

interview

Petr Uhl

The Fight for a Socialist Democracy in Czechoslovakia

From 1968, when you were the first person to be tried and sentenced after the Soviet invasion, right up to the present, when you were one of the last to be released from prison in November 1989, you have always sought to combine a militant defence of human rights with a firm rejection of the 'other', capitalist camp. Has this been a difficult path to follow?

As I explained recently at a meeting of former political prisoners, most of whom were violently anti-communist, I am a Trotskyist and revolutionary Marxist and this is the driving force of my commitment. As I see it, there is no socialism without human rights. My Marxism certainly does not seem to have been seen by the authorities as an extenuating circumstance: witness all the time I have spent in prison over the past twenty years. Of course, it is always possible to treat it as an odd quirk or an aberration. But it is harder to say that for my activity—the pamphlets and agitational work among young people in the late sixties, then my involvement in Charter 77 and

VONS, my work defending political prisoners and fighting for wider freedom of thought. All of that is generally recognized, so people respect what motivates that kind of activity, whether it be religious belief or Marxist conviction. We Chartists are in fact very diverse. There are those like me who saw the Charter as a step in the direction of political revolution, while others saw it as a way of disseminating the word of Christ. We respected one another, indeed there was a veritable laboratory of tolerance among the differing viewpoints of people all involved *actively* in the struggle. Outside, things were rather different.

Perhaps that is how things were in the past, among the Charter 77 militants. But will the same be true for the mass of people entering politics in the present period? Even though you have spent more time than most in prison—four years for Trotskyism and five for human rights activism, I believe, not to speak of numerous short periods of detention—will people not hold your stubborn Marxism against you, seeing it as a congenital inability to break radically with the system, whereas the anti-communists for their part do seem to have made a clean break?

But that is not true! They have not made the kind of clean break you mean. On the contrary, many of them are advocates of an authoritarian system. They want to calm the revolutionary upsurge, in order to put through their economic 'reform'. There is also a race for ministerial or parliamentary posts, with the help of anti-democratic procedures. For the moment I criticize all this politely, as it were, because the old order is not yet defeated. But is this not the proof that my Marxism is more radical than their anti-communism? There is something very important at stake here: the emancipation of the individual, the transformation of object into subject, not just on the economic but also on the political level. I do not want to discuss the words 'socialism' or 'Marxism', but human emancipation as the precondition for social emancipation.

Yes, but even if decades of Stalinism have corrupted political discourse and made words like democracy and socialism equivocal, to say the least, thought is still unthinkable without words. Moreover, behind the problem of definitions, is there not a more substantial problem? In the Soviet Union, for example, there are plenty of people who talk about defending the interests of the workers, fighting corruption, even building socialism, but who unfortunately are only too often linked directly or indirectly to the existing bureaucratic apparatus. On the other hand, those committed to defending democratic freedoms, fighting for national sovereignty, enhancing the right to initiative and responsibility, in short to a radical break with the old order, are only too often convinced that salvation lies only in the development of a capitalist market. In other words, there are very few people who consciously reject both the capitalist and the conservative options. In the German Democratic Republic, by contrast, advocates of that kind of 'third way' seem to be more numerous. What is the situation in Czechoslovakia?

The bureaucratization of society has never gone so far in our country as in the USSR. From that point of view, the situation may be more like in the GDR, but it is hard to say much more than this since the

big economic discussion has not really started yet. In my opinion, the market has to be able to develop further in Czechoslovakia. This may perhaps seem like a regression, in relation to the communist ideal of a classless society, but I think it is an inevitable stage today. Of course, I am in favour of a plan worked out *democratically*, to determine the overall balance of priorities; but we must beware of the illusion that this could govern production down to the last detail. Only a market can allow the consumer real freedom of choice so far as clothes, shoes and so on are concerned. You will tell me that the problem lies in knowing how far the market can be allowed to impose its laws, how many workers should be employed per enterprise in the private sector, and so on. It is certainly hard to codify all that. But precisely because I regard a certain development of the market as indispensable, I would say the central question is that of democratic control and the practical forms in which workers' self management is exercised. This is all the more true when we are dealing with foreign capital investments. Poland, after all, must have received a colossal foreign contribution to have the debts it has; apparently, however, in the absence of any control by the workers or consumers this brought it little benefit.

