

The Conductor and the Conducted

review by R. Burke

Contradictions of "Real Socialism: The Conductor and the Conducted, by Michael A. Lebowitz, Monthly Review Press, New York 2012, 222 pages, \$15.95 ISBN 978-1-58367-256-3

An important task for socialists in the wake of the fall of the Soviet Union is to analyze what went wrong. For defenders of capitalism the answer is simple: "there is no alternative." Those of us who resist this facile conclusion and continue to insist on a socialist alternative are tasked with examining "really existing socialism" and explaining how such a system actually worked. Such an analysis must not only identify and reject the failures of Marxist-Leninism but must also be able to recognize where, perhaps, they got some things right. In his latest book, *The Contradictions of "Real Socialism: The Conductor and the Conducted*, Michael A. Lebowitz has made an important contribution to this project.

In *The Contradictions of Real Socialism*, Lebowitz makes use of the metaphor of an orchestra to illuminate the economic relations that existed in the U.S.S.R. and those regimes which modeled themselves upon it. The Communist Party stood in relation to the workers in much the same way as a conductor stands in relation to a symphony orchestra.

Basic to the fabric of Soviet society was a social contract in which workers abdicated their power to self-manage enterprises in favor of taking directions from the Party and its planners. In return they received a guarantee of job security which ensured their continued employment in their work-place, as well as a promise of consumer goods to sustain and improve their lives. Lebowitz makes it clear that the Party attracted the most idealistic of people to its ranks, members who took seriously their commitment to maintaining the social contract with the workers. However, due to the hierarchical

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The conductor leads, indicating when and how the musicians should play. Power is exercised from the top down.

Outside of the illustrating metaphor of an orchestra this has been a standard feature of Left Marxist, Western Marxist, and Anarchist critiques of the Soviet Union and Marxist Leninism generally. Lebowitz, however, goes beyond this, illuminating the "two logics" that interacted to produce the Soviet economy. Here he displays an in-depth knowledge of the relations between planners, managers and workers.

and authoritarian nature of "democratic centralism," acceptance to the party, as well as advancement in it, was conditional on approval of those higher up in its ranks. This led to the development of a *nomenklatura*, "those who can be trusted." Innovation and creative thinking were thus stifled.

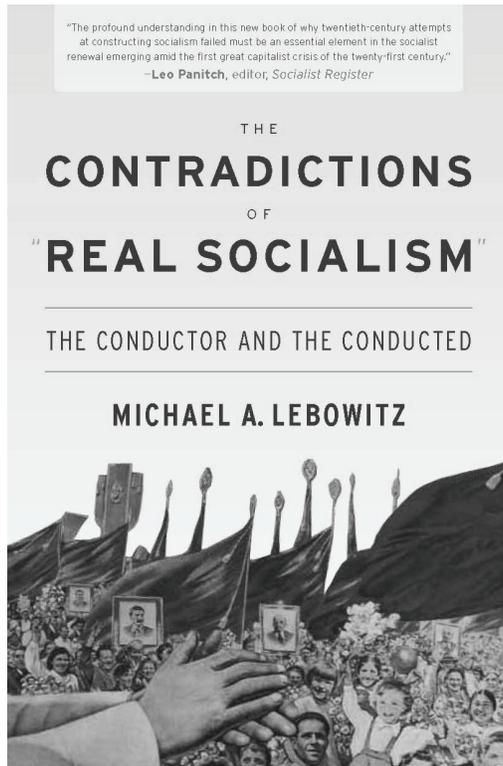
If the social contract and the relations it mandated represented one logic, the position of enterprise managers represented another. The continued employment, salary, and bonuses of managers was dependent upon fulfilling plan targets and meeting production quotas. Within the context of

the Soviet system this acted as a set of perverse incentives which led to waste and inefficiency. One example of this was the practice of “storming,” whereby there was a rush to meet end of the month production quotas.

It was common knowledge among Soviet citizens that it was best to buy products which were made before the middle of the month, because items produced toward the end of the month were likely to be of poor quality or defective due to the rush to meet the monthly quota. Another was the practice of “gold plating.” For example, coats were produced in which the material used for linings cost twice as much as that used for the outside—because the value of the coat was thereby increased. As Lebowitz points out, how plan targets were specified greatly mattered, because managers had discretion in terms of value or physical quantity. He refers to a well known cartoon in which workers were depicted carrying one gigan-tic nail. The caption read “the factory fulfills its plan.”

What Lebowitz makes clear is that the logic of the managers was the logic of capital. Interacting with the vanguard relationships between workers and planners was the logic of those who sought above all to make as much money as they possibly could. It was the managers who played a major role in re-establishing capitalism in Russia. The logic of the managers, who sought to maximize their rewards, was an important factor in the economy of shortages that was the Soviet Union. Seeking to realize the biggest possible bonuses, they found it expedient to withhold information on the actual capacities of the enterprises they ran. Unreported labor and supplies would be stockpiled, often held in reserve for the period of “storming,” or even in an attempt to influence the planning process. In such a situation accurate planning is impossible. Lebowitz argues that central planning per se is not discredited by the Soviet experience. What goes unexamined however is whether it is the best or most desirable form of economic planning and whether a more democratic and participatory form of planning might more fully further the construction of socialism.

As for the workers, they fully expected that the social contract with the vanguard party-state would be fulfilled. Since the Soviet system was unable to provide the promised consumer goods in the desired quantity and quality, the workers felt justified in appropriating resources from their workplace, justifying their doing so because it was, after all, common property. Lebowitz states that in many cases



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worker management, the strengthening of communal councils, the expansion of the commons, and the development of direct links between these cells of a new socialist state.” One interesting theme that he touches upon, but does not elaborate on, is his insight on socialism as a form of what anthropologists term the “economy of the gift.” “It is a society in which cooperation itself is seen as a process of gift-giving, where we can develop all our powers without restraint.” It would be interesting to see Lebowitz develop this insight further in future books.

Overall Micheal A. Lebowitz’s *The Contradictions of “Real Socialism;” The Conductor and the Conducted* is a well researched and thoroughly knowledgable investigation of the workings of the Soviet economy. By knowing more closely what went wrong we are in a better position to avoid the mistakes of Vanguard Marxism and successfully build a socialist alternative. The loom-

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ing environmental catastrophes that threaten the survival of the human race make the need for that alternative greater than ever. *The Contradictions of “Real Socialism”* is a worthy contribution to that project.

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