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The Bolshevik Revolution: A legacy better rejected

Anarcho

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2004 marked the 80th anniversary of the death of Lenin. Given that Leninism is still the dominant theory in what passes for a revolutionary movement in Britain, it is useful to discuss the only reason why this authoritarian is still taken seriously. This is the Russian Revolution, held to be the first successful socialist revolution. The fact that it quickly produced a party dictatorship presiding over a state capitalist economy seems irrelevant in Leninist quarters.

For anarchists, the Russian Revolution is seen as a classic example of a social revolution in which the self-activity of working people played a key role. In their soviets, factory committees and other organisations, the Russian masses were trying to transform society from a class-ridden, statist regime into one based on liberty, equality and solidarity. This did not last. The reasons why can be found in Bolshevik ideology and practice.

The initial overthrow of the Tsar came from the direct action of the masses. In February 1917, Petrograd erupted in bread riots as women took to the streets in protest (ignoring instructions from the local Bolsheviks not to). On February 18th, the workers of the

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A short overview of the anarchist critique of the Leninist counter-revolution.

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Putilov Works went on strike and by the 25th the strike wave was general. The turning point came on the 27th, when some troops went over to the revolutionary masses, sweeping along other units. This left the government without its means of coercion, the Tsar abdicated and a provisional government was formed.

So spontaneous was this movement that all the political parties were left behind. In the workplaces and streets and on the land, more and more people became convinced that the overthrow of the Tsar made little real difference if feudal and capitalist exploitation existed in the economy. Workers started to seize their workplaces and peasants, the land. All across Russia, ordinary people started to build their own class organisations: unions, co-operatives, factory committees and councils (or “soviets” in Russian).

The anarchists participated in this movement, encouraging all tendencies to self-management and urging the overthrow of the provisional government. They argued that it was necessary to transform the revolution from a purely political one into an economic/social one. Until the return of Lenin from exile, they were the only political tendency who thought along those lines. Lenin convinced his party to adopt the slogan “*All Power to the Soviets*” and push the revolution forward. This meant a sharp break with previous Marxist positions, leading one Menshevik to say that Lenin had “*made himself a candidate for ... the throne of Bakunin!*” The Bolsheviks now championed direct action and supported the radical actions of the masses, policies in the past associated with anarchism. They soon won more and more votes in the soviet and factory committee elections as the anarchist mottoes proved more popular than orthodox Marxism.

The anarchists were also influential at this time. They argued for workers and peasants to expropriate the owning class, abolish all forms of government and re-organise society from the bottom up using their own class organisations – the soviets, the factory committees, co-operatives and so on. They were particularly active in the factory committee movement for workers’ self-management of

state was designed for minority rule. No state can be an organ of working class self-management due to its basic nature, structure and design. For this reason anarchists have argued for a bottom-up federation of workers' councils as the agent of revolution and the means of managing society after capitalism and the state have been abolished.

The degeneration of the Bolsheviks from a popular working class party into dictators over the working class did not occur by accident. A combination of bad politics and the realities of state power could not help but result in such a degeneration. State power automatically produces a class division into society – those with power and those without.

Only when working people actually run themselves society will a revolution be successful. For anarchists, this means that socialism can be achieved only by working class direct action in their own class organisations organised from the bottom-up in a self-managed way. The task of revolutionaries is to help this process by working within and not above the masses. By substituting party power for working class power, the Russian Revolution had made its first fatal step.

production. They co-operated with the Bolsheviks during the October Revolution which overthrew the provisional government. But things changed once Lenin's party seized power. For while anarchists and Bolsheviks used many of the same slogans, there were important differences between the two.

Take "*workers' control of production.*" Before the October Revolution Lenin saw "*workers' control*" purely in terms of the "*universal, all-embracing workers' control over the capitalists.*" He did not see it in terms of workers' management of production itself via federations of factory committees. Anarchists and the factory committees did. Once in power, the Bolsheviks systematically undermined the popular meaning of workers' control and replaced it with their own, statist, conception. Every time the factory committees tried to bring their form of socialism into being, the party leadership overruled them.