Unfortunately, there is small sign in Czechoslovakia of any worked-out conception of economic and political self-management. So far as the opposite conception is concerned, however, which aims to privatize medium and large-scale production, although this has on more than one occasion been evoked obliquely, it has never been discussed head on. That will start during the campaign for the legislative elections and continue thereafter. All the recently established political parties will have to take up a position on this issue. As for the workers in the enterprises, I am convinced that they will oppose privatization and domination of the Czechoslovak economy by Western capitalism, if this attacks their standard of living and working conditions and produces social differentiation. I think this is where the struggle for socialism is finally going to begin.

The question of ownership of the means of production, and the power to dispose of them, is very important for me. The day after I got out of prison last time on 26 November 1989, there was a meeting of the Plenum of the Civic Forum's Coordinating Centre in Prague (this was before the Coordinating Council existed) and a programme for Civic Forum was adopted. There were four of us who voted against it, five abstentions and sixty in favour. I opposed it mainly because of *one sentence* (you could have an argument about others, but they were not so important): the one stipulating that all forms of ownership of the means of production were equal. I asked myself whether the form of ownership in which the Politburo, or the Party or State leadership, decides everything and the working people have no power was equal to the form of a cooperative employing, say, twenty people deciding jointly about the product, their working conditions, etc. If these two forms are equal, then theft and crime are equal to honest work. I cannot agree with that. Of course, put that way, nobody in Czechoslovakia would agree that all forms of ownership were equal. The truth is that the formulation is there to legitimize private ownership.

And you played the innocent?

Of course! And an odd thing was that it was included in the draft for the future Constitution, in an even stranger form. Just imagine, there is not a word about the political system, it could even in theory be a monarchy; not a word about the Federal Assembly, about elections or about the President of the Republic; but the phrase about the forms of ownership of the means of production being equal is there. That was not forgotten. People must have felt strongly about it. Despite this, I think the great majority is clearly against privatization of the big enterprises. There are doubts about medium enterprises, and almost everybody including me is for economic freedom for craftsmen, family firms and so on. That is almost a technical necessity. But, I repeat, the real problem does not lie in the number of workers or employees in this sector, but in the question of who controls the economy as it opens up to Western capital. That is the real danger, because in Czechoslovakia there is nobody who could buy up the enterprises.

Despite your disagreements, you are a member of the Coordinating Council of the Democratic Forum?

No, the *Civic Forum*! Your slip is interesting because, you know, our Forum is not so democratic. It is civic and you might even say amateur, but not really democratic. Given that, two days after the debate on the programme, when I read in another Civic Forum statement that no one agreeing with the programme could be excluded from the movement, I posed the question: does this mean, vice versa, that anyone disagreeing with the programme *is* excluded from the movement? But in fact, though everyone knows I am against that formulation and in spite of that, I was elected yesterday to the 31-strong Coordinating Council of the Forum. Moreover, I am not the only dissident: in the collective of a hundred or so people which makes up the Civic Forum, there is a small left wing that is certainly going to oppose that thesis.

It is certainly a great honour to be a member of the Council, but it also must represent a huge burden of work, judging even by the difficulty we had in finding time to have this discussion at 2 in the morning and your telephone that never stops ringing. You have just given a big interview to Tvorba about Left Alternative. What are the different groupings now operating, and what role will Civic Forum play in the coming elections?

Left Alternative was set up before 17 November. We only finalized our theses after that date, but they had been written earlier. By an odd chance, we voted on them on 18 November, a few hours before my arrest. Left Alternative—like the Children of Bohemia, who are monarchists, or the Association of Anarchists—is part of a burgeoning of new and mostly marginal groupings which are appearing by the score throughout the country. Some groups are larger, with hundreds or even thousands of members: there are the Social Democrats, who have three or even four groups if you include Slovakia; there is the Green Party or rather the green parties; then there is the Christian Democrat Party; and finally there is Democratic Initiative, who call

themselves liberals. I think these last are the most dangerous of all; they are determined at all costs to be an integral part of the Civic Forum and to have a member on the Council. They have just managed to achieve this, and someone was pointing out to me only today how odd it was: all the other people in Civic Forum wear sweaters and call each other *ty*, but those gentlemen wear ties and say *vy*. They are seen as a bit weird, but even so everyone treats them with proper respect.

The big struggles will begin during the legislative election campaign. But I see another danger for Civic Forum, which is to repeat the electoral process of the Poles. In Poland it was not wrong, indeed in the circumstances it was a necessity; but nothing obliges us here in Czechoslovakia to fight the same kind of election as in Poland, by putting up a single Civic Forum candidate in each constituency. In that event, no other candidate would stand a chance. We might do better not to put up Civic Forum candidates as such at all, but simply to support all those advocating a democratic system in the broad sense. It would also be possible to put up several Civic Forum candidates, three or four representing different parties or currents of opinion. Of course, in that case too parties not recognized by the Forum would stand very little chance.

