Interview by Henry Zimmerman

The Soviet Experience:
An Interview with Lloyd Churchward

Lloyd Churchward, former reader in Political Science at Melbourne University, and author of a number of books on the Soviet Union, discusses the Soviet Union with Henry Zimmerman. They cover the relevance of the Soviet experience to the socialist movements in the capitalist world, prospects for economic reform, likely democratisation of the work place and the use of increased discipline, the impact of the new leadership and the crucial questions of war and peace.

A common question in leftwing circles is whether the Soviet experience has any lessons for the left today. This was illustrated by the Italian Communist Party's statement that the October Revolution is no longer the inspiration it used to be in communist circles.

Well, I can appreciate the reason why the Italian Communist Party made such a statement, but I don't altogether accept it. I think that the historical experience of the Russian Revolution is still of fundamental importance to working class movements throughout the world and, more generally, to peoples' revolutionary struggles in Third World countries. The Russian Revolution has to be studied closely because it was the first attempt at a socialist revolution: according to some people it went off the rails and didn't lead to socialism which, by the way, is not my opinion. It's not "developed socialism" as officially described in the Soviet Union; for instance, it has not led to the development of socialist democracy as most people in the west understand it. But, having said that, the revolution is to be understood as a successful revolt against a very autocratic system. It has led to the establishment of a new system which, to my mind, is a form of state socialism and not state capitalism because the property has been transferred from the former private owners to the state authorities. This state ownership is one of the main reasons for the central bureaucratic power which has developed in the Soviet Union.

The mere fact that the industrial base, in the years after the revolution, was so small and so inadequate, required accelerated industrial development. The way this was done in the early five year plans, and is still being done today, means that the bulk of industry is controlled by about three dozen industrial ministries, some of which are thoroughly centralised, and others partly decentralised.

But aren't you describing a successful revolt against autocracy and perhaps an example to undeveloped countries, but one which has little to offer the advanced capitalist countries?

I'm glad you brought me back to the crux of the question. The advanced capitalist countries can learn a number of things from the Soviet experience. Firstly, they can learn from the mistakes of the Soviet Union. This is one thing that has been done by various socialist movements in Europe and, to some extent, even in Australia. There are fewer socialists now in western Europe who believe, as communists did in the 1920s, 30s and even later, that the historical experience of the Russian revolution was the way to a socialist future. Now, it took a long time but I think this belief has been destroyed, to my mind a good thing, because the experiences and the particular strategy and tactics followed in Russia are related to the circumstances in which the revolution in Russia was carried out. They related also to the type of revolutionary organisations that functioned, to the perspectives of the leaders, and to the struggles that went on within the leadership of the Bolshevik Party and, eventually, to the idiosyncrasies of the dictator Stalin, and this obviously can't be transferred to the experience of western countries.

The old simplistic belief was that all the revolutionary party needed to do was to come to power and smash the bourgeois state and institute the dictatorship of the proletariat and that that would guarantee democracy. This just isn't so. The preservation of the democratic elements in capitalist society, and the strengthening of democracy is a major task for revolutionaries. I think that the Russian revolutionaries mainly because there wasn't much experience of democracy in Czarist Russia just underestimated the importance of this task, and it is only in
recent years that they have been beginning to see the interdependence between the development of socialism and the development of democracy.

Well, to complete this section of the questions, both Lenin and Stalin repeatedly referred to the fact that while there were certain specific Russian lessons of the October revolution, there were also several universally valid lessons, international lessons, of the Russian revolution. Are there any today that would be universally valid?

Well, I'm very doubtful about that, unless by universal validity you mean the fact that it was the first successful proletarian revolution in world history and that in itself is a certain universal validity. But I don't accept that the peculiarities of the Russian revolution, which were written into the doctrines of the Comintern after 1920, principles about democratic centralism and the revolutionary party, about the dictatorship of the proletariat, overthrowing, smashing the bourgeois state and so on — a whole series of them — I don't accept that these are universal at all.

Economic Reform

You have mentioned that what makes the Soviet Union a socialist country is the fact that the basic forms of industries and so on are owned, not by private owners, but by the state. There have been changes, or discussions of changes, in the economic sphere in recent years. Can you see any changes which would lead, as some western commentators say, to imitating the Hungarian model of Kadar, where they allow a certain amount of private enterprise to grow and so on?

I think that changing the Soviet economy is much more difficult than changing the Hungarian economy, or the Polish or Czech economies, or even changing the Chinese economy. The reason for this is the establishment of the command economy, as it's often called, with centralised industrial ministries and one or two central planning organs supposedly directing the whole course of economic development. This has a history in the Soviet Union now of well over fifty years and in that lies one of the great difficulties of making economic reforms.

