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Why you should be a socialist

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WHY DO we live in a world of such obscene inequalities and terrible violence?

A world where 1.2 billion people survive on less than \$1 a day. A world where the most powerful country on earth uses horrific weapons of mass destruction in a war for oil and empire. A world where the fat cats live the high life, while working people live in fear that they'll be standing in the unemployment line--or worse.

There is an alternative. The socialist alternative is based on the power of working people to fight together for a better world--and create a society based not on profit but on making a better life for everyone in it. In this special section, we print excerpts from ALAN MAASS' Why You Should Be a Socialist, soon to be republished by Haymarket Books in a new and expanded edition.

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THE UNITED States is the land of freedom, prosperity and opportunity, we're told. And for some people--a very small number of people with a lot of wealth and power--it's all that and more.

People like Larry Ellison. Ellison is the super-rich CEO of the giant software corporation Oracle. He co-founded the company as a small consulting firm, and it grew from there--not because of any special computer skills that he possessed, but because he latched onto an idea for business software developed by other people, and started selling it before anyone else.

In other words, not because of his superior intelligence or hard work, but old-fashioned good luck. Luck made Larry Ellison a millionaire, then a billionaire, then a multibillionaire. Today, there is no luxury that he can't afford, no interest that he can't pursue, no door closed to him.

He owns a yacht, of course--one that's nearly as long as a football field. There's the private plane and a fleet of fancy cars. But topping all of it is Ellison's new villa, under construction for the last several years in the town of Woodside, Calif., south of San Francisco--which claims on its Web site to be "one of the U.S.'s most exclusive communities, where homes sell for \$3 million and up...about as an ideal location as can be found anywhere on the planet."

Ellison's "home" will cost more than \$100 million. The enormous main building, five guest houses and assorted other structures--including three garages for Ellison's 14 cars--are designed to look like a 16th century Japanese village. The grounds will be covered with a literal forest of Japanese trees, interspersed with ponds and streams, hills and a 2.7-acre lake, fed by two waterfalls. The lake will be filled with purified drinking water.

Luxury on this scale is hard to grasp--like the stories about France's Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, or the pharaohs of ancient Egypt. But what is even more incredible is the fact that all this is small potatoes for Larry Ellison.

As the sixth-richest person in the world, by Forbes magazine's latest estimate, he's worth \$16.6 billion. That means he could afford to build 99 more palatial

estates, each with a price tag of \$100 million, and still remain a billionaire several times over.

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WILLIAM BLAINE lives across the country from Ellison, in Durham, N.C. But to judge from what passes for prosperity or opportunity in his life, he might as well live on another planet.

After three decades of working as a computer engineer, by the end of the 1990s, Blaine had a good-paying job with the telecommunications company Nortel, as the industry boomed. He hoped that the position would ensure a decent retirement in another 10 or 15 years' time--nothing like Larry Ellison's, but at least comfortable.

Then the telecom boom went bust--and Blaine got the ax during one of the many rounds of layoffs at Nortel. He's looked for work ever since--but there are thousands of unemployed technical workers for every job that opens up.

He's had to raid his retirement savings to make ends meet. He also works part time in a marine store--where his boss last summer was his son. "You feel like someone has pulled the plug on you," Blaine told a reporter.

He's not alone. Between the start of 2001 and the middle of 2003, the U.S. economy lost 3.2 million private-sector jobs--and the number of people classified as long-term unemployed rose to the highest level in 20 years.

Pat Zanon is literally not sure how she'll make it. The divorced mother of three was laid off in the spring of 2002 after 24 years with Qwest, another telecommunications industry player. "Talk about a kick in the gut," she told a reporter late last year. "It was going to be a bleak Christmas anyway, because with unemployment, you don't get that much. But now it's really going to be bleak."

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THESE TWO different worlds--rich and poor, powerful and powerless--have always existed in the U.S. But the gap between them has grown massively.

