

FOUR HOURS EVERY WEEKDAY

Socialism's Meeting Problem

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that it takes up too many evenings

—OSCAR WILDE

”

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Socialism's Meeting Problem

There's no escaping socialism's "interminable meetings."

A democratic socialist society would not run itself. It would require each citizen to contribute their time and labor to the operation of the socialist state.

So explains celebrated socialist thinker Ernest Mandel¹—an important influence on Che Guevara.² Mandel also answers the question of how much time running a democratic socialist society would take. He writes that *each workday*, the typical socialist citizen would need to spend

four hours attending meetings or performing administrative labour.³

These four hours every workday would be *separate and distinct from normal work*. That's twenty hours a week on top of a regular job—twenty hours spent in public meetings and carrying out administrative tasks for society.⁴ This contribution required of each citizen is essential to keep the gears of a democratic socialist society turning.

Yes, creating an actual democratic socialist society would require each of us to attend countless hours of meetings.

Although most socialist thinkers avoid discussing this reality (since it doesn't exactly help their sales pitch), it's a problem that socialists have long recognized. Well over a century ago, poet and socialist Oscar Wilde famously quipped:

The trouble with socialism is that it takes up too many evenings.⁵

Any number of socialist thinkers since have admitted that socialism entails too many meetings, even referencing Wilde when they do. For example, Michel Walzer, editor emeritus of *Dissent*, quotes Wilde and writes that his point about socialist meetings consuming too much of our free time is

one of the most significant criticisms of socialist theory that has ever been made.⁶

And Michael Harrington, the founder of the Democratic Socialists of America, similarly writes:

One of the most effective arguments against socialism, as Oscar Wilde realized long ago, is that it would create a society with *interminable* meetings.⁷

But even socialist thinkers who fess up about socialism's risk of "interminable meetings" invariably shy away from estimating how much time these meetings would require of the typical person. They know they would end up with estimates like Mandel's four hours a day—a figure that shows that democratic socialism is a practical impossibility and a figure that shows that one of socialism's key promises is empty.

DOES SOCIALISM REALLY SAVE WORK TIME?

Socialists have long sold their philosophy as the pathway to a dramatically shortened workweek. Many socialist thinkers even argue that socialism would cut the workday in half.⁸

This claim is a byproduct of the socialist belief that capitalist society is brimming with "social parasites"—not only "slackers" who shirk labor but also diligent workers who perform tasks that socialism deems "socially useless." As Che Guevara puts it, socialism calls for

drastic measures to eliminate the parasites.⁹

Similarly, democratic socialist icon Eugene Debs (who attacked "parasites" dozens of times¹⁰) explains that

in socialism, the parasites and grafters would have to go to work.¹¹

Socialist theory says that by forcing all supposed parasites to perform work approved as "socially useful," socialism could dramatically reduce the work hours required of each citizen.¹² In one example, French socialist Georges Renard writes:

It [work time] will be reduced to the minimum by the sole fact that everyone will take part in the work and that the parasites and the useless will have returned to the ranks of the laboring army.¹³

But the claim that socialism would mean a radically reduced workday is deceitful. It has not proven itself to be true. And it also fails to account for the hours upon hours of meetings necessary to keep a socialist society afloat.

The Sinners of the Socialist Religion

Socialism's "parasite" obsession is one of the byproducts of socialism's foundation on compulsory duty. For example, socialist superstar Charles Fourier (who says that two-thirds of society and all Jews are "parasites") writes that socialism "will return to duty and return to productive work those legions of parasites called merchants."

Socialists say slackers are only the tip of parasite iceberg. Dozens of types of work in capitalist society are labeled by socialists as being "parasitic," as an alleged waste of society's time to be suppressed come socialism.

To learn more, see the RFP paper "The Socialist Obsession."

