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What Socialists Stand For

By Bruce Lesnick

A Socialist Action Booklet
Our present government of the few must be abolished and replaced by a workers government that will represent the majority. A workers government will guarantee democratic rights and implement this proposed *Bill of Rights for Working People*.

It will immediately recognize the right of African Americans, Native Americans and other oppressed nationalities to self-determination. It will immediately denounce all colonial ambitions and grant full independence to Puerto Rico.

It will adopt a policy of peace and friendship with peoples throughout the world and offer economic, technical, medical and food assistance to other countries, with no strings attached. It will dismantle all U.S. military bases abroad and stop U.S. interference in the internal affairs of other countries. Instead of supporting oppressors and dictators across the globe, it will offer aid to the struggles of the oppressed.

A workers government in the United States will be a tremendous inspiration to people all over the world. With the knowledge that the mighty USA was a friend and no longer their enemy, oppressed people everywhere would rise up against their own oppressors and the entire world will be changed for the better.
For a Workers Government

All of this will only be possible if the government itself passes completely into the hands of the majority—the masses of working people. Key steps in this direction would be expanding, democratizing and strengthening labor unions, breaking with two parties of capital—the Democrats and Republicans—and forming a labor party, based on a reinvigorated labor movement to offer a working class challenge to the parties of the corporate elites.

Ultimately, however, creating a system of, by and for working people is not simply a matter of electing socialists and labor activists to currently existing government bodies. A whole new system of representation is needed—a socialist system, born out of the mass struggles of working people to defend our rights and build a society that puts human needs ahead of profits:

- Committees should be formed in every factory, warehouse, office and workplace to govern working conditions.
- Managers should be elected by the workers themselves, and subject to immediate recall.
- Workplace and neighborhood committees should elect representatives to local, regional and national committees that would actually determine policy—from what to produce and what to prioritize nationally, to how to invest and distribute the gargantuan mountain of wealth that working people collectively generate.

When the American colonists could no longer tolerate British rule, they drew up their Declaration of Independence which stated “that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends [of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness] it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to affect their safety and happiness.”

What Socialists Stand For

What if there was a way to address climate change, halt police brutality, heal the environment, end unemployment, take the profit out of exploitation and racism, end sexual harassment and violence against women and put an end to endless war? If there were such a plan, the powers that be would do all they could to keep it from us. After all, those who profit from the violence, injustice and destruction all around us have every incentive to obfuscate, misrepresent and undermine anything that might threaten their advantage.

Well it turns out there is a concrete, eminently practical way to build a better world. But you won’t read about it in the New York Times or the Washington Post, and it won’t be featured on network TV news. We call it a Bill of Rights for Working People.*

This new bill of rights is more than just a set of ideas; it’s an action plan. As more and more people come to realize that solving any of the big social or economic problems we face will require a complete system overhaul, the Bill of Rights for Working People outlines how to get it done.

This plan is rooted in our nation’s best democratic traditions. If embraced and adopted by unions, activists, students and organizations of all types fighting for justice and social change, we would be well on our way to ending the nightmare that modern capitalism has wrought. In fact, we would be turning a corner, leaving behind humanity’s adolescence and taking the first steps along the path that leads to a just, rational world.

* A version of the Bill of Rights for Working People was first introduced by Peter Camejo and Willie Mae Reid in their 1976 campaign for President and Vice-President of the United States on the Socialist Workers Party ticket. The version presented here has been substantially updated.
Background

In 1776, American colonists revolted against British tyranny to shake off the vestiges of feudalism and the English monarchy, and to lay the foundations for American capitalism.

Today, working people at home and abroad are ruled by a new tyranny. Industrial and financial barons govern by the rule of profits, denying us the basic democratic and social rights we need for “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

America is in a deepening crisis. Real unemployment\(^2\) hovers around 8.3\(^{\%}\), afflicting more than 17 million people\(^3\). Over one third of the working age population has given up looking for work\(^4\). Those lucky enough to have employment are often forced to work multiple jobs for low pay\(^5\). Many women have the triple burden of outside work plus childcare and eldercare responsibilities. The quality of life for the majority is going from bad to worse\(^6\), and the present system offers no hope for improvement. Meanwhile, the Wall Street\(^7\) bailout and open-ended military spending\(^8\) ensure that the lion’s share of our national wealth continues to be funneled to the richest few at the very top.

More wealth overall, but it’s not going to working people.\(^1\)

Government stockpiling and testing of nuclear weapons; to U. S. military bases throughout the world\(^16\); and to the support of puppet generals and military dictators.

Immediately end all wars defending the interests of the 1\(^{\%}\). Bring all the troops home now!

