

# An East German Definition of Human Rights as Based on Social Equality (September 16, 1976)

## Abstract

---

An East Berlin newspaper article describes the SED's understanding of human rights, emphasizing the importance of equality and security as opposed to political liberty. The article also underscores the insufficiency of Western definitions of freedom that fail to address the issue of economic exploitation.

## Source

---

### What Do We Mean by Human Rights?

There are few questions in which so much malicious and deliberate confusion reigns as in this one. Therefore, let me begin with a clarification: Only in socialism are human rights realized; only in socialism can they be fully realized at all.

Let us consider this from the negative side, that is, from the perspective of what human rights look like in capitalism. No one talks about human rights as much and as frequently—and as hypocritically—as capitalist politicians. Karl Marx already remarked on this subject one hundred years ago in *Das Kapital*: “And equal exploitation of the laborer's work-power is the first human right of capital.”

Here, we have an excellent point of departure from which to elucidate the question at hand. Exploitation means taking undue advantage. Anyone who is taken advantage of—and in capitalism that is the mass of workers—is greatly restricted in his personal freedom, in his fundamental right to the product of his work. Even more than that, anyone who has to sell his labor in order to survive, and this lies at the heart of capitalist production, cannot be free. And freedom is a human right.

Accordingly, the basic prerequisite for personal freedom is eliminating the system of exploitation. It is eliminated in socialism. At the same time, the foundation is created for realizing all the rights of man. The most basic right is the right to life. Capitalism refuses to grant even this: through war, unemployment, poverty, hunger, undernourishment.

Human rights were first formulated and anchored in international law on December 10, 1948, in the United Nations Human Rights Declaration. This is a comprehensive document of thirty articles. Hardly any of them have been fully implemented outside of the socialist world. Regarding the right to freedom, for example, reference is made to the universal right to equal freedom irrespective of race, skin color, political opinion, and national and social origin. The multimillionaire and the wage-worker certainly do not enjoy the same rights. And neither do the Greek guest-worker and his Dutch director. And due to employment bans [against radicals], the communist teacher in the FRG does not enjoy the same freedom as his colleague who belongs to the CDU.

According to the UN declaration, the right of every person to social security is a basic human right. This is possible only where there are no crises, that is, in socialism. The same goes for every person's right to work. The right to equal pay for equal work (also a human right) is in short supply in capitalism. Not to mention the right of every person to remuneration that ensures a dignified existence for himself and his family.

Human rights also include the right to rest and recreation, equal rights to all forms of education and

---

vocational training, the right to freely participate in the cultural life of the community and to enjoy the arts, the right to be equal before the law, the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. In short, human rights are the right of all people to a dignified and secure existence. And that is guaranteed in the GDR.

Source: Klaus Wilczynski, "Was verstehen wir unter Menschenrechten?", *Berliner Zeitung*, September 16, 1976. Republished with author permission.

Translation: Allison Brown

Recommended Citation: An East German Definition of Human Rights as Based on Social Equality (September 16, 1976), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/two-germanies-1961-1989/ghdi:document-1171>> [April 10, 2024].