Do you mean that these would be either parties linked to the old order or far-right, even fascist ones?

We should be careful before we eliminate everything linked however distantly to the old order. If, for example, you take the Socialist Party or the Popular Party, they were of course linked to the old order since they formed an integral part of it; but you cannot throw them out, because they were our allies right from the start of the overturn—indeed, the Socialists had helped us even before November—and they have already carried out purges in their own ranks. Even take the Communist Party: the Democratic Forum has been established within it, I do not know how many members it has, but even though it remains inside the Party its slogans and outlook are quite acceptable, genuinely democratic, and I think they will have some chance in the forthcoming elections, especially if they do distinguish themselves from the CP. But in that case, what will be left of the old Party? And one other thing before we return to the elections, about relations between Civic Forum and members of the CP. In the Coordinating Centre in Prague, so far as I know there is no member of the Party. There were some initially, but they became ministers—Komarek, for example. In the provinces, on the other hand, Party members are very often in the leadership of the local Civic Forums. Indeed, it was Civic Forum which put forward Party members to make up the last Federal government.

In a nutshell, Civic Forum must guarantee the democratic nature of the forthcoming elections; it must take part in all the commissions that will prepare and control them and scrutinize the results; it must ensure popular control from below; but it must not behave like a political party, which it is not. That would be a mistake and a serious one, flowing from a desire on the part of many people to insert

themselves into the system *as it is*. You can see how the original demand that the interior minister, for example, should not be a Communist was quickly replaced by the demand that ministry X should be occupied by Mr Y. Even then, at first this Mr Y would not be one of us, but that soon changed into a different Mr Y who *was* one of us. We are now putting forward our own candidates to seats in the Assembly, for which deputies are going to be coopted on a provisional basis, perhaps for six months. This is an anti-democratic situation: nobody will be able to recall them, because nobody will have elected them, whereas the old deputies were recallable by their electors. It is paradoxical, to say the least!

Can you go a bit further into what Civic Forum really is. Who can belong to it? How is it linked with whatever is going on in the enterprises?

I think we are at present passing through a revolutionary period. There are no precise rules. In practice, the Coordinating Centre of the Civic Forum in Prague is the thirty-one members of the Council plus the apparatus, dare I call it that: in other words, all the unpaid helpers, who number between one and two hundred. This Centre is based on Civic Forums in the neighbourhoods—Prague is divided into ten boroughs—and on the Coordinating Centre of the city of Prague, which is distinct from our national centre. In the provinces, the situation is very uneven. For example, there are areas or enterprises where a third of the people have registered as members of Civic Forum. Elsewhere, the Forum is made up only of a few individuals, but the support for them is clear from the numbers attending meetings. There are also Civic Forums in the army.

There are more than 10,000 strike committees in the country as a whole. These sometimes exist alongside Civic Forum in the enterprise, sometimes the two are identical. There is an Association of Strike Committees, whose function is rather different from that of the Forum. They have a syndicalist line, not with the idea of launching strikes now, but rather of maintaining, as it were, a state of alert. The strike committees set themselves the task of carrying out a purge of the trade unions. The Central Trade Union Council has gone; it has been replaced by an Action Committee which wanted to reform the trade unions, but the workers did not accept that, they are going to create a new trade-union structure—using, of course, the existing buildings and infrastructure. They want to recover what belongs to them, but to change the statutes and not just individuals as the Action Committee wanted. This is a syndicalist line very close to self-management. Six months or a year ago, all enterprises in Czechoslovakia became state enterprises no longer under national administration, endowed with statutes according them greater autonomy than before. Direct dependency on the ministry was replaced by a dual dependency of management upon the ministry and upon the workers. A system of workers' control termed 'self-management' was formally introduced. This could be effective if the workers really believed in it. But in general they have interpreted it as a trick by the authorities, so if they have elected anybody, they have done so with a great deal of mistrust. Nevertheless, in certain enterprises—a small minority, no

more than 5 or 10 per cent—councils have been democratically elected, and these now coincide with the strike committees. What is interesting is that even where this was not the case, the strike committees often want to carry out a purge and replace the whole self-management system. Having said that, since all eyes are now mainly fixed on what lies ahead in the strictly political sphere—presidential and legislative elections and so on—all this is tending to escape general attention.

Are the strike committees represented in Civic Forum?