Workers have the right to control their working conditions through their own democratically elected committees. They have the right to regulate the pace of work in the safest and least dehumanizing way. They have the right to have their own inspectors on the job. They have a right to control layoffs and whether or not plants will be shut down.

Workers have a right to determine that production will be for social needs rather than private profits. To help achieve this, all major industries—from energy and transportation, to food production and distribution—should be converted to public ownership and managed under workers’ control.

All private utility monopolies should be converted into government owned utilities.

All the banks should be nationalized and merged into a single government bank. The concentration of the entire credit system in the hands of the government will provide it with the necessary resources to institute national economic planning.

A national economic plan, democratically determined by working people, should be implemented in order to put an end to the present anarchy and breakdowns in the economy, and to ensure that natural resources and productive capacity are used for the benefit of all.

Similarly, a national economic plan under workers’ management would end the current scourge of poverty, and would institute effective environmental controls—including the necessary conversion from fossil fuels to a renewable energy-based economy. To achieve these goals, the colossal sums now spent for military purposes must be reallocated for social needs.
9. Right of Oppressed National Minorities to Control Their Own Affairs

An injury to one is an injury to all. Attacks on the most exploited serve to divide and weaken us as a whole.

African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans and other oppressed peoples have a right to control the schools, hospitals, parks, and other institutions in their communities. They have a right to determine how federal and state funds will be used in their communities.

The racist murders of Michael Brown, John Crawford, Marvin Booker, Ezell Ford, Eric Garner, Sean Bell, Amadour Diallo, Oscar Grant, Philando Castile and others demonstrate that police violence against African Americans and other oppressed minorities has reached epidemic proportions.

To end police brutality, completely remove the police from Black, Brown and other communities of the oppressed and instead establish a security force democratically selected and supervised by the people in those communities.

10. Right to Decide Economic and Political Policy

The small handful of extremely rich families who currently own key industries, factories, mines, natural resources, utilities, and banks manage them with only one aim: maximizing profits. To those at the top, the welfare and security of the majority is not a priority. This must change.

We must take the war-making power away from the White House and Congress. Let the people vote in a referendum before the country is taken into any war or action involving military force.

We must have the right to say no to policies that can lead to nuclear holocaust and the end of humanity. We have a right to say no to

No rational economic system would have built-in, periodic crises where the majority suffers as a result of worker productivity having risen to the point where more food, more goods and more services can be produced than can be sold at a profit. Yet this is what we are told to accept as “normal” under capitalism.

Breakdowns, shortages, layoffs, outsourcing, offshoring, and soaring prices—each week it’s harder to get by. Suffering the most are those at the bottom of the ladder—African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans and other doubly oppressed people.

Endless War

There is no end to wars, one following another. After World War II came the wars in Korea and Vietnam. These were followed by military interventions in Grenada, Nicaragua, Panama, Haiti and Bosnia. Most recently, the US has been waging war in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, Libya, Ukraine and Syria. There are also the many proxy wars undertaken by US client states with US weapons, including the 2008-2009 Israeli military slaughter

U.S. recessions and depressions since 1923.
in Gaza and the current Saudi war in Yemen. To all of this must be added the numerous secret attacks by drones and special operations forces, as well as harsh economic sanctions and illegal blockades.

Huge stockpiles of atomic weapons are a constant reminder of the threat of nuclear war.

Environmental Destruction

Pollution is threatening our health and destroying our environment—from the water we drink, to the food we eat, to the air we breathe. An October, 2017 study in The Lancet blames pollution for 9 million premature deaths in one year. Climate change from the burning of fossil fuels presents humanity with an existential challenge that our current profit-driven system is completely incapable of addressing. In November of 2017, over 15,000 climate scientists from 184 countries addressed a “Warning to Humanity” citing an imminent threat of climate catastrophe.

Representatives of Wall Street and the Rich

Neither the Republicans nor the Democrats offer a solution. Both are firmly in the pocket of their big business funders, and neither party has any interest in challenging capitalism or otherwise rocking the boat.

Well-schooled in the art of “divide and conquer,” both parties pit white workers against Black, Brown and Red, and women against men in the struggle for decent jobs, housing, and education. They divert attention from their own misdeeds by urging us to blame our problems on working people and the poor from other countries, while the corporations they represent plunder the resources of those same countries.

The message of the Democrats and Republicans is simply, “What’s good for large corporations is good for America.”

8. Right to Know the Truth about Economic and Political Policies That Affect Our Lives

Democratic and Republican administrations claim that their foreign policy decisions advance peace and democracy throughout the world. The Pentagon papers and revelations by Chelsea Manning, Edward Snowden and WikiLeaks show that this is not the case. We have a right to know the full truth. Publish all secret treaties and agreements this country has made with other countries!

