

The invasion and the bureaucratic, centralist and repressive model of socialism it reimposed, have played a useful role for capitalism in the west. Like the denial of rights and the trials of dissidents in the Soviet Union, they serve the useful purposes of drawing attention away from the ills of bureaucratic socialism. In today's conditions, this is a key element in capitalist ideological domination. In various ways, the idea is pushed that whatever people's problems in the West they can't be as bad as the lack of democracy in the East. 'Better the devil you know than the one you don't' is the catch-phrase and, to a large extent, it works.

Ten years later Czechoslovakia itself suffers from the same problems that only the continuation of the Prague Spring could have overcome.

So long as an unwanted regime and socialist model are imposed there cannot be the social dynamism which is essential if socialism is to prove its superiority over capitalism.

Socialists in the west, while developing their own roads to, and models of, socialism should not forget the contribution of the Prague Spring, nor its leaders who, like forestry worker, Dubcek, under restrictive house arrest, still suffer to this day for their attempt to do the same.