Yes and no. In the first place, the Coordinating Centre of the Civic Forum has a commission for 'liaison with workers', and the person in charge of this is also a member of the Council. In addition, there is a workers' representative as such on the Council, Lis, but unfortunately he is a friend of another worker—Petr Miller—who has in the meantime become minister of labour and social affairs, and who strikes me so far as a bit of a demagogue. So there is no direct representative of the Association of Strike Committees, though, of course, Lis is in contact with them. There are also students' and cultural workers' representatives on the Council. But, for the moment, there is no clear distinction between a civic or political current and a current more directly linked with the workers. We all work together.

This is a key question. In Poland, for example, one could say that by contrast there is a clear separation, if not yet an open break, between the 'political' current that is now in the government and a wing of Solidarnosc more directly linked to the enterprises.

But, you know, in our factories the workers are more concerned just now with things like the election of Havel than with directly economic or social questions. It must be said that the economic situation here may not be brilliant, but it is far from being as alarming for the workers as it is in Poland.

To return to more directly political questions, you were mentioning the Socialist Party which helped you even before November. How would you characterize it and its constituency?

The Socialist Party is not very socialist. It is the descendant of Benes's old National Socialist Party, which used to invoke the name of Masaryk although Masaryk himself actually supported the Social Democrats. You could situate it somewhere between a social-democratic and a liberal party. It was always a party of the intelligentsia, skilled workers, craftsmen and members of the liberal professions with socialist leanings. Perhaps you could call them advocates of the 'Swedish model', if that still means anything. They had about 18,000 members and 16 deputies before 17 November. Today they may have two or three times that number, I cannot say exactly. A real boom!

From our point of view, the Social-Democrat Party may be more interesting. It is now in the process of renewal and refers back to

former traditions well to the left of the Socialist Party's. Just the opposite of how things are in the West, you see!

You were speaking just now about Civic Forum's relatively open attitude towards the Democratic Forum grouping inside the Communist Party. How do you interpret that? A desire to compromise, or a readiness to distinguish between bureaucrats and Stalinists on the one hand and communists considered to be honest on the other?

It is hard to interpret. The desire for compromise is greater in Prague, whereas in the countryside there is a different problem: as there are very few qualified people to take responsibilities, Party members tend to come to the fore. This causes considerable friction, with the more anti-communist people saying that nobody who was in the Communist Party has the right to be in the leadership of Civic Forum. That kind of view does not exist in Prague.

How do you see your activity now? Is there no problem in being a leading member of Civic Forum at the same time as a founder of Left Alternative?

There is no contradiction for me. Other currents too are represented in the Forum. Even when they are large, which is far from being the case with us, they want to be there not just as individuals but as a current—which may pose a problem, since we do not want the Forum to become a second National Front. That said, I have very little time at present to concern myself with Left Alternative and have to leave that to my comrades. I hope I shall be able to step up my involvement again in a few weeks, when things are less chaotic in the Forum, and also in the new information agency we have set up on Eastern Europe. That will allow us to take an active part in the election campaign. The aim is to get our ideas across to the public at large, in order to have some influence on political and above all economic developments. It is important that a force should emerge capable of showing the dangers that flow from pro-capitalist conceptions (even though such a characterization is a bit simplistic, I think). Of course, those who advocate them cannot (yet?) go very far. They have to respect a certain idea of social justice, the rights of workers, etc. Our role in any case will be to make sure this respect is maintained, by defending everything that goes in the direction of self-organization by the producers.

But, from a practical point of view, how can you get your ideas across to a wider public? Left Alternative does not as yet have the means to establish a regular press of its own. By collaborating with other groups not necessarily sharing all your views, could you not try to establish a non-sectarian, pluralist publication within a broadly socialist framework? Would such a publication not have a certain resonance?

We have thought of that and have even made contact with a group calling itself Socialist Forum, but they are even smaller than we are. Of course, there is also Democratic Forum, made up of members of the Communist Party, which is far larger. The problem is that we do not want to lose our soul, if I can put it like that. We may be small,

but our political strength lies in the fact that none of us is linked to the old regime. Many of us have suffered repression. We can say: take our ideas in conjunction with the way we have conducted our lives. Thus what we put forward represents a political logic reinforced by a moral strength, something which the members of Democratic Forum cannot claim. We have to be careful. There would be less problem with the Social Democrats, but they are in the throes of reorganization and have a lot of unresolved internal problems. Everything is happening very fast at present, you see, and any definite answers on possible alliances would prove illusory.