Socialist nations have engaged in widespread suppression of alleged "parasites."¹⁴ Yet none of them has delivered on the promise to drastically reduce work hours or come anywhere close to doing so. The average workday in socialist nations has been *as long or longer than* the workday in capitalist ones.¹⁵ Socialist governments have also forced their citizens to perform millions of hours of unpaid "volunteer" work harvesting crops, laboring on construction projects, and toiling at other tasks, all in addition to their regular workweek.¹⁶

But even if suppressing supposed parasites could reduce the average workweek, it's still completely misleading to pitch socialism as the means to a lighter workload. The hours saved would not be for our leisure. No, to have any chance of creating an actual democratic socialist society, your hours of regular work must be reduced so that you will have the time to attend the hours of meetings democratic socialism requires.

The need to reduce traditional work hours so that socialist citizens have time to attend meetings and perform administrative tasks isn't a new concept. Socialist superstar Friedrich Engels wrote on this topic over 150 years ago, saying that under socialism it would become

possible to distribute labor among all members of society without exception, and thereby to limit the labor-time of each individual member to such an extent that all have enough free time left to *take part in the general—both theoretical and practical—affairs of society.*¹⁷

In other words, for one the founders of socialist theory, the goal of reducing traditional work time is so that people would have the time to perform the additional work required to run a socialist society.

Ernest Mandel also addresses the requirement for normal work hours to be reduced so that socialist citizens have the time to work for society. He writes that if our daily

hours of traditional work could be cut in half, to four hours, we would then have the time to attend four hours of socialist meetings without the total exceeding eight hours.¹⁸

Thus, a 50-percent reduction of regular labor hours (a goal no socialist society has come anywhere close to achieving) results not in an actual reduction of the average workday *but in the same eight-hour workday most have now.*

And since, in Mandel's reckoning, four hours of daily administrative labor and meetings is necessary to keep a democratic socialist society running, those four hours will be necessary no matter how long our regular work takes. Even if a future socialist society somehow succeeded in cutting traditional work time to six hours a day, the combined workday would be ten hours. That's no reduction in work compared to what's typical under capitalism. It's a 20-percent increase.

A 50-percent reduction of regular labor hours would result in the same eight-hour workday most have now.

The total work hours socialism requires stands in stark contrast to the promises socialists make. Frankly, it's unethical. Socialists want to sell us their product as a path to reduced work without explaining that socialism has plans for how any saved time would be used: making us perform another kind of work in meeting after meeting.

TENS OF THOUSANDS OF PUBLIC DEBATES

Why does democratic socialism require so many meetings? Because it calls for countless issues to be decided by society-wide debates. Choices that today are made independently by individuals and organizations would instead become public matters that everyone would decide jointly.

In *Ecology and Socialism*, Chris Williams provides an example of the types of issues that socialism expects the "whole community to democratically decide":

Everyone will be involved in decisions about manufacturing methods, energy techniques, use of chemicals, and so on.¹⁹

How many manufacturing methods, energy techniques, chemicals, and so on are in use in an industrial society? How many decisions would need to be made about these things? How many hours would it take for everyone to say their piece and cast their votes? It's hard to even imagine.

But Williams's examples don't even begin to scratch the surface of the kinds of issues socialists expect us to attend meetings about. For example, as Paul D'Amato explains, it's also the plan that in socialist society, goods would be

produced because they are socially necessary, and their production and distribution is carried out according to a democratically worked-out plan.²⁰

Fulfilling this requirement would require two waves of meetings. First, socialist citizens would have to debate which products should qualify as "socially necessary" and, consequently, which should become illegal because they fail this test. A mindboggling number of meetings would be required to determine the fate of the millions of products currently available in our capitalist society.²¹

Next, a second round of meetings would be needed to create the "democratically worked-out plan" for the production and distribution of those items approved as "socially necessary." Again, we're speaking of an unimaginably complex question being resolved by open public debate. And this plan would have to be continuously updated via ongoing sessions, not only to account for the changing desires of the populace but also to determine what to do when the plan goes awry (for example, due to production shortfalls).

This would mean countless decisions about countless issues being debated for countless hours. It's no wonder that in his recent book *Socialism ... Seriously*, Danny Katch admits:

It can be tedious for every major decision to be democratically decided, especially when there are no easy answers.²²

No kidding! Yet as Katch's thinking demonstrates, even the examples cited above fail to encompass the full range of issues that socialists expect us to spend time quarreling about come socialism.

