The Intelligent Human's Guide to Socialism

written by Sandy Boyer | February 14, 2016

This is the book many socialists have been waiting for, although we probably didn't know it. In just over 150 pages it describes the core socialist ideas in a clear, highly accessible way. The fact that the book is frequently laugh-out-loud funny makes it even better. *Socialism … Seriously* is written for people who are new to socialism and want to find out what it's all about.

The first question about a book that sets out to explain socialism is, of course, what the author means by socialism.

In the introduction Katch says, "A short answer is that socialism is a society whose top priority is meeting all its people's needs—ranging from food, shelter and health care to art, culture and companionship."

Later he spells it out as:

1. Working people control the government.

2. The government controls the economy.

In a chapter on "Workers' Power" he writes, "The simplest definition of Marx's socialism is that it is what society would look like if the working class were in charge."

Danny Katch is a member of the International Socialist Organization (ISO), and the book is written from that point of view without being a recruiting tool. The underlying theme is what Hal Draper called "socialism from below" and what Marx set forth as "the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves."

In the final chapter on "Five Habits of Highly Effective Relatively Undamaged Socialists," Katch recommends, "Organize with other socialists," but he doesn't say, "Join the ISO." This means that you can recommend S*ocialism … Seriously* even if you're not in the ISO and you have no intention of joining.

Still the book can't help but reflect the ISO's basic politics. It makes it clear that Russia, China, Cuba, and their ilk aren't socialist because the workers aren't in control. In the age of Bernie Sanders, "the Democrats are that loud guy in the bar pretending to be held back by his friends to keep him from going after someone he has absolutely no intention of fighting."

Katch freely admits that, "Despite its title this book isn't really an introduction to socialism. It's an introduction to just one branch of the socialist tree." The book sets out revolutionary socialism, which Katch champions, but also explains social democracy and Stalinism.

At the end of this chapter Katch takes on the idea posed by people like Stanley Aronowitz that the word socialism itself comes with too much baggage. Katch comments, "I'm happy to welcome any new name that works better than the old ones. I'll be that shameless old guy eager to use whatever lingo the radical kids are using these days. But until that happens, I'm not going to waste my time trying to rebrand the revolution. *Open Source Economy! Wiki-ism."*

The book is admirably free of abstruse Marxist terminology that many wouldn't understand. Surplus

value is described—without ever using the term—by the experience of someone earning $25 an hour making CD's for a label specializing in German house music and late nineties slow jams. It's clear that the worker is being exploited and why.

I would have gone a step further and used "government" instead of "the state" whenever possible. People in this country who haven't been introduced to socialist language think "the state" means New York, Iowa, or California. The point is to make it as easy as possible to understand what we're talking about.

Socialism … Seriously has two main sections, appropriately enough titled "Capitalism" and "Socialism." Each has a series of brief chapters on related themes.

Perhaps the two most important chapters in "Capitalism" are "Freedom Isn't Free," which deals with Adam Smith's analysis of capitalism, and "Who's in Charge."

Katch shows that behind Adam Smith's "invisible hand" is the economic exploitation of workers by capitalism. Profits are only possible because what workers produce is worth so much more than what they're paid. The capitalists' blind competition for ever greater profits leads to both over production and recession and to the destruction of the environment.

He describes how, while all working people are exploited by capitalism, some are also oppressed. "Oppression refers to the systematic mistreatment of some groups of people on the basis of their ethnicity, gender, disability, sexual identity, or some other factor." Oppression "comes straight from the top," not from individual prejudice.

"Who's in Charge" aims to show that in reality you can't have both capitalism and democracy, or, "You can have billionaires or you can have democracy, but you can't have a little of both." The book describes the drastic limitations on the right to vote. There are, for instance, no votes on plant closings, layoffs, executive bonuses, or even government spying.

Beyond the relatively popular idea that government operates by and for the 1 percent, Katch describes how government is needed to keep individual capitalists from hurting the system as a whole. "Capitalists are like children, and the state's job is to be the grownup pushing the shopping cart while capitalists sit in the front and make a grab for whatever they want, leaving the state to clean up their spills and put the five boxes of Frosted Flakes back on the shelves." In reality, to stick with this analogy, the state increasingly has to tell capitalists that they can't even touch the Frosted Flakes.

"Socialism" begins with an amusing fantasy about a lousy day under socialism in 2015 in Philadelphia. It isn't meant to actually predict the future. But behind the humor there's a serious point that socialism wouldn't be all sweetness and light and also that society wouldn't fall apart if people could democratically decide things like cars versus mass transit, or whether we want to live individually or share with others, and even whether to keep stores open 24 hours a day.

"Socialism" finishes as it should, with "Revolution!" Here Katch convincingly argues that there is no electoral road to socialism. After all, if we can't vote for full employment, to stop hospital closings, or even to end omnipresent sexist TV ads, we're never going to be allowed to vote to take away the capitalists' property. Or as Henry Kissinger said about Chile, "I don't see why we should stand by and allow a country to go communist because of the irresponsibility of its own people."

The book develops the theme that it's only the experience of making a revolution that prepares working people to run their own government and economy. It's the only way that the working class, both individually and collectively, can develop the confidence and capacity they have been prevented

from acquiring.

The section finishes with a brief description of the Russian Revolution and its degeneration. It debunks both the idea that the revolution was just a coup to put Lenin and the Bolsheviks in power and the even more popular notion that there was no real difference between Lenin and Stalin. There's also a valuable description of how the communist parties became blind agents of Russian foreign policy and even helped to defeat subsequent revolutions throughout the world.

The book concludes with Gramsci's "Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will." "Try to steer clear of the twin traps of bullshitting yourself that things aren't bleak and wallowing in self-pity as long as we still have a chance to win. In my experience the best way to stay on track is to keep finding reasons to laugh—at the absurdities of capitalism and at our own sometimes clumsy efforts to challenge it."

Apart from the humor and elegant descriptions, like the Democratic Party as the loud guy in the bar pretending to be held back, many *New Politics* readers may not find a lot new in *Socialism … Seriously*. But if you know someone who's just getting interested in socialism, by all means invest the $14 and give it to them. If it helps win them to socialism, it will be $14 well spent.

Full disclosure: Both Danny Katch and I write for *Socialist Worker* online (SocialistWorker.org). He writes much more often than I do, and his articles can be hilarious, something no one has ever accused me of.