

Socialism, Explained

Where it came from, what it split into, and where it led — told from the side of the workers it meant to protect.

What socialism intended to fix in capitalism

1

Exploitation of workers
Owners keep most of the value that workers create.

2

Concentration of wealth and power
Wealth, and the political power it buys, pools among a few.

3

Insecurity and poverty
Work, income and old age are left to chance.

4

Necessities left to profit
Markets underprovide what earns little: health, clean air, research.

5

No democratic voice
People who do the work have no say in how it is run.

How the four branches have done, across all history to date

	Anarcho-communism REPLACES CAPITALISM	Democratic socialism REPLACES CAPITALISM	Social democracy REFORMS CAPITALISM	State communism REPLACES CAPITALISM
Exploitation of workers Owners keep most of the value workers create	 Workers ran some 3,000 Catalan enterprises themselves (1936).	 Chile's program ended in the 1973 coup, too soon to judge its effect on work.	 Unions enroll about two-thirds of workers in Sweden and Denmark, 10% in the U.S.; profits stay private.	 Jobs guaranteed by law, but no independent unions until Poland's Solidarity (1980).
Concentration of wealth and power Wealth, and the power it buys, pools among a few	 Property held in common; decisions made in assemblies.	 Chile nationalized its copper by a unanimous vote of Congress (1971).	 Incomes among the most equal anywhere, yet Sweden's top 1% hold 25–40% of its wealth.	 Private fortunes abolished, but all power concentrated in one party.
Insecurity and poverty Jobs, income and old age left to chance	 Collectives fed and employed members in wartime; results varied, and sources are partisan.	 Too brief a national record to judge.	 Denmark, Norway, Iceland and Germany sit in the UN's top five for human development (2025).	 Work, old-age and sickness support guaranteed by law, but man-made famines killed tens of millions.
Necessities left to profit Public goods that markets underprovide	 Barcelona's trams, power, gas and water run by their own workers (1936).	 Too brief a national record to judge.	 Universal health insurance, pensions and schooling; Sweden built its system from 1932.	 Free health care by law, but chronic shortages, such as 10–15-year waits for an apartment.
No democratic voice Over work and the economy	 Workers' assemblies, federated councils, free soviets.	 Pursued socialism through elections while keeping civil liberties (Chile).	 Elections and bargaining; German workers hold half of large-firm boards, but owners break ties.	 One-party rule; Kronstadt crushed for demanding free elections to the soviets (1921).
Survived and scaled Lasted, and reached millions	 Most crushed within months or years; the Zapatistas (~300,000) have lasted since 1994.	 Chile's attempt ended in the 1973 coup; no other national attempt has gone as far.	 Sweden's Social Democrats governed 1932–76; Nordic welfare states endure.	 Nearly a third of humanity by the 1970s; the Soviet bloc collapsed in 1989–91.

none → strong **Dashed ring:** cut short; the fill rates its record while it lasted.
Ratings are judgments drawn from the evidence in each cell, not measurements.

What the scorecard shows

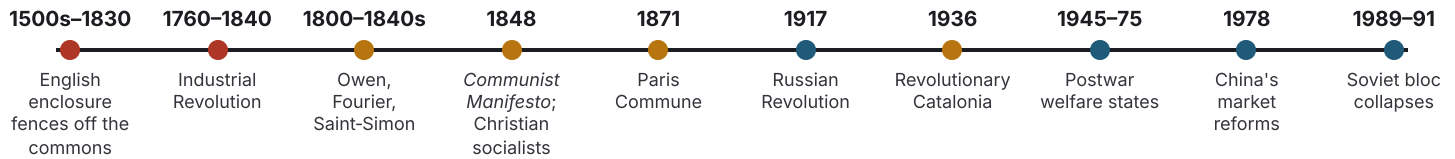
Social democracy scores highest overall, but only partly fixes exploitation and concentration, because capital stays in private hands.

Libertarian socialist experiments scored highest on worker control and democracy, but most were crushed before they could reach scale.

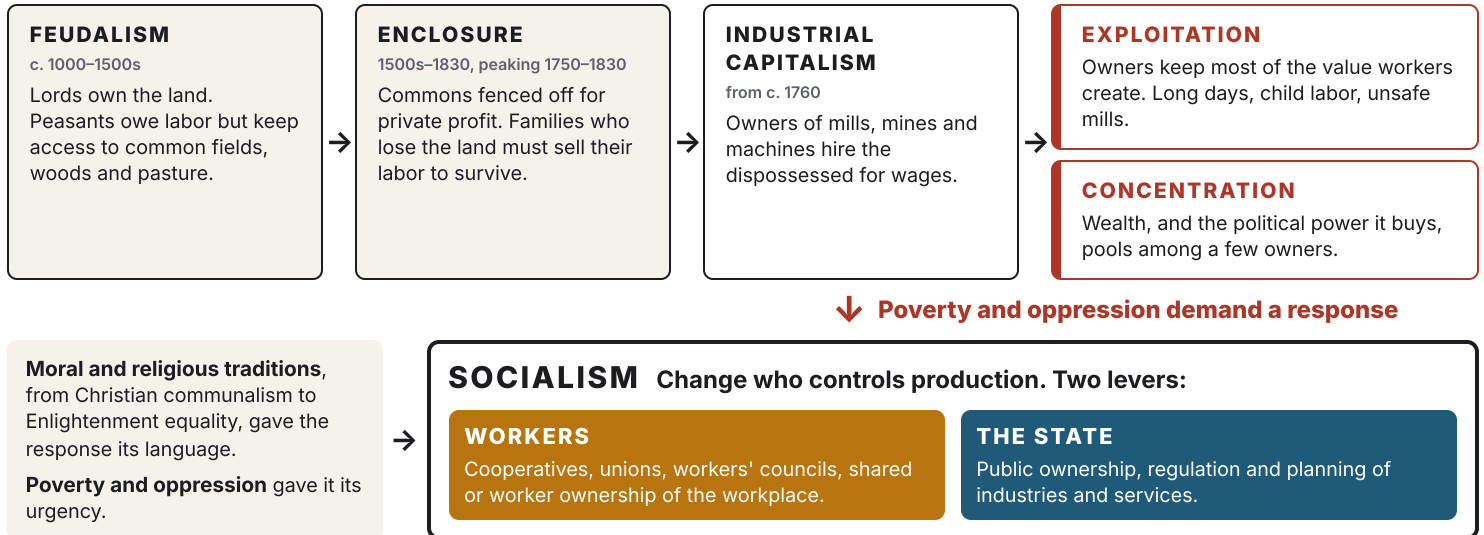
State communism delivered public goods at vast scale while failing workers and democracy almost entirely.