The Duty to Meet

How would socialist society get us to attend countless hours of meetings? The simple answer is that it would compel us.

Socialism is founded on the belief that we each owe our time and talents to society, as is reflected by the famous axiom "from each according to their ability." This duty makes our time effectively society's property to control. And one use that socialist society will put that time to is meetings.

Why can Ernest Mandel count on every citizen to give society so many hours week after week? Because he knows that socialist society would require us to do so. Sure, some would attend endless meetings voluntarily, but the rest of us will be there whether we like it or not.

To learn more, see the RFP paper "The Ripple Effects of Socialist Duty."

Consider his illustration of a “major decision” socialist society would decide by debate: whether convenience stores and stores of other types should be open twenty-four hours a day.²³ It would no longer be up to store owners or managers to determine operating hours. Instead, socialist citizens would meet to argue over the tradeoff between consumer convenience and worker inconvenience and—eventually—determine the hours for each type of store.

Yes, issues that socialists expect socialist society to answer by community debate are limitless.

Worse still, as Katch explains, the results of these sessions would not be final. You could spend dozens of hours in meetings resolving a particular issue only to have the topic reopened at any time. Katch’s example of socialist society determining store operating hours addresses this point. He imagines the decision being

reversed multiple times over the years.²⁴

In other words, the number of issues requiring meetings doesn’t decrease as time goes on. Instead, no question is ever fully resolved.

Given the number of issues to be debated (and then re-debated and re-re-debated), Ernest Mandel’s estimate of four hours of meetings each workday would seem to be, if anything, too low.

“THREE OR FOUR HOURS” A NIGHT OF “NUMBING SPEECHES”

Coming to grips with the meeting-mania democratic socialism entails might make one wonder: would authoritarian socialism be a better path to achieving the theoretical benefits of socialism? At least it might spare us the meetings.

Alas, it wouldn’t. All forms of socialism entail countless hours attending meetings.

For example, life in Mao Zedong’s People’s Republic of China featured many types of meetings, and plenty of each variety. The fun was non-optional: anyone who failed to attend was sent for “reeducation.”²⁵

Daily gatherings of all the inhabitants of a town or village were common. These events often ran far into the evening and sometimes even took multiple days.²⁶

Such sessions were used to drill citizens in socialist principles and the teachings of Chairman Mao. Attendees listened to speech after speech and sang songs praising Mao and socialism. Verses from one popular tune have been translated:

Nothing is as good as socialism. Mao Zedong's Thoughts are the revolutionary treasure; Whoever is against those is our enemy.²⁷

Meetings in which attendees were pressured to boost their industrial or agricultural production were another staple of socialist life in China. In the award-winning²⁸ *Mao's Great Famine*, Frank Dikötter writes that these sessions were the

site of intimidation where cadre [local socialist leaders] could lecture, bully, threaten and shout themselves hoarse for hours on end.²⁹

"Denunciation rallies," also known as "struggle sessions," were a third common form of meeting in the Peoples' Republic. Citizens targeted for public shaming would wear signs detailing their alleged crimes, and often dunce caps as well. They were attacked for hours on end, cursed, spit on, and beaten.³⁰

Tens of thousands of those condemned during these sessions were later executed without trial.³¹ Tens of thousands more committed suicide.³²

Photojournalist Li Zhensheng, whose images provide the foremost visual record of these events, describes his own struggle session:

I was put on stage, made to bow, and criticized for *over six hours* continuously in front of more than three hundred of my colleagues.³³

"I dreaded the nightly meetings where the entire village ... met for three or four hours of numbing speeches and confessions."