As of 2000, the richest 0.01 percent of U.S. households--just 13,000 families--had a combined annual income nearly as big as the poorest 20 million households. The richest 1 percent of families "earned" about as much as the bottom 40 percent. And that's income. When it comes to wealth--the things that people own--the richest 2 percent of the population have a combined net worth equal to the other 98 percent of the population.

Just how vast is the difference between the super-rich and the rest of us? Think of it this way: Imagine we had a full year's wages for the average U.S. manufacturing worker--\$32,181 in 2002, according to the Labor Department--in stacks of \$20 bills. If we laid all the bills end to end, they would stretch 831 feet. That's a little more than one-eighth of a mile--about one city block or half a lap around a football field.

Now take Microsoft founder Bill Gates. Poor fellow lost upwards of \$60 billion since the 1990s stock market bubble burst, but he's still worth \$40.7 billion, according to Forbes magazine. If we had Gates' fortune in \$20 bills, laid end to end, they would stretch for 199,132 miles. That's about 800,000 laps around a

football field--or back and forth between New York City and Los Angeles 81 times. Actually, it's about eight laps around the full circumference of the earth--or nearly the distance from the earth to the moon.

Two worlds. Larry Ellison lives in one, a world of privilege and power where he's able to indulge any whim. William Blaine and Pat Zanon--like the vast majority of people in the U.S.--belong to a different world.

It's a world of poverty and despair for many people--whether they're suffering through tough times after being laid off, or they were born into tough times and never had a real shot at anything else. Even for those who have a job and can keep their heads above water, it's a struggle from day to day to make ends meet.

Look beyond the borders of the U.S., and this tale of two worlds is even more extreme. Some 1.2 billion people around the world survive on less than \$1 a day--and almost one-half of the global population lives on \$2 a day or less, according to the latest Human Development Report produced by the World Bank. Meanwhile, the total wealth of the three richest families in the world is equal to the combined economic output of the world's 48 least developed countries.

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WHAT COULD possibly explain this incredible gap--between the pampered and privileged lives of a tiny few and the terrible poverty endured by billions of people around the world, each and every day? The most important thing to understand is that it isn't an accident.

It isn't simply that some people in the world are rich and some people are poor. The truth is that some people in the world are rich because other people are poor.

People like Larry Ellison are rich because people like William Blaine and Pat Zanon have been driven all their lives to work harder for less--until they're kicked aside. Some people are rich because others go hungry, because others have nowhere to live, because others face the horror of war, because the future of the environment is put in jeopardy.

That is the ugly truth about the capitalist society we live in. And Larry Ellison doesn't even try to hide it. He's known for paraphrasing the 13th century warlord Genghis Khan: "It's not enough that we win; everyone else must lose."

This perfectly sums up Ellison's business methods. Currently, he and Oracle are carrying out a hostile takeover bid for a rival software company called PeopleSoft. Their openly expressed purpose is to wreck PeopleSoft--eliminate products that might compete with Oracle's, fire thousands of employees and steal the top programmers.

This kind of ruthlessness isn't an exception. It's the rule in Corporate America. Thus, as the U.S. economy began slumping in 2000, CEOs at companies that announced layoffs of 1,000 or more workers received almost twice as much in pay and bonuses as the average for the top executives at 365 companies surveyed in Business Week magazine's annual review.

They were being rewarded for the amount the misery they caused--because from the capitalist point of view, the misery of the many leads to the profits of a few. "CEOs who want to keep their jobs must be willing to cut others' when earnings

decline," chirped the Denver Post in April 2001. "They must take money away from the people who built the company, and give it to the people who financed it."

In other words, steal from the workers...to give to the bankers, the bosses and the Wall Street speculators. Karl Marx couldn't have put it better himself.

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THE PRIORITIES of capitalism certainly don't stop at the borders of the United States--as the U.S. government is proving right now in Iraq. George W. Bush and his fellow Texas oilmen in the White House used a variety of cover stories to justify their invasion.