Democratic socialism's one national attempt, in Chile, ended in a coup after three years, so its record is thin.

Let's dig into the conceptual and historical details that undergird this scorecard. →



Why it arose: dispossession, then exploitation



Four branches, four distinct systems



Democracy became the dividing line.

Social democrats and democratic socialists made elections the route to change, and workers' cooperatives govern themselves one member, one vote. In Russia, workers' councils (*soviets*) were meant to run the revolution democratically. By 1921 the Bolshevik party controlled them, and when the Kronstadt sailors demanded free elections to the soviets under the slogan "All power to the soviets, not to parties," the Red Army crushed them.

	Rival	Non-rival
Excludable non-payers can be kept out	PRIVATE GOODS Food, clothing, cars Markets deliver well.	CLUB GOODS Toll roads, cable TV, software Markets deliver, often as monopolies.
Non-excludable hard to keep anyone out	COMMON-POOL RESOURCES Fisheries, groundwater, forests Markets overuse them. Elinor Ostrom (Nobel, 2009) showed that the people who use them can govern them well: neither state nor market.	PUBLIC GOODS Clean air, public health, flood control, basic research Little or no profit, so markets underprovide.

Essential services (healthcare, education, housing, utilities): markets supply them but leave many people out. This is where socialist pressure pushed hardest.

Public-goods theory is mainstream economics (Adam Smith; Paul Samuelson, 1954), and governments of every stripe provide public goods. Socialism's distinctive role was widening the list and relieving the pressure to secure it.

A grand jury found PG&E put "profits over safety" before its nearly century-old line sparked the 2018 Camp Fire. The company pleaded guilty to 84 deaths. Butte County grand jury, 2020.

MIXED ECONOMIES

United States: 1890 (Market-led) → today (Mixed) ← 1965 (Market-led)

Britain: 1850 (Market-led) → today (Mixed) ← 1950 (Market-led)

Sweden: 1900 (Market-led) → today (Mixed) ← 1975 (Market-led)

Netherlands: 1900 (Market-led) → today (Mixed) ← 1980 (Market-led)

USSR → Russia: 1992 (State-led) → today (Mixed) ← 1935 (State-led)

China: 1978 (State-led) → today (Mixed) ← 1965 (State-led)

← **Market-led** | **State-led** →

The top five on the UN Human Development Index (2025), Iceland, Norway, Switzerland, Denmark and Germany, are all mixed. Which mix works best remains contested.

A horizontal timeline from 1875 to 2025 showing the duration of various communist states and movements. The timeline is marked with vertical lines every 25 years. A legend at the top indicates four categories: red square for 'ended by a communist state', dark grey square for 'ended by a non-communist state', orange square for 'internal conflict, then invasion', and green square for 'ongoing'. The events are listed on the left, with their corresponding symbols and descriptions on the right.

Entity/Event	Duration / Outcome
Paris Commune France · ~2 million (city)	72 days; crushed by the French national army in "Bloody Week"
Free Territory Ukraine · ~7.5 million (disputed)	Red Army turns on its former allies
Kronstadt Russia · ~50,000	16 days; crushed by the Red Army
Shinmin (KPAM) Manchuria · ~2 million (disputed)	Leaders assassinated amid anarchist-nationalist conflict; Japan invades
Catalonia & Aragon Spain · 5–7 million peasants (disputed)	Communist-led suppression, 1937; Franco's victory, 1939
Zapatistas Chiapas, Mexico · ~300,000	Self-governing municipalities since the 1994 uprising
Cherán Michoacán, Mexico · ~16,000	Assembly rule after expelling police, officials and illegal loggers
Rojava (AANES) Syria · 2–4.6 million (disputed)	Under pressure from Turkey and Syria's post-Assad government

Sources. Britannica Money, "Mixed economy" · Heldring, Robinson & Vollmer, NBER WP 29772 (enclosure) · Samuelson, *Rev. Econ. Stat.* (1954) · Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences (Ostrom, 2009) · UNDP, *Human Development Report 2025* · Avrich, *Kronstadt 1921* · Bianco, *East/West* (2016) on the Soviet and Chinese famines · ProPublica (2023) on Cigna · In the Public Interest (2013) on lockup quotas · KQED (2020) on the Butte County grand jury · Polish Institute of National Remembrance on the 1980 Gdańsk Agreement · T. Collins Logan, *A Register of Anarchist Endeavors*, level-7.org (populations are orders of magnitude). Amnesty International (2015) documented forced displacement and home demolitions by Rojava's forces.