

The Russian Revolution

Andrew Flood to the WSM public meeting in Dublin, 1991

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To-night I want to talk about the Russian revolution of 1917. This has been a subject of key importance to anarchists for 70 years now, for two reasons. The first reason is that for the first time in history a working class revolution succeeded in ousting the old ruling classes. The second reason is that after the old ruling class was ousted a new class came to power. Those of us who want to make a revolution to-day must understand where the successes and failures of the past came from.

The Russian revolution demonstrated that it was possible for the working class to take over the running of the economy and to bring down their old rulers, not once but twice in a single year. After the February revolution of 1917 the workers entered into a period of almost constant struggle with the state and the bosses. At the start of this period many workers supported the Kerensky government. This struggle changed their attitudes on a mass basis and gave them the confidence to try to overturn all the old order and privilege. Committees sprung up in the factories and the armed forces. In the run up to October the workers had already taken control of the factories, for the most part. The purpose of the October revolution was to smash the state, destroying the power of the bosses to use armed force to recover their property.

There were several organisations arguing for a workers revolution in this period. This included many anarchists particularly in Kronstadt. They were however much fewer in number than the Bolshevik party which came to claim the revolution as its legacy alone. During the 1905 revolution the anarchists had raised the slogan "All power to the soviets", at the time this was opposed by what became the Bolshevik party but in 1917 they used this slogan to gain mass support. Other Marxists at the time were, incorrectly to accuse the Bolsheviks as having abandoned Marxism for Anarchism but as events were to show they had done no such thing.

The revolution was made by no single organisation, but rather was the work of the working class of Russia. During the October revolution 4 anarchists were members of the Revolutionary military committee that co-ordinated the military side of the revolution.. An Anarchist sailor from Kronstadt led the delegation which dissolved the constituent assembly.

After October the working class of the Russia set about the process of building the new society on the ruins of the old. If they had succeeded there would be little need for this meeting to-night. Within a few short years however the revolution had collapsed. The old bosses never came back as a class although many individuals returned. Instead a new class of rulers arose, one which

successfully incorporated many of the revolutionaries of 1917. Too socialists to-day there is no more pressing task than understanding not only why the revolution failed but also why it failed in such a manner. The fact the patient died is now obvious, the question to-night is what it died of.

Many Socialists have tried to explain this degeneration of the revolution as a product of a unique set of circumstances, comprising the backwards state of the USSR and the heavy toll inflicted by three years of civil war and western intervention. According to this theory the Bolsheviks were forced to take dictatorial measures in order to preserve the revolution. These were intended as emergency measures only and would have been repealed later if not for Stalin's rise to power in the 20's. This interpretation of history presents the Bolsheviks as helpless victims of circumstances.

This is not a view we would accept as most of you are no doubt aware. It is a view that falls beneath even a casual look at what occurred in the USSR between 1917 and 1921. It also collapses when you look at what Leninist ideology had stood for before and after the revolution. We instead lay the blame at the feet of Lenin and the Bolshevik party. The degeneration was part and parcel of the policies of the Bolsheviks.

What actually happened in this period was the replacement of all the organs of workers democracy and self-management with Bolshevik imposed state rule. One example of many is given by the factory committees. These were groups of workers elected at most factories before, during and after the October revolution. The delegates to these committees were mandatable and recallable. They were elected initially in order to prevent the individual bosses from sabotaging equipment. They quickly attempted to expand their scope to cover the complete administration of the workplace and displaced the individual managers. As each workplace relied on many others to supply raw materials, power and to take their products on to the next stage of production the Factory Committees tried to federate in November 1917.

They were prevented from doing so by the Bolsheviks through the trade union bureaucracy. The planned 'All Russian Congress of Factory Committees' never took place. Instead the Bolshevik party decided to set up the "All Russian council of workers control" only 25% of the delegates coming from the factory committees. In this way the creative energy of Russian workers which would have resulted in a co-ordinating centre not under Bolshevik control was blocked in favour of an organisation the party could control. This body was in itself still born, it only met once. In any case it was soon absorbed by the Supreme Economic Council set up in November 1917 which was attached to the Council of Peoples Commissars, itself entirely made up of Bolshevik party members.

