



# **THE COMMUNIST MANIFESTO**

## ***AN INTRODUCTION***

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COMMUNIST PARTY OF CANADA, 2022

The Communist Manifesto published in February of 1848, is probably the most famous document in the library of socialist writings. It is a watershed document. There is socialism before the Manifesto and socialism after, socialism utopian and socialism scientific, socialism asking for reforms and socialism demanding revolutionary change. There is capitalism before the Manifesto and capitalism after, capitalism sanguine and confident and capitalism haunted by its nemesis.

Its language is concise, succinct, and powerfully descriptive. It was praised by Paul M. Sweezy and Leo Huberman in their remarkable document "The Communist Manifesto after 100 Years" as "arrestingly brilliant prose" (Sweezy and Huberman, 1949, 89).

Those who have tried to disprove the Manifesto, to pick it apart, to hammer it into meaninglessness by choosing this or that phrase or statement, have all failed to diminish its importance or the validity of its core concepts. The critics are all gone, no one remembers them. The Manifesto lives on, read, meaningful and ultimately it is "untouched and the stature of its authors untarnished" (Sweezy and Huberman, 90) by the criticisms that have fallen by the wayside.

The Manifesto is not a recipe, not a formula, nor did it ever claim to be so. It is a set of principles. Marx and Engels themselves saw changes in the world and noted them in the various prefaces – which are discussed below. But with every noted development they also asserted that the principles remained basically sound.

So, what were the developments that Marx and Engels wrote about in the prefaces? The first preface – the 1872 Preface to the German edition – was

written after the defeat of the Paris Commune. The authors asserted again a previously made point "the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made State machinery, and wield it for its own purposes." . This is a major break with much previous socialist thinking and certainly a break with social democratic thinking with respect to the State. It recognizes the inherent class character of state institutions as well as the necessity of overcoming the physically repressive mechanism of class power – the police, the army, the secret services. That was the lesson of the Paris Commune.

In that same Preface, they state: "The practical application of the principles will depend, as the Manifesto itself states, everywhere and at all times, on the historical conditions for the time being existing, and for that reason, no special stress is laid on the revolutionary measures proposed at the end of Section II". They also noted that the criticism on socialist literature would be different if written in 1872. For these reasons no mention is made in this introduction of the last two sections of the Manifesto – they reflect only the situation at the time of its writing, not the principles espoused.

In the 1882 Preface to the Russian edition, the authors noted that Russia and the US were missing from the discussion of opposition parties in the last section. They perceived developments of significance in both of these countries. They predicted that the US would soon "break the industrial monopoly of Western Europe" and "Russian forms the vanguard of revolutionary action in Europe." And they raised the question with respect to Russia whether you could skip stages of development, moving from common land ownership still present under a dying feudalism directly to socialism, a question which continues

to be debated today.

The 1883 Preface (German edition) is really just Engels paying tribute to Marx who had recently died.

The 1888 Preface to an English edition takes note of the spread of the Manifesto – at least 12 reprintings in German, editions in English, French, Spanish, Polish, Russian (2 editions) Danish, and an Armenian one that didn't get printed for fear of reprisals. And again, Engels noted the need for detail changes in light of historical conditions.

In the 1890 Preface (German edition), Engels noted the fight for the 8-hour day.

In the 1892 Preface (Polish edition) he again refers to the spread of the manifesto but this time notes that its travels track the development of capitalism. He also notes that in the wave of revolutions that swept across Europe in 1848 “the proletarian fighters did the work of the bourgeoisie” and paid in blood. And he identifies the independence of Italy, Germany and Hungary as the results of those revolutions. He acknowledges the 1863 uprising in Poland against tsarist Russia and the brutality of tsarist repression.

In the 1893 Preface to the Italian edition, Engels comes back to the role of the proletariat in the 1848 revolutions: they wanted but could not achieve power, the fruits of the revolution went to the capitalist class.

These are details which Marx and Engels tell us are transitory – it's the principles of the Manifesto that have stood the test of time. Sweezy and Huberman, in their previously referenced pamphlet, wrote “the general principles of the Manifesto can be grouped under the following headings: (a) historical materialism, (b)

class struggle, (c) the nature of capitalism, (d) the inevitability of socialism, and the road to socialism.” (Sweezy and Huberman, 92).

1) Historical Materialism is the basis of the analysis of the document and by which is meant:

- that the way people act and think is moulded, in the final analysis, by the way they make their living, not individual occupations but the specific relations of production which are part of each mode of production – e.g. serf and lord, worker and capitalist.
- that developments in the processes of production are the driving force of history.

