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When Lenin abolished syndicalism

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The Workers' Opposition

However, the syndicalist influence among the factory workers and the desire to preserve the independence of the "factory committees" did not disappear with the physical elimination of the syndicalist militants. As late as March 1920, a congress of food workers adopted a resolution written by the syndicalist Grigory Maximov, which criticized the Bolshevik regime for its centralism and absolute power and demanded new independence for the factory committees. This desire also gained ground within the Communist Party itself, and the so-called "workers' opposition" with Alexandra Kollontai as its leader arose. This demanded workers' management of the enterprises through "factory committees" under the leadership of the trade unions. As the highest body of economic administration, they wanted a "nationwide producers' congress" freely elected by the workers and independent of the party.

The "workers' opposition" within the Communist Party made a great deal of noise in the latter part of 1920. It was rejected by Lenin and definitively banned at the Party Congress in early 1921. The syndicalist revolt at the Kronstadt naval base that broke out at this time was put down in blood. But when syndicalism as a doctrine proved contagious despite the removal of its human representatives, syndicalist literature was also banned. The works of the French syndicalist Fernand Pelloutier were put on the index, as were also certain writings by Bakunin and Kropotkin.

This is, in broad outline, the history of syndicalism in the Russian Revolution.

strengthen the loyalty of the working masses by promising the rapid realization of their utopia.”

Corporate Democracy Gone

I do not know whether this assessment of the right to determine, which Avrich shares with Lenin and with capitalists worldwide, is correct. In any case, workers’ control became a brief episode in the history of Bolshevik Russia. Lenin soon set about having workers’ control replaced by state control. The first step was taken on December 1, 1917, when the state planning body “Supreme Economic Council” was created. This replaced the federally functioning “All-Russian Council of Workers’ Control”. At the same time, the Bolsheviks began to advocate for “iron discipline” in factories and mines. Labor discipline became the slogan instead of workers’ control. At a trade union congress in January 1918, the Bolsheviks pushed through a decision according to which the “factory committees” were transformed into cells in the state-controlled trade unions. From having been spontaneously established bodies for workers’ co-determination in the workplaces, the factory committees thus became state institutions under Bolshevik control.

Anarchists and syndicalists did not find themselves silent in this development. They began to work for the “third stage of the revolution”, which would overthrow the dictatorship of the proletariat and introduce a stateless society. Lenin then decided to “abolish” them. The persecution of anarchists and syndicalists began in April 1918, less than six months after the October Revolution. Associations were cleared by the “Cheka” and those who resisted were shot or imprisoned. Newspapers were confiscated and banned, prominent syndicalists were taken into “custody”, less prominent ones “disappeared” in the detention centers.

When speaking of Russian anarchism, most people probably think first of the two great Russians who made significant contributions to anarchist ideology: Bakunin and Kropotkin. But Paul Avrich’s book “The Russian Anarchists” (Princeton University Press) does not deal with them, except in passing. It deals with the Russian anarchist movement, and a lasting one did not emerge until 1903, when Bakunin was long gone and Kropotkin was living far from his Russian homeland in exile in London.

The anarchist movement played a certain role during the first Russian revolution in 1905, later experienced a period when terrorist methods dominated or at least were most talked about, participated in the popular volcanic eruption of February 1917, supported Lenin and the Bolsheviks in the October Revolution, but almost immediately came into conflict with the holders of the “dictatorship of the proletariat”, and was gradually eliminated.

Russian anarchism spanned a very wide range. It included quiet scholars who were mainly concerned with ideas, peaceful Kropotkin supporters who were bent on immediately implementing “anarchist communism”, gunmen who raised money for anarchist propaganda through “expropriations”, and death-scouring desperados who fought bourgeois society with dynamite. In addition, there were the syndicalists who took their ideas from the French. Pelloutier and Lagardelle, and on the fringes of the movement the Christian anarchists of Tolstoy’s teachings. During the civil war of 1918–1920, Ukrainian peasant anarchism, led by Nestor Makhno, gained wide distribution. It formed free peasant communes and successfully engaged in guerrilla warfare against the Whites. Avrich describes all these trends in detail and with great historical expertise. The emphasis, however, lies on the presentation of the position of the anarchists and above all the syndicalists within the Russian Revolution and towards the Bolsheviks. In this report I shall limit myself to touching on this,

Factory Committees

The Russian Revolution, like all true revolutions, was a spontaneous outbreak, and no party group or school of thought could claim to have “made” the revolution. Also spontaneous were the factory committees and workers’ councils that were formed all over the country. The factory committees functioned as trade union bodies separate from the unions. They demanded wage adjustments, regulated working hours, and higher payment for overtime work, but also demanded “control” over the company, primarily control over hiring and firing, but also a more far-reaching influence aimed at real co-determination, ultimately at the employees’ takeover of the companies. “Workers’ control” became one of the slogans of those groups that did not want to be satisfied with the democratic achievements of the February Revolution but wanted to implement a more profound social revolution.

The syndicalists advocated factory committees and “workers’ control”. The Russian syndicalists were united in the “Union of Anarcho-Syndicalist Propaganda”. They rejected the reformist trade unions dominated by the Social Democrats and formed their own trade union groups. Especially among bakers, typographers, railwaymen and among workers in the leather and chemical-technical industries there were deep depressions. But in their persistent defense of the “factory committees” and “workers’ control” the syndicalists represented practically all the workers.

The Mensheviks (Social Democrats) rejected workers’ control. They made themselves interpreters of the view that Russian society had now put aside its “bourgeois revolution” and must be given time before any socialist revolution could be contemplated.

They wanted to place the “factory committees” under the authority of the reformist trade unions. The Bolsheviks, on the other hand, abandoned the Marxist idea of a bourgeois-

democratic revolution which must first work out its time, and prepared a new upheaval. For tactical reasons, the Bolsheviks also supported the “factory committees” and their demands for workers’ control.

The October Revolution

The Bolsheviks, anarchists and syndicalists thus collaborated in the October coup that overthrew Kerensky’s democratic regime in order to carry out the “socialist revolution” and end the war, which was one of the Bolsheviks’ most important goals.

On November 3, the new government published a first draft law on workers’ control, drawn up by Lenin himself. According to it, workers’ control was to be introduced in all enterprises with more than five employees. Control was to be exercised by the elected factory committee with powers that made it the de facto management of the enterprise. Each committee was to be responsible to the local council, and this in turn to a national council for workers’ control.

“Workers’ control” received a new impetus through this decree. Before the October Revolution, “workers’ control” had in most places a more passive character of “transparency”. Now it was a question of active intervention in the management of enterprises. Avrich gives the following overview: “Many workers were convinced that the new decree had placed the means of production in their hands, and for several months after the revolution the Russian working class enjoyed a freedom and a sense of power unparalleled in its history. But as workers in more and more enterprises sought to assert their right to co-determination, the country slid rapidly towards the abyss of economic collapse. When Lenin issued the radical decree, he was by no means unaware that it could worsen the already chaotic situation, but tactically he considered it necessary to