Untold hundreds of thousands were denounced at rallies across the People's Republic. Over a period of three years in just one of China's two dozen provinces, some 190,000 people were publicly condemned in such meetings.³⁴ This required tens of thousands of meetings running hundreds of thousands of hours just to handle all the denouncing.³⁵

"Propaganda-fueled nightly meetings"³⁶ were also standard in Democratic Kampuchea, as Cambodia was called when it was run by the Khmer Rouge. ("Rouge" is French for red, the official color of socialism, and the Khmer people are the prominent ethnic group in Cambodia. Cambodia had

been a French colony, and the leaders of the Khmer Rouge learned their socialism while living in Paris.³⁷⁾

A Cambodian villager describes her reactions to these sessions this way:

I dreaded the nightly meetings where the entire village of several hundred people met for three or four hours of numbing speeches and confessions.

She continues:

I dared not be absent or let my head nod or my eyes droop. ... Anyone could charge another with real or supposed failings. Old villagers had some opportunity to discuss their alleged crimes before being punished. New villagers were expected to “confess” without knowing the charges.³⁸

Such experiences by citizens in actual socialist societies illustrate that authoritarian socialism also promises a life of “interminable meetings.” But the headache of having to spend hours attending indoctrination and criticism sessions obviously pales by comparison to the extreme mental and physical cruelty experienced by victims of these events.

Yes, “the trouble with socialism” isn’t simply that “it takes up too many evenings.” A far greater threat is that these nightly gatherings have time and again ended up devoted not to tedious democratic decision-making but to terrifying public humiliation, indoctrination, beatings, and death.

NOTES

1. Ernest Mandel (1923-1995) was a Belgian socialist philosopher and economist. Among his many noted works are *Marxist Economic Theory* (1962), *Late Capitalism* (1968), and *Power and Money* (1994). When he died, 1,200 socialist thinkers and leaders from around the world attended his funeral in Paris.

2. Che Guevara read Mandel's opus *Marxist Economic Theory* and invited Mandel to come to Cuba to work with him to plan the socialist economy.

3. Ernest Mandel, *Power and Money: A Marxist Theory of Bureaucracy* (New York: Verso, 1992), 202. Emphasis added.

4. Mandel uses the figures of both four hours per weekday and twenty hours per week when describing the quantity of time each citizen would be expected to attend meetings and perform administrative tasks for socialist society. Mandel, *Power and Money*, 202, 204.

5. A version of this quote was first attributed to Oscar Wilde in Michael Walzer, "A Day in the Life of the Socialist Citizen," *Dissent*, May-June 1968.

6. Walzer, "A Day in the Life."

7. Michael Harrington, *Socialism: Past and Future* (New York: Little Brown, 1989), 242. Emphasis added.

8. Below are four examples of socialist thinkers arguing that socialism would yield a four-hour workday (with emphasis added). Please note that in each instance, the reason these socialists believe a four-hour workday can be achieved is because they see capitalist society as filled with "parasites" (non-workers and people performing "useless" work) whom socialism will force to work.

"Even at the present stage of economic development, *if everybody worked* and there was no waste, a universal *four-hour day* would undoubtedly be enough to provide abundance for all in the advanced countries." James P. Cannon, *America's Road to Socialism* (New York: Pioneer, 1953), 66.

"*Four hours* of moderate and intelligent work, for every able-bodied man, would be enough to exploit and marvelously shape all its products, *if the bulk of nations were not composed of so many parasites.*" Theodore Dézamy, "Question proposée par l'Académie des sciences morales et politiques: les nations avancent plus en connaissances, en lumières qu'en morale pratique" (Paris: L. E. Heran et Bimont, 1839), 37.

"It has been computed that *if everybody now worked at some useful calling*, everybody could live in comfort on *four hours daily labor.*" Laurence Gronlund, *The Cooperative Commonwealth: An Exposition of Modern Socialism* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1884), 116.

"We are going to *get rid of all non-workers*, and busy-idle people; so that the working time of each member of our factory will be very short, say, to be much within the mark, *four hours a day.*" William Morris, "Work in a Factory As It Might Be," in *Political Writings: Contributions to Justice and Commonweal 1883-1890*, ed. Nicolas Salmon (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1994), 40.