Since the death of Stalin a whole series of attempts has been made to decentralise the Soviet economy, particularly in the Khrushchev period. Under Brezhnev, various other attempts were made. First of all, the industrial ministries which had been largely dismantled in the later years of the Khrushchev period were restored in 1965. Since then, no attempt has been made to build up the power of the managers at the plant level. In 1973, a major reorganisation was announced when they proposed rationalising the industrial structure and making possible a combination of individual plants and larger establishments and building up industrial combines. A lot was pinned on this reform but it hasn't become all that universal. In fact, what happened was that, in many cases, the ministries simply rechristened their existing branch divisions as combines. In more recent years they have, I think, strengthened the combines, certainly in some ministries, but this hasn't led to the weakening of the power
controlled by the large firm. To my mind, it's a form of only at the canteen, but through the supply system also to supply their workers with foodstuffs. People can buy quite a lot of their food, like chickens, for example, not farming in order to be able to supply their canteens, and or whatever on sale in the state stores.

about getting the rather run-down apples, onions, potatoes these places to get their supplies, and they just don't bother prices are often two or three, or even four, times the state better off people in the Soviet Union go increasingly to network of these markets. You can get almost anything farm markets any more. All the large cities now have a building up the markets. These are nominally collective products, deficiencies in the state distribution system, by overcome the deficiencies, particularly in the supply of fresh fruit and vegetables, and meat and other food stressed discipline as the way forward. This seems to indicate that democratisation, which the previous law suggested would be introduced, has in fact not worked and that they are going back to a rather tough attitude towards the workforce?

I wouldn't be quite as pessimistic as that. In my evaluation, the statute on workers' collectives which was passed in 1983 came directly out of an article in the new constitution. In the debates on the constitution, there was a great deal of discussion about the rights of workers' collectives. In the original draft of the constitution there was an article which covered workers' collectives, but it was recognised in the discussions as too limited, and was then entirely rewritten. If you study article 16 of the draft constitution and compare it with the final text of article 8, you can see the difference between the two. The point I am trying to make is simply that there was obviously tremendously broad demand for extending the rights of workers' collectives and all types of collectives.

In a workers' state?

In a workers' state as understood, yes, as understood by the people in the Soviet Union. The demand coming to the fore throughout the public discussion was for a more emphatic recognition of these rights in the constitution, and this led to the legislation of two years back. The legislation itself was subject to massive popular debate and, in fact, almost all of the articles in the legislation were amended, some of them quite substantially, in the process of the debate.

But I think that the leadership has not fully implemented the new legislation. One thing which the legislation recognises is the right of the collective of workers in the plant to elect the management. Now, the management in the Soviet system is tied into the various nomenclature systems which operate meaning that the managers are appointed by higher party committees or, in some cases by the higher state body, which has to be endorsed by a higher party body. And it is not, in fact, the workers who are selecting the management. This process of self-
management which has been talked about quite a lot in Eastern Europe has influenced the Soviet workers and they are, I think, putting increasing pressure on the Soviet leadership to get a fuller recognition of their rights to self-management. But there is a contradiction here. The whole system of appointment in the Soviet Union, appointment to all leading posts, which is justified in communist theory and is enshrined now in the party rules and in the constitution, is inherently undemocratic and this is not recognised in the Soviet Union. There are people in the Soviet Union who can see this, and who will voice this opinion, but at the moment the possibilities of getting very far with a real effective expansion of democracy in the workplace is fairly limited.

The objectives of the present leadership for improved productivity, for instance, will not be realised unless they are prepared to give more powers to the ordinary workers both in terms of the election of people holding positions in the factory, but also in terms of what is produced. In other words, there must be more involvement of the workers in the whole process of production to make these targets realisable.

Now, the emphasis on discipline, anti-alcohol campaigns and so on is undoubtedly needed in the workplace, just as much as it is needed in the higher echelons of the party.

The anti-alcoholism campaign existed more than twenty years ago when I was in the Soviet Union. Now we still have this campaign. Is this a reflection that there is something wrong with the morale of the Soviet people — disappointment in their achievements?

I think there is an element of that, but it is very difficult to analyse the roots of alcoholism. I'm not convinced that alcoholism is a bigger problem in the Soviet Union than it is in Australia. The worst aspect of alcoholism is when factory workers, and often young people when they get into the workforce, get onto what would be called hard liquor here, on to vodka. For many years, the Soviet regime has been encouraging the consumption of low-alcohol beer and wine. But the consumption of spirits is very much part of the traditional way of life, particularly of the rural communities in the severe winters.