There was Saddam Hussein's "weapons of mass destruction." There was the supposed military threat, even to the U.S., half a world away--and the regime's supposed connection to the September 11 hijackings. And there was the "liberation" of the Iraqi people from the rule of a dictator--who, incidentally, the U.S. helped into power decades before. All lies.

The real aim of Bush's war on Iraq was clear from the opening days of the invasion, when the first priority for U.S. and British forces was to protect the oilfields. Likewise, when U.S. troops rolled into Baghdad, setting off chaos and looting, there was one Iraqi government building where Marines stood guard--the Ministry of Oil.

Since its defeat in Vietnam 25 years ago, U.S. military interventions have been cloaked with rhetoric about "humanitarian" aims. But today, the Bush administration's hawks talk openly about exploiting Iraq's oil wealth--and using their new puppet state as a stepping stone for the further expansion U.S. military power.

In this context, terms like "colonialism" and "imperialism"--which used to be dismissed as out-of-date left-wing rhetoric--are obviously fitting. "We need to err on the side of being strong," says William Kristol, editor of the right-wing Weekly Standard. "And if people want to say we're an imperial power, fine."

But who pays the price for Washington's armchair generals to "err on the side of being strong"? More than 1 million Iraqis are dead as a direct result of 13 years of U.S. military and economic warfare--from George Bush Sr.'s first Gulf War, to Bill Clinton's endless bombardments, to the brutal UN-sponsored economic sanctions that strangled the country.

A nation that was among the most economically advanced in the Middle East has been reduced to one of the most miserable places on earth. And for what? An unnamed U.S. official gave away the truth in a comment to the Los Angeles Times about the controversy over whether Iraqi families whose innocent loved ones had been killed by U.S. soldiers would be compensated.

"How much is a life worth?" the official said. "The value of a life in Iraq is probably a lot less than it would be in the U.S. or Britain." What a sick comment about the world we live in--that some faceless bureaucrat in Washington would dare to calculate the lesser value of an Iraqi life. But the obscene truth is that this is entirely in keeping with the logic of an economic and political system that puts profits before human need.

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THERE IS an alternative--socialism.

Socialism is based on a few simple and straightforward principles. The world's vast resources should be used not to increase the wealth of a few parasites, but to eradicate poverty and homelessness and every other form of scarcity forever. Rather than fighting wars that promote the power of the tiny class of rulers at the top, the working majority in society should cooperate in the project of creating a world of plenty.

The important decisions shouldn't be left in the hands of people who are either rich or controlled by people who are rich, but should be made by everyone democratically. Instead of a system that crushes our hopes and dreams, we should live in a world where we control our own lives.

These socialist principles have been part of a rich tradition of struggle against inequality and injustice--a struggle that is more relevant today than ever. The corporate-run media would have us believe that opposition to the status quo is "utopian" and "out of style."

But all of their cheerleading for war couldn't stop a massive outpouring of opposition to George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq. As the Pentagon prepared its attack, tens of millions of people marched against the war around the world--and their protests spoke for the doubts and questions of countless others.

Even the pro-war New York Times had to observe: "The fracturing of the Western alliance over Iraq and the huge antiwar demonstrations around the world this weekend are reminders that there may still be two superpowers on the planet: the United States and world public opinion." The hope for an alternative to the rotten world we see around us lies with mobilizing a "second superpower"--not only in the struggle against war and militarism, but in all the countless other protests against a system that breeds violence and poverty and environmental destruction.

According to the United Nations Development Program, the cost of providing the most basic needs that go unmet around the world--for food, shelter, clean water, primary education, basic medical care--would be \$80 billion a year. The three richest men in America--Bill Gates, Warren Buffett and Paul Allen--could cover this cost for a year with plenty to spare.

The U.S. military will spend five times more than this sum next year alone. Can there possibly be a good reason why the world's poor aren't lifted out of poverty?

If Bill Gates' billions or a fraction of the Pentagon's budget could abolish hunger and disease right now, then what kind of a society would refuse to take the steps necessary to end the suffering? It is a society that needs to be replaced--by socialism. That is a struggle worth fighting today.