

Hail the October Revolution

Melbourne Anarchist Communist Group

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Contents

The Road to October	3
October	4
Aftermath	5
Lessons	6
Conclusion	8

One hundred years ago today, a workers' revolution triumphed in Russia, with consequences that would echo for generations. It was 7 November 1917, which Russia then called 25 October because the Czar was so reactionary he opposed switching from the inaccurate Julian calendar to the more accurate Gregorian one. That day, workers and soldiers under the command of the Revolutionary Military Committee of the Petrograd Soviet (which means "council" in Russian) took control of all important public buildings in Petrograd, the Russian capital, and dismissed the Provisional Government of Alexander Kerensky. That night, the Second All-Russia Congress of Soviets met and proclaimed its power.

The Road to October

The road to the October Revolution had been long and filled with diversions. Russia was a large but very backward country, whose participation in the First World War had shown that the State apparatus was so chaotic as to be useless in prosecuting the war. Pushed to breaking point, it collapsed in March (February, old style) 1917 and a Provisional Government was formed to take over from the Czar. Significantly, the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies was also formed.

This makeshift government, however, was unable to solve the crisis. Peasants lived in desperate poverty in semi-feudal conditions, inflation was driving workers to starvation, soldiers at the front were short of arms, ammunition and even boots, and industry was grinding to a halt due to shortages of raw materials. Not a single problem in Russia could be solved without stopping the war, but none of the parties in the Provisional Government would contemplate pulling out. As a result, the situation continued to deteriorate. Parties participating in the Government lost credibility and support. More soviets formed, growing stronger and more representative as the year progressed.

The Anarchist movement in Russia at the time of the February Revolution was very small. It grew as the year went on, but its influence in the Soviets was still very limited. The main parties in the Soviets were the Mensheviks, the Social Revolutionaries and the Bolsheviks. While the Mensheviks and SRs maintained their majority, the Petrograd Soviet acted as a pressure group on the Provisional Government, rather than seeking to overthrow it.

Out of all the parties, it was the Bolsheviks that gained most from the growing crisis – but things could have been different. The long-time Bolshevik position was to support what it called the "democratic dictatorship of the workers and peasants". After the February Revolution, this meant being a Left pressure group on the Provisional Government and hoping to become a Left wing opposition party in a capitalist parliament governing Russia. Lenin had to fight several internal battles in the Bolshevik Party in order to get it to adopt, and then to keep, a position calling for the overthrow of the Provisional Government and for the Soviets to take power. Without that position, the Bolsheviks would have followed the path of the Mensheviks and SRs, whose strength grew and then shrank as the Provisional Government floundered in the face of the growing crisis. The war effort was tearing Russia to pieces. The only solution was for Russia to leave the War – and that required overthrowing the Provisional Government.

The growing crisis in the economy spawned the growth of the Factory Committees, where rank and file workers tried to deal with the day-to-day problems they faced. The Bolsheviks had a majority in the Committees from an early date, but the more conservative workers, concerned

to support the war effort, were also often keen to use the Committees to counter-act the bosses' incompetence. Factory Committees gained control of hiring and firing, resolved conflicts over wage rates, dealt with personnel matters, took on abusive managers and, increasingly, addressed supply issues. In some cases, bosses abandoned their factories in the face of their difficulties, but the workers, through the Factory Committees, kept them going. In the beginning, the impetus behind their formation and growth was practical, not ideological, but the experience of these committees in gradually establishing workers' control was key to the growth of working class support for overthrowing capitalism and establishing self-management under socialism. Workers were solving problems the bosses couldn't, and learnt a powerful lesson from this.

By early July (Old Style), the workers of Petrograd were supporting the slogan "All Power to the Soviets". There was a mass demonstration sparked by opposition to the Provisional Government's order for a war offensive at the front. But support for Soviet power was at its infancy across the country as a whole and the Petrograd Soviet still had a moderate majority. The Government suppressed the peaceful demonstration with great violence, killing 700, and ordered the arrest of Bolshevik leaders. Lenin fled temporarily to Finland.

At the end of August (Old Style), the Provisional Government invited General Kornilov to bring an army to Petrograd to restore order and suppress the radicals. Kornilov agreed wholeheartedly and marched on the capital. When Kerensky, leader of the Provisional Government, realised Kornilov saw him as one of the radicals that needed repressing, he panicked and turned to the Soviet for salvation. Co-ordinated by the Soviet, railway workers refused to provide transport, dissidents encouraged sabotage and soldiers deserted en masse. The army never made it to Petrograd, except for Kornilov and his aides, who arrived under arrest. The credibility of both the Provisional Government and the Czarist Right were shot. The Bolsheviks immediately won majorities in both the Petrograd and Moscow Soviets and continued acquiring majorities in other cities.

October

As a result of the Kornilov Affair, the Petrograd Soviet gained control of troop placements in and around the capital. The Soviet formed a Revolutionary Military Committee, under the leadership of Leon Trotsky, to administer this new power. Trotsky, who had been in a small faction independent of both the Bolsheviks and mainstream Mensheviks, had led his group into the Bolsheviks at the start of August (Old Style). Lenin at last persuaded the Bolshevik Central Committee that an insurrection must be organised and the Revolutionary Military Committee became the forum where the military side of the October Revolution was planned.