The New Leadership

In the media recently there has been a lot of discussion about the new leadership — the fact that they are younger, the fact that they are better P.R. people and so on. Do you think that the change in leadership makes a significant change in the position of the Soviet Union in all areas — politics, economics and so on?

Well, this is the 64 dollar question. The change in leadership, I think, does make a difference, if only because the health and age of the new leader is such that he is likely to be there over a considerable period. The later years of Brezhnev's leadership were marked by ill-health and increasing inability to develop new policies. Andropov began very effectively, but after a few months his ill-health caught up with him. Chernenko was obviously not healthy and virile when he was put into the top office. These stop-gap arrangements have meant a period of more than a decade in which decisions were not taken on very many domestic and probably foreign policy matters. Now, with a younger leader, and quite a number of younger leaders who have been moved into important positions in the party and the state, you have got something like a new team which should be more capable of facing up to the problems and more likely to produce some partial solutions. I don't know that they are going to produce complete solutions to any of the underlying problems because the problems are too complex.

But I would also want to say that you can easily exaggerate the effect of leadership changes. So much happens in the Soviet Union which is really not in the control of the leader; this was true even in the Stalin period, and certainly true since the fall of Khrushchev in October 1964. More and more of the decisions are taken by various state and party bodies. Take the party ones: the Politbureau, the Secretariat, the various committees of the central committee; now that involves thousands of people.
If you look at the state agencies, there is the Council of Ministers, which has a membership of approximately 110, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, various commissions of the Supreme Soviet and so on. The point I am making is that many thousands of people are now involved in the taking of decisions. And, in the implementing of decisions, the same process goes on. Although, in theory, the principle of one-man management still operates, in actual fact this has given way, in many areas, to collectives taking the decisions. The decisions are being implemented at the different levels of government: the USSR level and then the Union Republic level, and the local level, down to the village and the town. These decisions are being reinterpreted to suit the needs of the people at different levels.

What I am trying to say is that the USSR is a very large complex society which covers about a sixth of the world's land surface. Even though you have effective new leaders operating and enunciating new policies in Moscow, what goes on in Eastern Siberia is something different. I know from spending a few days in Eastern Siberia and talking to people that they are not all that sensitive to demands coming from Moscow. They know they are a hell of a long way from Moscow. They seem to think of things more as reasonable problems which they often have to solve and I don't think that's a bad thing. I think the idea of having everything centrally controlled and centrally planned and centrally directed is not an ideal which socialists should take pride in.

**War and Peace**

*To what extent do you think the key question of relations between the Great Powers, of war and peace, will be affected by the change of leadership? Are there any signs of changes there, or what can we expect?*

Well, the one thing that Gorbachev has announced since he became general secretary of the Communist Party is, of course, the cessation of underground testing of nuclear weapons from 6 August until the end of this year. That moratorium will be extended, provided the United States joins it. Now, that type of initiative is not really new. The Soviet Union has suspended, at various times, the testing of nuclear weapons in earlier years. The first point I want to make is continuity. The Soviet Union has a vested interest in peace as, in a sense, all countries do, except that the Soviet Union's vested interest is so much greater than that of the United States, greater than that of Western Europe, because the Soviet Union, along with other parts of Eastern Europe, suffered so much more from the last world war. And this is something which affects the leadership just as much as it affects the ordinary people. That being so, the leadership is always, I think, looking for ways of getting beyond the stalemating of negotiations on disarmament and limitation of armaments and so on. A lot of the initiatives that have been taken, by Andropov in December 1982 and later on by Chernenko and now by Gorbachev, are all to my mind, just minor additions or modifications to well-established policy initiatives that have been hanging around for years. And they don't look like getting very far, because they are not getting the response from the United States that they perhaps deserve.

*A lot of people in the west fear the Soviet Union. They say, alright, they talk peace, but they really mean something else. Isn't there some justification in that view?*

I don't think the Soviet Union constitutes a threat to Western Europe — short of a global war. The Soviet Union has used military force only in countries bordering on itself. Now, I wouldn't justify those. I condemn all uses of military force by the Soviet Union outside of its own territory. But I think it is important to remember the countries where Soviet forces have been directly involved. They have been influential in Poland, but not directly involved in recent years. They were involved in Hungary and they were involved in Czechoslovakia in 1968, and are still present there. They are in Afghanistan, which also has a long border with the Soviet Union. But the Soviet Union has never used military force globally in the way in which the United States has, and I don't think it is likely to. It has never used atomic weapons anywhere and would be unlikely to use them. It has, in fact, given a unilateral pledge not to be the first to use nuclear weapons. And that stands, irrespective of what the United States does.