No secret diplomacy behind the backs of the American people!

Let the American people know the truth about U.S. support for dictatorships all over the world. Fully disclose all of the secret backroom deals masquerading as “free trade” agreements.

When corporations claim they can’t grant wage increases, they should be compelled to open their books to public inspection.

When industries harm communities or the environment—as is the case with the big energy and chemical companies—they should be transferred to public ownership and reopened under workers control.

Expose the threads that tie industry and agribusiness to the big banks, transportation, retailing enterprises, government agencies, judges and to Democratic and Republican politicians.

Examination of the financial books of the big corporations and trusts should be done by committees made up of delegates from workplaces, unions, cooperatives, farmers and organizations representing oppressed minorities.

The Snowden documents have revealed a tiny bit of the secret spying, surveillance, and harassment carried out by the government. They show how government policies are designed to work against the interests of working people. We have a right to know the full truth. Let us see what the rulers really have in mind when they make the decisions that affect our lives. Open all police, FBI, CIA, NSA and Department of Homeland Security files!
All retired and disabled persons should receive government-financed benefits at full union wages.

Government-financed programs should be instituted not only to provide care for people who are ill, but for medical research and mass education about health and preventative care.

Adult educational and cultural programs should be vastly strengthened to permit working people to develop themselves to the fullest extent possible.

Safe, adequate housing should be guaranteed to all, at a rate easily affordable to the average working person.

7. Right to a Clean, Healthy Environment

Unelected boards of directors must not be allowed to treat resources, communities, the environment and the planet as collateral damage in their quest for profits. The precautionary principle, which assumes synthetic substances are harmful until proven innocent, should be part of the standard for developing sustainable enterprises. Industries that pollute or poison the environment should be nationalized under workers’ control. Priority should be given to removing toxic dumps, incinerators and other biohazards from communities of the oppressed. Any workers displaced in transitioning from polluting to non-polluting technologies should be guaranteed retraining and full pay at union wages for as long as they are without work.

Government support should be provided to farmers to transition away from harmful, chemically dependent agricultural methods, toward sustainable organic practices.

The Waltons, Kochs, and other super-wealthy dynasties that own the two major political parties and run the country think they were born with rights that come first, no matter what happens to the welfare and security of the rest of us. For the sake of profits, they believe it’s perfectly justifiable to lay off tens of thousands of workers, to destroy our environment, and to stampede the country into war.

Those at the very top have accumulated monumental fortunes, but they are in fact a tiny minority who should not be allowed to trump the rights of the American people as a whole.

Existing Rights must be Defended and Extended

More than 200 years ago, when our country won its independence from British despotism, small farmers and working people succeeded in adding 10 amendments to the Constitution: the original Bill of Rights. These were intended to help guarantee “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

Among these are:

- Freedom of speech, press and assembly.
- The right to a jury trial by one’s peers.
- The right to bear arms.
- Protection from unreasonable searches and seizures, excessive bails and fines, and cruel and unusual punishment.

The Civil War—a veritable second American revolution—resulted in additional amendments to the Constitution protecting the rights of the majority. These are:

- The ending of slavery.
- Protection from deprivation of life, liberty, or property without due process of law.
- The right of all male citizens, 21 years of age or over, to vote, regardless of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.
In 1920 women won the right to vote, and in 1971 this right was extended to all citizens 18 and older.

These rights were won through struggle. Frequent, bitter battles against racists, sexists, bigots, anti-labor forces and hostile government agencies have been required to preserve them.

Even now, many of the principles in the original Bill of Rights have not been fully implemented and extended to everyone. Many Americans are still reduced to second-class status. African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans and other oppressed minorities continue to struggle for equal opportunity in housing, education, and jobs.

In sporting events, when one team is disadvantaged by unfair play, the rules provide a way to make amends and level the playing field.

So too must we establish preferential hiring and upgrading to help oppressed minorities achieve equality on the job. To gain equality, oppressed minorities must have the right to live in the neighborhoods of their choice. They have the right to decide where to send their children to school, even if it means traveling to better funded, predominantly white schools.

For non-English speakers, education, civil service exams, voting instructions and ballots must be provided in their own language in order to achieve equality.

The recent exposure of widespread sexual harassment of women at every level is testament to the depths to which capitalist-promoted prejudice, degradation, discrimination and persecution has permeated society. This must end. For women, preferential hiring and upgrading, and equal pay for the same work are needed to combat exploitation and gain full equality on the job.

These democratic rights should be extended to everyone, including prisoners, GIs, foreign-born workers, LBGTQI individuals and youth, regardless of religion, ideology or sexual preference.

