

Endosker
Newspaper

TIME TO SPEAK UP FOR THE UNDERDOG

by

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Since childhood I have been afflicted by the impulse to stand up for the underdog. In boyhood, this often took the shape of standing up against my mother for the fruit or vegetable vendor or the servant who was being dismissed. I guess that is why I started in politics as a socialist and joined with my good friend Jayaprakash Narayan in establishing the Congress Socialist Party in 1934. For our activities during the years that followed, we have both been expiating since in different ways!

When in 1959 I joined in forming the Swatantra Party, some of my socialist friends, who suffer from conservatism of the Left, thought that I was acting out of character, since they imagined, following Jawaharlal Nehru's smear campaign, that the Swatantra Party was going to be the champion of the vested interest and the privileged classes. If there are any people who still think on those lines, it is high time they think again. The events of the last eight years have made it amply clear that the people for whom the Swatantra Party stands are not only not the vested interest but the great bulk of the people who need to be protected against the new vested interests that have come into existence as a result of twenty years of State Capitalist rule. Among those who need to be so protected and who are today's underdogs are not only the small farmers, who have been denied a fair deal by the predominantly urban rulers of India during the past twenty years, but also those who were formerly the upper classes - such as industrialists, businessmen and former rulers.

Paradoxical as it may seem, it is the ^{yesterday's} so-called upper class of rulers who have become today's underdogs. When, therefore, some of us formed the Swatantra Party we were only giving expression to our sympathy for the underdog before it became possible for most people to appreciate the fact.

If, on the one hand, the business and professional classes and the former princes have lost their privileges and are now entering the ranks of the dispossessed, a new ruling class is quietly and almost surreptitiously coming on top. It still seeks to conceal its

physiognomy by donning the Gandhi cap and the khaddar kurta and by making loud protestations about social justice for the masses.

Since ours is still a mixed economy, there are in India three elements in our new ruling class - the politicians in office, the corrupt bureaucrat and the dishonest businessman. These three have ganged up, while shouting loudly about socialism, to loot the peasant, the worker and the middle class or, as Karl Marx would have put it, "to extract surplus value" out of their labour. This is being achieved through what may be described as the politicisation of almost all aspects of life, which means that those who rule the State have acquired a grip over industry, business, farming and other aspects of our economic life. Partly by nationalisation but predominantly by "Permit-Licence-Quota Raj", they have acquired a stranglehold over the processes of production, whether agricultural or industrial and, like the Highwaymen of old, they extract their toll before a bag of foodgrains can move, before necessary materials can be imported or before any kind of profit can be made. Certain elements in business have, in their pursuit of a quick rupee, not scrupled to betray free enterprise and the free way of life by becoming accomplices in the process. They, at least, have "never had it so good".

Recently, Parliament debated a motion which stipulated that there should be a ceiling on the expenditure of a family of Rs.1,500/- a month. Members of the Communist and Socialist parties and even the Jan Sangh supported this motion. Luckily, it was defeated with the support of the Swatantra Party, but the honourable members who waxed so eloquent happened to forget that their own emoluments and perquisites amounted to more than Rs.1,500/-! As to Ministers who, day in and day out, talk about social justice, their housing, lighting and transportation allowances are of an order that quite big industrialists might envy. Did not Mr. Ram Manohar Lohia, whom we have so tragically lost in the last few weeks, once write a little book about how much it cost the country to maintain its first socialist Prime Minister?

Let it not be thought that there is anything particularly wicked or unique about this phenomena. Our Indian Socialist ministers cannot take the credit for any originality. All this has been done before. The Communist leaders of Russia and the East European countries have shown them the way, which they have avidly followed. The story has been told succinctly and clearly in Milovan Djilas's book The New Class, for writing and publishing which that distinguished communist was

awarded a sentence of ten years in prison. And what was his crime? His crime was to delineate the anatomy of the new class in Soviet Russia and the East European countries, who have been exploiting the peasants and workers for the benefit of themselves and their families. Instead of owning factories and lands, these commissars have misused their political control over factories and collective farms to carry on the good old practice of "extracting surplus value" from the fruits of others' labours.

"The new class", writes Djilas, "may be said to be made up of those who have special privileges and economic preference because of the administrative monopoly they hold." He goes on to explain: "In practice, the ownership privilege of the new class manifests itself as an exclusive right, as a party monopoly, for the political bureaucracy to distribute the national income, to set wages, direct economic development, and dispose of nationalised and other property. This is the way it appears to the ordinary man who considers the Communist functionary as being very rich and as a man who does not have to work.....He who grabs power grabs privileges and indirectly grabs property."

Giving a description which many people will recognise as not an unfair one of the state of affairs in our own country, Djilas writes: "In Communist systems, thefts and misappropriations are inevitable. It is not just poverty that motivates people to steal the 'national property'; but the fact that the property does not seem to belong to anyone. All valuables are somehow rendered valueless, thus creating a favourable atmosphere for theft and waste. In 1954, in Yugoslavia alone, over 20,000 cases of theft of 'socialist property' were discovered. The Communist leaders handle national property as their own, but at the same time they waste it as if it were somebody else's."

There is only one way in which this new vested interest of monopoly State Capitalism can be ended and that is by bringing about a change of government and putting in a Government that does not believe in a system which has led India to misery and bankruptcy but one in which real social justice is re-established by free enterprise in industry and business and vigorous peasant proprietorship on the land.

It is time our socialists, like generals who fight a war with the weapons of the last, stop fighting non-existent vested interests and turn their guns on the new foes of freedom. It is time for all those who believe in social justice to speak up for the former upperdog who has now become the underdog.