The document applies this analysis to the transition of feudalism to capitalism and refers to the historically progressive character of capitalism which, it points out, destroyed feudal patriarchal bonds and substituted cash, reduced the power of religion and replaced it with ego, prejudices and opinions were swept away, narrow-mindedness became more and more impossible, and capitalism rescued people “from the idiocy of rural life”. Marx and Engels also refer to the unleashing of productive capacity through capitalist industrialization with the question “(who could have known) ... that such productive forces slumbered in the lap of social labour?” (Marx and Engels, 41).

2) Class Struggle is defined as a corollary of the development of classes, that the class division of society produces antagonism and struggle. Further, that the character of that struggle changes as the mode of production changes. The Manifesto points out that control of the State is a necessary component of the rule by a class and defines the modern State as the

“committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie.” (Marx and Engels, 38). Not only, according to the Manifesto, does the State serve the interest of the dominant class, “The ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class.” (Marx and Engels, 57).

3) The Nature of Capitalism is described without ever using the term capitalism. A number of the features of capitalism are outlined.

- The advent of wage labour and the commoditization of labour.
- The concentration and centralization of capital (property) – a feature so extreme now that 3 people in the US own as much wealth as the bottom 50% of the population.
- The destruction of the peasantry, artisan producers, small businessmen and self-employed professionals.
- Imperialism as a result of the constant expansion and revolutionizing of production. In the words of the Manifesto “The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere”(Marx and Engels, 39).
- The existence and character of the inner contradictions of the system. It gives a classic summary of the defined primary contradiction of all social systems – the discrepancy and conflict between the developing forces of production and the relatively rigid and stable relations of production. It also points out some specific contradictions of capitalism – the crisis of overproduction, the creation

of a large, organized and disciplined proletariat and the contradiction between social production and the private appropriation of its product.

4) The Inevitability of socialism is seen as a necessary outcome of capitalist development. Marx and Engels do acknowledge that there is another possibility when they note that in past social systems. “.... oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary re-constitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes” (Marx and Engels, 37). Marx and Engels could not have foreseen the enormous destructive capacity developed by capitalism with its potential for environmental catastrophe and nuclear annihilation, but it is perhaps alluded to by the phrase – “the common ruin of the contending classes”. In view of that potential, the projection of the inevitability of socialism must now include the message – the working class must save the world in order to win the world. Or dialectically, they must win the world in order to save the world.

The assertion of socialism’s inevitability, however, is based on the unavoidable development of the working class and the requirement of that class to destroy private property as a condition of its own freedom. It cannot achieve its freedom in any other way. “The proletarians cannot become masters of the productive forces of society, except by abolishing their own previous mode of appropriation ..... their mission is to destroy ..... Individual property” (Marx and Engels, 47). That working class power, socialism, would be an advance for everyone is gloriously expressed as follows: “All previous historical movements were movements

of minorities or in the interest of minorities. The proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority” (Marx and Engels, 47).

5) The Road to Socialism is the last principle of the Manifesto, the articulation of the role of the proletariat as the most revolutionary class as a result of the features of the class that the bourgeoisie itself creates, “its special and essential product” (Marx and Engels, 46). Those features are its growing size, its strategic location at the point of production, its discipline, its developing education and mastery of knowledge, and the growing solidarity between its members first locally and then nationally and then internationally. It also speaks to the fact that for the proletariat, the only route to the ownership of the means of production – the feature that defines each and every ruling class – is a collective ownership. The final pages of Section II give a clear description of the tasks of the proletariat in the achievement of socialism.

### Miscellaneous points

Interestingly, the issue of socialism in one country is raised in question #19 of the Appendix in which Engels wrote: The answer, NO. While that sounds unequivocal, it is then modified to note that the process of the revolution is lopsided, lurching and uneven. It develops here now, there later, there are victories and defeats. What modern history has taught us is that no socialist society is secure and unassailable while the system and the class which it seeks to replace continue to exist elsewhere in the world and threatens to overthrow working class power and regain control wherever it has been replaced.

The identification of the contrasting

character of the relationship between living and accumulated labour is worth noting. “In bourgeois society, living labour is but a means to increase accumulated labour. In Communist society, accumulated labour is but the means to widen, to enrich, to promote the existence of the labourer” (Marx and Engels, 54).

### Final Quotes:

“The passage is dangerous and difficult, the worst may be yet to come. But there is no escape for the disillusioned, the timid, or the weary. Those who have mastered the message of the Manifesto and caught the spirit of its authors will understand that the clock cannot be turned back, that capitalism is surely doomed, and that the only hope of mankind lies in completing the journey to socialism with maximum speed and minimum violence.” (Sweezy and Huberman, 113).

Workers of All Countries Unite!

### Works Cited

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