

# Historic socialist conference

Saturday 8 October 2005, by [CHENG Eva](#) (Date first published: 21 September 2005).

Kajang,

Two-hundred socialist activists and their sympathisers were joined by socialists and Malaysian political exiles from at least eight countries at Kajang near Kuala Lumpur on September 10-11 to discuss the way forward for socialist struggles.

There was a collective sigh of relief when the first open socialist gathering in Malaysia for many decades concluded without police interruption.

The Socialism 2005 conference was organised by the Malaysian Socialist Party (PSM), which formed in 1998, building on more than two decades of grassroots struggles. It has repeatedly sought legal registration but been refused. One excuse for refusal by the authorities is that the party is “a threat to national security”.

PSM chairperson Nasir Hashim told Green Left Weekly that many progressive and left collaborators had strongly advised the PSM to camouflage the socialist nature of the gathering to minimise the chance of being repressed. However the PSM leadership decided against this and overseas guests were greeted at the airport by PSM comrades holding an eye-catching red PSM flag featuring a fist in struggle. Along the long driveway to the conference venue, dozens of PSM flags flew high and proud.

The rousing singing of the Internationale in four languages - Bahasa Melayu, Tamil, Mandarin and English - provided a glimpse of hope that the Malaysian activists can, through united struggle, find a way to deal with the thorny national question that has undermined working-class unity in Malaysia. Just over 60% of the country's population is Malay, 24% is Chinese and 7% Indian. The division and distrust between the three main ethnic groups was instigated by British colonialists during their pre-1957 rule. After the May 13, 1969 racial riots between the Chinese and Malays, the constitution was changed to institute Malay special rights.

In a preliminary assessment of the conference, PSM leader D Jeyakumar told GLW: “It opens the democratic space [in Malaysia] a bit further ... it is giving a boost to the [Malaysian] left, beyond the PSM ... The left in Malaysia has been bullied for a long time.”

The conference's opening rally, attended by around 700 people, addressed the question of whether socialism is still relevant today. This was answered in the affirmative by the five speakers, whose contributions were translated into all four languages.

G. Rajasegaran, secretary general of the Malaysian Trade Union Congress, was joined on the platform by Indonesian trade union leader and People's Democratic Party chairperson Dita Sari; Hashim; national secretary of Australia's Democratic Socialist Perspective John Percy; and Socialist Party of Australia leader Steve Jolly. This was followed by a concert of rock bands and cultural performances. Activists mostly in their twenties and thirties were the backbone of the organising teams throughout the three-day event.

Five major topics were tackled on the first day of the conference: globalisation and capitalism's resilience; is today's imperialism new and can the US be stopped; why did socialism in the USSR and

China fail; the unfolding revolution in Latin America; and people's power in South-East Asia.

Malaysian lawyer and human-rights activist T. Rajamoorthy highlighted the widespread revolt generated by the destruction and marginalisation that came with the global spread of capital. British Marxist Robin Jamieson told the conference that the development of productive forces under capitalism has today more than ever paved the way for a socialist future. PSM leader D. Jeyakumar said globalisation was the price paid by the left for its retreat over the past decades. "The resilience of capital is inversely proportional to the strength of the working class", he said, emphasising that so long as class struggle persists, "it's not all over yet".

On "new imperialism", Thailand's Giles Ji Ungpakorn from Workers Democracy and the International Socialist Tendency argued that the form of imperialism has changed. He characterised China as imperialist and said the world today is multipolar rather than bipolar. He described the "people's movement" as the "second superpower" of the world. Fan Yew Teng, ex-Democratic Action Party MP and human-rights activist, disagreed with many of Ungpakorn's views, arguing that there's nothing fundamentally new in imperialism today. According to Fan, the USSR's collapse has resulted in a unipolar world and the left must not kid itself in believing the rhetoric that the people's movement is already a second superpower.

John Joseet, a Malaysian socialist and former detainee under Malaysia's repressive Internal Security Act (ISA) who now lives in London, stressed the "failure" of socialism in the USSR and China were more "serious distortions of socialist praxis" than a failure of socialism per se. Based on a dissection of Stalinism, Joseet pointed out the way forward is "through thorough-going democratic socialism". Clare Doyle from the London-based Committee for a Workers' International also spoke.

In the session on Latin America, Jolly gave a rundown on recent gains of the popular revolt in a number of Latin American countries, while Percy provided a detailed outline of the unfolding revolution in Venezuela.

Discussing the struggle in South-East Asia, Sonny Melencio, long-time Philippines socialist and a leader in the trade union alliance Laban ng Masa, emphasised the important strategic goal of bringing about systemic change rather than regime change. Sari highlighted the challenge facing the left in steering the Indonesian movement along an anti-capitalist path and Ungpakorn discussed the left's experiences in Thailand.

The second day of the conference focused on the Malaysian struggle, tackling why the left failed to gain power in Malaysia; lessons of the 1998 reformasi movement; and the unresolved national question.

Chen Jian (better known as CC Chin), a long-time left activist in both Singapore and Malaysia, kicked off a sober assessment of the important achievements and mistakes of the Communist Party of Malaysia (CPM). Dominic Puthuchery, a constitutional lawyer, a former militant trade union leader in Singapore and political detainee argued that Malaysian nationalism has always been left leaning. Syed Husin Ali, deputy president of the People's Justice Party and former ISA detainee, gave an account of the Malay left and its relations with the CPM.

The historic significance of the 1998 Reformasi movement was drawn out by Hassan Karim - secretary general of the Malaysian People's Socialist Party (PSRM) of the 1980s and its leader after the party dropped "socialist" from its name in the 1990s to become the PRM - and Hishamuddin Rais, a long-time activist now involved in political satire. According to PSM general secretary S. Arutchelvan, "1998 was definitely a period of historic importance for Malaysia". He also said that the 1998 anti-Suharto struggle in Indonesia impacted on Malaysia.

The conference concluded with a panel on building the left movement today.

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