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9. “Las medidas drásticas de eliminar al parasito, ya sea al que esconde en su actitud una enemistad profunda la sociedad socialista o al que esta irremediabilmente reñido con el trabajo.” Ernesto “Che” Guevara, “Contra El Burocratismo [February 1963],” in *Obra revolucionaria* (Mexico City: Ediciones ERA, 1971), 548.

10. See over two dozen example of Debs attacking alleged parasites at parasiteobsessed.org/learning-from-eugene-debs

11. Eugene Debs, “Roosevelt’s Stale and Silly Objections: An Answer to the Articles in *The Outlook* (May 1, 1909),” <https://www.marxists.org/archive/debs/works/1909/090501-debs-rooseveltstaleandsilly.pdf>. Originally published as “Debs’ Reply to Roosevelt,” *Appeal to Reason*, May 1, 1909. Debs attacks “parasites” three other times in this one article.

12. To learn the reasons for socialism’s parasite fixation and how creating socialism hinges on suppressing alleged parasites, see the RFP paper “The Socialist Obsession.”

13. Georges Renard, *Le régime socialiste: principes de son organisation économique et politique*, 6th ed. (Paris: Felix Alcon, 1907), 48.

14. Every socialist nation has sought to root out alleged “parasites.” This is hardly surprising, since socialist theory holds that eliminating parasites is the pathway to creating a socialist society. Take for example Fidel Castro’s explanation of the plan regarding alleged parasites in socialist Cuba: “Our future society must be a society entirely of workers. Of parasites, let there not be even one per million in that future society. For if we have one parasite out of a million people in that future society, the revolution’s work cannot be considered finished.” Fidel Castro, “Castrol Speech at CDR Anniversary Rally [September 29, 1967],” Castro Speech Database, accessed February 28, 2023, <http://lanic.utexas.edu/project/castro/db/1967/19670929.html>. See the RFP paper “The Socialist Obsession” for additional details.

15. For over 150 years, socialists have been promising that their philosophy would result in a dramatic reduction in working hours (see n. 8). No socialist nation has come close to delivering on this promise, much less to cutting the regular workday to four hours. For example, in the world’s first socialist nation, the USSR, the workweek was forty-six hours until the 1950s and forty hours thereafter (Edmund Nash, “Hours of Work and Leave Provisions in the USSR,” *Monthly Labor Review* 80, no. 9 [September 1957]: 1069–73). Moreover, these weekly totals don’t include the millions of hours of mandatory “volunteer” work citizens of the USSR were made to perform (see n. 16).

16. Mandatory “voluntary” labor has been a standard feature in socialist regimes, including the USSR, the People’s Republic of China, the German Democratic Republic, socialist Cuba, and so on.

In the USSR, this work was nicknamed “subbotnik” and “voskresnik” from the Russian words for Saturday and Sunday, the days on which most “voluntary” labor took place. Frank Kaplan describes the intent of these days. Rather than Saturday and Sunday being a holiday from labor, these days were meant to be “a day on which rest is put aside for the joy of labor.” Frank Kaplan, “The Origin and Function of the Subbotniks and Voskresniks,” *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 13, no. 1 (April 1965): 30–39.

The sham nature of the “voluntary” aspect of this work is found in its organization from the top down; for example, the workforce of, say, an entire plant was “volunteered” by its managers. Individual workers did not make a choice; they were told what to do. The only way in which this work resembled volunteer work is that it was unpaid.

17. Friedrich Engels, *Anti-Dühring: Herr Eugen Dühring’s Revolution in Science*, trans. Emile Burns, Marxist Library 18 (New York: International Publishers, 1947), 207.

18. Mandel, *Power and Money*, 204.

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19. Chris Williams, *Ecology and Socialism: Solutions to Capitalist Ecological Crisis* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2010), 228, Kindle.

20. Paul D'Amato, "To each according to their need," SocialistWorker.org, August 23, 2013, <https://socialistworker.org/2013/08/23/to-each-according-to-their-need>.