So within a few short months of October the Bolsheviks had taken control of the Economy out of the hands of the Working class and into the hands of the Bolshevik party. This was before the civil war, at a time when the workers had showed themselves capable of making a revolution but according to the Bolsheviks incapable of running the economy. The basis of the Bolshevik attack on the factory committees was simple, the Bolsheviks wanted the factories to be owned and managed by the state, the factory committees wanted the factories to be owned and managed by the workers. One Bolshevik described the factory committees attitude as " We found a process which recalled the anarchist dreams of autonomous productive communes".

There were many anarchists involved in the factory committee movement at the time, mainly through the K.A.S., the Confederation of Anarcho-Syndicalists. In some areas they were the dominant influence in the factories. From this stage on the influence of the KAS was to grow rapidly

in the Unions to the point where the Bolsheviks started to physically suppress its activists in 1918. At the first all Russian council of trade unions the anarcho-syndicalists had delegates representing 75,000 workers. Their resolution calling for real workers control and not state workers control was defeated by an alliance of the Bolshevik, Menshevik and Social-Revolutionary delegates. By the end of 1918 Workers Control was replaced with individual management of the Factories (by Bolshevik decree) and the KAS had been weakened by armed Cheka raids and the closing down of its national publication in April and May 1918.

All this occurred before the Civil war and the allied intervention attempted to smash the revolution. The civil war was to reap an enormous harvest on the Soviet union as the combined forces of White generals and 17 foreign armies captured up to 60% of the land area and threatened to capture Petrograd. It also provided the excuse the Bolsheviks were to use for the suppression of workers control but as we have seen this was a process that was already under way. It did however mean that most of the non-Bolshevik revolutionaries temporarily sunk their differences with the Bolsheviks in order to defeat the whites.

The civil war greatly weakened the ability of the working class to resist the further undermining of the gains they had made in 1917. During the civil war emphasis was placed on the need for unity to defeat the whites. After the civil war a much weakened working class found itself faced with a complete state structure armed with all the repression apparatus of the modern state. Many of the activists had been jailed or executed by the Bolsheviks. In 1921 at the end of the civil war only a fresh revolution could have set the USSR back on the path towards socialism.

Those of you who have read Workers Solidarity will be aware of these arguments in more detail. The major point I want to make to-night is that the repression of workers democracy by the Bolsheviks was as a result of Bolshevik ideology rather than due to character flaws in the Bolshevik leadership. Lenin had a very limited view of what socialism was, seeing it as little more than an extension of state capitalism.

”State capitalism is a complete material preparation for socialism, the threshold of socialism, a rung on the ladder of history between which and the rung called socialism there are no gaps”.

The introduction of Taylorism and one man management in the factories in 1918 and 1919 displays a similar fixation with efficiency and productivity.

Lenin also believed that ordinary workers could not run society. A party of intellectuals was necessary to do this. He thought that workers were unable to go beyond having a ”trade union consciousness” because of the fact they had no time to study socialism.

”there are many...who are not enlightened socialists and cannot be such because they have to slave in the factories and they have neither the time nor the opportunity to become socialists”.

Briefly in 1917 Lenin was forced to acknowledge this to be wrong when he admitted that the workers were 100 times ahead of the party from February to October.

This was the justification behind the dictatorship of the party. In a modern sense it is the justification behind putting the party before all else. Leninists today will happily argue that a socialist should have no principles beyond building the party and that even scabbing is excusable

if it is in the parties interests. Leninist organisations tend to look at struggles purely in terms of recruitment, remaining involved just long enough to pick up any activists then heading on for the next one. For the Leninists the chance of a revolution being successful is mainly determined by the size of their party at the time.