Lenin advocated "*state capitalism*" for Russia, incredibly stating that "*socialism is merely state-capitalist monopoly **which is made to serve the interests of the whole people.***" It based on the centralised institutions created under the Tsar by capitalists for capitalists and was, unsurprisingly, far less democratic than that proposed by the factory committees and anarchists. Lenin simply handed industry to the state bureaucracy, preferring to vest both managerial **and** control powers in organs of the central authorities. This process ended in Lenin arguing for, and introducing, appointed "*one-man management*" armed with "*dictatorial*" powers in April 1918.

Unaware of the importance of economic power, Lenin considering state ownership rather than workers' control as the key. Deprived of economic power in the workplace, the workers' political power was going to be tenuous at best. Combined with Bolshevik centralism, it was non-existent. For Lenin the "*organisational principle*" of Bolshevism was "*centralism*" and "*to proceed from the top downward.*" He stressed that "*the principle, 'only from below' is an anarchist principle.*" This meant, in practice, that power was held by a few party leaders, not the masses.

This can be seen from the slogan “*All power to the Soviets.*” For anarchists it meant exactly that — the working class running society directly, using councils of mandated, recallable delegates. For the Bolsheviks, that slogan was simply the means to create a Bolshevik government over and above the soviets. The difference is important, for if power really did belong to the soviets, it could not belong to the Bolshevik party. If power belonged to the Party, it could not belong to the soviets.

In practice the Bolsheviks proved the anarchists right, quickly showing that for them “soviet power” equalled party power. If, to stay in power, the Bolsheviks had to destroy the soviets, then they did. In response to massive losses in the provincial soviet elections during the spring and summer of 1918, Bolshevik armed force usually overthrew the results and repressed the subsequent working class protest. In Petrograd and Moscow, the Bolsheviks gerrymandered the soviets making the elections irrelevant as a their victory was assured by the packing of the soviet with organisations in which they had overwhelming strength. They even gerrymandered the fifth All-Russian Congress of Soviets to ensure their power, so provoking the Left-SR revolt of early July 1918.

After the October Revolution, anarchists started to denounce the Bolshevik regime and call for a “**Third Revolution**” which would finally free the masses from all bosses (capitalist or socialist). They exposed the difference between the rhetoric of Bolshevism (as expressed in Lenin’s **State and Revolution**) with its reality. Bolshevism in power had proved Bakunin’s prediction that the “*dictatorship of the proletariat*” would become the “*dictatorship over the proletariat.*” In April 1918, the Bolsheviks began the physical suppression of their anarchist rivals using the Cheka (Lenin’s secret police formed in December, 1917).

All this happened **before** the start of the Civil War in late May, 1918, which most supporters of Leninism blame for the Bolsheviks’ authoritarianism. During the civil war, this process simply accelerated, with the Bolsheviks’ systematically repressing opposition

from all quarters — including the strikes and protests of the very class who they claimed was exercising its “dictatorship” while they were in power!

This was because Bolshevism was rooted in Lenin’s ideas of the vanguard party. In 1902, Lenin had argued that “*there can be no talk of an independent ideology being developed by the masses of the workers in the process of their movement*” and so the “*spontaneous development of the labour movement leads to its becoming subordinated to bourgeois ideology.*” Faced with the working class revolts against them, the Bolsheviks repressed them to remain in power. As only the party could represent socialist consciousness, any deviation in support for it simply meant that the working class was “*declassed*” (to use Lenin’s 1920 expression). So the party, in order to defend the “the revolution,” has to impose its will onto the class, eliminating all means by which the workers could spontaneously express themselves (such as democratic soviets). Given Leninist ideology, the sight of the “*dictatorship of the proletariat*” repressing the proletariat was to be expected.

So in less than six months Russia was a de facto party dictatorship. From 1919 onwards Lenin, Trotsky and other leading Bolsheviks were admitting as much and, moreover, arguing that such a dictatorship was essential for any revolution. There is no evidence that Lenin or any Bolshevik leader lamented the loss of workers’ control or soviet democracy. Nor did they refer to these losses as a retreat or a temporary measure.

The Bolshevik revolution confirmed anarchist theory that a “workers’ state” is a contraction in terms. For anarchists, the Bolshevik substitution of party power for workers power (and the conflict between the two) did not come as a surprise. The state is the delegation of **power** — as such, it means that the idea of a “workers’ state” expressing “workers’ power” is a logical impossibility. If workers **are** running society then power rests in their hands. If a state exists then power rests in the hands of the handful of people at the top, **not** in the hands of all. The