21. Socialist thinkers argue that a substantial portion of the products available today are "socially useless" and should be suppressed. For example, Fred Magdoff writes: "Socially useless, even harmful, products ... utilize perhaps as great as half of the labor force." Fred Magdoff, "An Ecologically Sound and Socially Just Economy," *Monthly Review*, September 1, 2014, <https://monthlyreview.org/2014/09/01/an-ecologically-sound-and-socially-just-economy>.

22. Danny Katch, *Socialism ... Seriously: A Brief Guide to Human Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2015), 77.

23. Katch, *Socialism ... Seriously*, 77.

24. Katch, *Socialism ... Seriously*, 78. Emphasis added.

25. Li Zhensheng, *Red-Color News Soldier* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2003), 44; Frank Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958–1962* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), 292.

26. Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine*, 291.

27. Xing Lu, "A Rhetorical Analysis of Types of Political Rituals," in *Rhetoric of the Chinese Cultural Revolution: The Impact of Chinese Thought, Culture, and Communication* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2004).

28. *Mao's Great Famine* won the 2011 Samuel Johnson Prize for best non-fiction work.

29. Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine*, 292–93.

30. Zhensheng, *Red-Color News Soldier*, 82–200; Lu, "Rhetorical Analysis."

31. In *Rhetoric of the Chinese Cultural Revolution*, Xing Lu cites a figure of over 200,000 who were "executed on false charges of counterrevolutionary crimes." Xing Lu, "My Family Caught in the Cultural Revolution," in *Rhetoric*.

32. Frank Dikötter writes that during the People Republic's Cultural Revolution period, the vast majority of China's two thousand counties experienced in excess of one hundred deaths by beatings or suicide and that in many counties "the body count reached four to five hundred victims." Frank Dikötter, *The Cultural Revolution* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2016), 189.

While the overall total is unclear, as well as the breakdown between beating deaths and suicides, there's no question that the number of suicides resulting from denunciation sessions across China were in the tens of thousands.

Dikötter's work is also full of specific examples of large numbers of individuals taking their own lives after being targeted during struggle sessions. For example, there were over a dozen suicides driven by denunciation at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music (186), twenty-three at Peking University (187), and six hundred in the first few weeks of denunciations in the Hubei province (238).

33. Zhensheng, *Red-Color News Soldier*, 204–206. Emphasis added.

34. Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine*, 22.

35. Li Zhensheng's criticism session lasted over six hours. If we treat this as the typical length, the 190,000 criticism sessions in just one of China's two dozen provinces would have taken over 1,140,000 hours.

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36. Daisha Lee Delano and J. David Knottnerus, “The Khmer Rouge, Ritual and Control,” *Asian Journal of Social Science* 46, no. 1–2 (2018): 80.

37. Numerous Khmer Rouge leaders learned their socialism in France. Pol Pot (“Brother Number One”), Ieng Sary (“Brother Number Three”), Son Sen, Khieu Samphan, and others who became key players in the Khmer Rouge were students together in Paris. Like most of his future comrades, Pol Pot wasn’t a socialist when he arrived in Paris, but he was when he went home. He morphed from high school teacher to revolutionary leader.

While living in Paris, Pol Pot and his pals received instruction in socialism from members of the PCF (Parti Communiste Francais), participated in “Marxist Circles” (socialist study groups), attended socialist demonstrations, made side trips to socialist Yugoslavia, and so on. If you’ve visited Paris, you’ve likely walked by one or more of the apartments where Pol Pot and the other mass murderers of the Khmer Rouge resided. Pol Pot lived at 28 rue Saint-Andre des Arts in the 6th arrondissement, a minute’s walk from the Fountain of Saint Michael and the Seine.

To learn more about the atrocities of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge and their time in Paris, see these sources: David Chandler, *Brother Number One: A Political Biography of Pol Pot*, rev. ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999); Philip Short, *Pol Pot: Anatomy of a Nightmare* (New York: Henry Holt, 2004); Elizabeth Becker, *When the War Was Over: Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge Revolution*, rev. ed. (New York: Public Affairs, 1998).

38. Delano and Knottnerus, “Khmer Rouge,” 94.