Anarchists have a different view of what socialism is and how people become socialists. We do not think it is something that comes from reading books or engaging in debates. The basic ideas of socialism are produced whenever workers come into conflict with the bosses. It is at this time that large numbers of people actively ask who runs the factories, what is the role of the state, etc. The purpose of an anarchist organisation is not simply to grow by grabbing activists out of campaigns. Its function is to get involved with such struggles using its reservoir of experience and theory to win them. Its function is to link up many individual struggles into a widespread anti-capitalist movement. Its function is to agitate for the smashing of the state and its replacement with a society based on communism and workers self-management.

We do not see the number of people in our organisation as being the most important factor behind the success or failure of a revolution. Rather we look at the level of confidence in the class, and the level of understanding about what needs to be built as well as what must be destroyed. Although we want our ideas to be taken up and used on a mass basis we have no wish to get become leaders in order for this to happen.

The Bolsheviks saw their party as comprising all the advanced revolutionaries (vanguard). They saw socialism as something best implemented by a professional leadership of intellectuals. So when they talked of dictatorship of the proletariat they did not mean the working class as a whole exercising control of society. They meant the party holding power on behalf of the working class and in practise the leadership of the party being the ones making all the important policy decisions.

They believed the party, because of its unique position was always right and therefore it had the right to rule over all the class. Therefore while the Soviets had been useful to the Bolsheviks up to the October revolution after the revolution they became a threat. They could and did decide policy which would contradict the party line. Most of them were not under sufficiently under the control of the party as they contained many other revolutionaries also. So the Bolsheviks proceeded to turn them into organs which rubberstamped party decisions.

By 1918 this process had been completed to the extent that the decisions to sign the treaty of Brest-Livtosk which surrendered a huge area of the revolutionary Ukraine to Germany and the Austro-Hungarian empire was made at a party Central Committee meeting. Indeed the central committee was split, the decision going through only by one vote, yet the Soviets had no role at all in this decision making. This was again long before the Civil war and the famine was to provide an excuse for such manoeuvres.

The success and failure throws up all the questions that still separate anarchism from all other socialist theories. Where do revolutionary ideas come from. Lenin was quite clear on this in what is to be done

”History in all countries attests that, on its own, the working class cannot go beyond the level of trade union consciousness, the realisation that they must combine into trade unions, fight against the employers, force the governments to pass such laws as benefit the conditions of the workers...As for the socialist doctrine, it was

constructed out of the philosophical, historical and economic theories elaborated by educated members of the ruling class by intellectuals”.

Anarchists on the other hand point to the creative energy of the working class, the creation of Soviets in 1905 and of the Hungarian Workers Councils in 1956 for instance were spontaneous events, unguided by any organisation. Revolutionary organisations are created by sections of the working class although it is certainly true that as the ruling class dominate education it may well be ex-members of this class that write down and formularise these ideas.

The Leninists also see their party as representing the working class. This was the justification of the suppression of all rivals in 1918 for the Bolsheviks and for the closing down of factions in the party from 1918 to 1921. Trotsky even more then Stalin or Lenin was the most prominent supporter of what was called the parties historical birthright. In the early 20's he was to repeatedly use this idea of the parties birthright against minority groups and individuals in the Bolshevik party. The most astounding part of this however was the willingness of the same groups and individuals to accept this silencing in the name of the party. By the 30's this whole process was to reach its logical conclusion with Stalins show trials of many of the old Bolshevik leadership.

The right of the party to dictate over the class was clearly expressed in 1921 by Trotsky at the 10th party congress. In attacking a faction within the Bolshevik party he said of them

”They have come out with dangerous slogans. They have made a fetish of democratic principles. They have placed the workers right to elect representatives above the party. As if the party were not entitled to assert its dictatorship even if that dictatorship temporarily clashed with the passing moods of the workers' democracy!” Here we have one of the clearest statements of the ideology behind Bolshevik practise in these years. This is the road many of to-days revolutionaries would like to lead us on to.

We have an entirely different project of how capitalism is to be overthrown and what is to replace it. We don't think Workers democracy is icing on the cake or a step towards a workers state. We have no illusions in the neutrality of the state, no matter in whose hands power may lie. We wish to take part in the building of a workers movement not only capable of tearing down existing society but also of building a new society free of exploitation on its ruins.

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