Escalator provisions should be pegged to the real rate of inflation, as determined by committees set up by unions and consumer groups. This would replace the dependence on the Labor Department’s Consumer Price Index, which deliberately underestimates real price increases.

All pensions, Social Security benefits, unemployment and disability compensation, welfare, and veterans’ benefits should be raised to union wage scales and protected with cost-of-living escalator provisions.

Small farmers, who are gouged by banks on the one hand and squeezed by Agribusiness on the other, should be allowed to make a decent living. They have a right to low interest, long-term government loans.

3. Right to Free Education

4. Right to Free Medical Care

5. Right to a Secure Retirement

6. Right to Safe, Adequate Housing

Education, health, housing and secure retirement should not be exclusive privileges of the rich. The health, welfare, education, and cultural enrichment of all citizens are the responsibility of society. These are rights that should be guaranteed to everyone.

Tuition, books, and living expenses should be furnished to all who want to attend public universities and trade schools.

Everyone, from birth to old age, should be guaranteed government-financed medical care through a full program of socialized medicine. The so-called “Affordable Care Act” (Obamacare) is a sham, designed to bolster the profits of insurance companies. But those who attack it from the right are only promoting a different way of picking our pockets. Instead, Obamacare should be replaced from the left, with full Medicare coverage for all. Medicare should be expanded to eliminate all deductibles and copays, and to include full prescription drug, dental and vision coverage.
Worker productivity has more than quintupled since the adoption of the eight-hour day in the early part of the last century. Up to now, any increase in productivity has been funneled to those at the top in the form of increased corporate profits. Instead, these gains should be used to reduce working hours with no reduction in pay, thus spreading the available work and achieving full employment.

When owners threaten to move or close down plants, those plants should be transferred to public ownership and reopened under workers control.

In order to assure economic independence for women, government financed child-care centers should be established. Maternity leaves with full pay should be granted. Women have a right to decide whether or not to give birth to children. This includes the right to abortion, contraception and protection from forced sterilization.

Workers who are not U.S. citizens, including those without documents, have the right to jobs and equal pay without fear of harassment or deportation. There is no inherent conflict between local and foreign-born workers. Technology has advanced to the point where every working person produces far more in value than he/she could ever consume, either directly or indirectly through the use of social services. Putting additional people to work doing socially useful labor only increases society’s overall wealth. At present, this fact is hidden because the capitalists hoard the excess wealth that is produced by the majority.

2. Right to an Adequate Income

A living wage is a basic right. As a protection against inflation, wages must be free to rise without government imposed limits.

To offset price gouging in food, rent, gas, electricity, and other basic necessities, wages must be protected with cost-of-living escalator provisions so that wages increase with each rise in living costs.

All repressive legislation must be repealed. All cruel and unusual punishment—including the death penalty, indefinite detention, rendition, waterboarding and all forms of torture—must be abolished. The school-to-prison pipeline and programs of mass incarceration must be dismantled.

As the economic crisis deepens and big business tightens the squeeze on labor, the elementary civil liberties of working people as a whole are eroded. Government spying, surveillance, harassment and intimidation make a mockery of our rights to assembly and free speech. This is shown most clearly by the revelations of Chelsea Manning, Edward Snowden and WikiLeaks.

Government interference infringes on the right of unions to organize, collectively bargain and strike. The Taft Hartley Act and all other anti-labor legislation must be repealed.

*   *   *
A Bill of Rights for Working People

Not only is it necessary to fight to assert our existing rights, we also need to broaden those rights to protect working people on the economic level and to protect against the threat of new wars, racism, sexism, gender discrimination and anti-labor initiatives. We need an expanded bill of rights to meet the present-day needs of the majority. This must include:

1) The right to a job.

2) The right to an adequate income.

3) The right to free, quality education.

4) The right to free, quality medical care.

5) The right to a secure retirement.

6) The right to safe, adequate housing.

7) The right to a clean, healthy environment.

8) The right of oppressed national minorities to control their own affairs.

9) The right to know the truth about economic and political policies that affect our lives.

10) The right to decide economic and political policy.

1. Right to a Job

It is the elementary obligation of society to guarantee steady work for everyone. This can easily be done if human needs are prioritized over private profit.

An emergency public works program should be launched to provide jobs through building homes expanding mass transit, repairing infrastructure, and constructing hospitals, parks, schools, and other social necessities. Priority should be given to projects where they are most needed—especially in African American, Latino and Native American communities.

As a first step, the huge sums necessary to pay for this program should come from eliminating military expenditures, raising taxes on big industry, and placing a 100 percent tax on all income over $1 million. At the same time, taxes for working people should be lowered.

As productivity has increased exponentially, the value produced by each hour of labor has skyrocketed.