On 25 October (Old Style), which was 7 November (New Style), delegates to the Second All-Russia Congress of Soviets gathered in Petrograd. The Bolsheviks, for the first time, had a majority. Not only was the Revolutionary Military Committee ready for action, but (unlike in July) the Soviets were ready to accept power.

The actual insurrection was almost an anti-climax. With the Petrograd Soviet in control of military deployments, the ability of the Provisional Government to resist the take-over was almost non-existent. Detachments occupied public buildings, troop formations went over to the revolution, government communications were cut and loyalist troops were overwhelmed or prevented from being located by Kerensky. The entire event was bloodless, with only one shot fired (into

the ceiling) in the storming of the Winter Palace. At 11 p.m. the Congress of Soviets opened. The Revolutionary Military Committee announced that the Provisional Government was overthrown and the Soviets accepted power. One chapter was over and a new one immediately began.

Aftermath

Kerensky blew his remaining credibility four days after the insurrection when he tried to enter Petrograd like a Czarist general, complete with a white horse and church bells, and killed eight people before retreating. Events in Moscow were more bloody. Fighting continued for a week before the Soviets defeated Kerensky's forces. After that, resistance to the power of the Soviets gradually subsided – for the time being.

From a tiny beginning, Anarchists were growing in influence in Russia during 1917 and continued to grow through 1918. Anarchists supported the overthrow of the Provisional Government and some even participated in the storming of the Winter Palace. Anarchists also participated in the Soviet's dispersal of the Constituent Assembly in January 1918. It was a capitalist parliament and would only have created a capitalist state.

Anarchists and Bolsheviks had been operating roughly in parallel (though rarely in cooperation) until the October Revolution, but went in different directions after that. In retrospect, it can be seen that the Soviets made two key errors that foreshadowed all subsequent ones. Firstly, the All-Russia Congress disregarded Marx's insight which he had set out in his pamphlet on the Paris Commune:

1. The Commune was to be a working, not a parliamentary body, executive and legislative at the same time.

That is, the Commune held executive power and implemented its own decisions. Instead, the Congress elected a Council of People's Commissars to act as an executive cabinet over the Soviets. The Congress of Soviets had turned itself into a legislature and was no longer the working body that the Commune had been.

Secondly, the All-Russia Congress of Soviets assumed central power over the regional and local soviets. Because of the unevenness of political developments in Russia, the Congress did need power in relation to areas where regional soviets were not yet established, and regional soviets needed power in relation to districts where local soviets were not yet established. But having the Congress assume central power over other soviets ensured that the All-Russia Congress was experienced as an external power imposed from above, making arbitrary and often ill-informed decisions. Its decisions were initially a good deal more just and popular than those of the Czar or the Provisional Government, but they were not the freely made decisions of the people who would implement them.

As a result of those two errors, Russia had a new state. The Bolsheviks would proceed to build its power at the expense of the workers and the peasants.

Subsequent events demonstrated that poor structural decisions made at the beginning were fateful. Very soon, the new government started reining in the Factory Committees. Before too long it was insisting on "one man management" – often the former owner employed as a "specialist" on a high salary. Repression of the Anarchists started in April 1918, a month before the first clashes with organised counter-revolutionary forces that became the White armies. The Red Terror, in the process of combating counter-revolutionaries, drove increasing numbers of workers

and peasants into opposition because of its dictatorial methods. Opposition parties were crushed, one by one. Independent revolutions in the territory of the old Russian Empire were put down – a Menshevik republic in Georgia and peasant-based Anarchists, the Makhnovists, in Ukraine. The suppression of the Makhnovists was especially grievous because they had proven their loyalty to the revolution on the battlefield. In fact, they had done the bulk of the fighting against the White armies that had invaded from the south. And finally, the Bolshevik (now Communist) Party crushed the Kronstadt Rebellion, suppressed all other parties and banned its own factions in 1921 – all after the Civil War had been won.

By 1921, the Russian Revolution was over. All counter-revolutionary forces had been defeated, but so had the working class. The so-called “Communist” Party had usurped the power of the Soviets and established a heavy dictatorship. In time, assisted by the illness and then death of Lenin, Stalin would rise to power and institute major changes in policy, including “Socialism in One Country”, a concept both intellectually ridiculous and politically criminal. He stacked the Party with flunkies, purged opposition and turned the reign of terror systematically onto the Party as well (though Lenin had engaged in sporadic internal repression himself). The name of communism was dragged through the mud, with consequences we still suffer today.

Lessons

The most obvious lesson of the October Revolution is that workers can take power. We’ve done it before and we can do it again. Fundamentally, the October Revolution was successful because power was taken by the Soviets, the mass organs of workers’ democracy. It was not a mere Bolshevik coup. We don’t know what the mass organs of workers’ democracy may be in future revolutions. They may be workers’ councils, workplace committees, anarcho-syndicalist unions, or something else. The essential thing is that, like the Soviets in Russia, they have the participation of the mass of the working class and they operate by direct democracy, with mandated and recallable delegates.

The next lesson is that things went very badly wrong in Russia very soon after the October Revolution, not in 1924. The “workers’ state” built by the Bolsheviks was an oxymoron, a repressive apparatus that could only impose authority from above. It was the antithesis of workers’ freedom and workers’ control.

Things could have been otherwise. If the All-Russia Congress had not set up a Council of People’s Commissars to act as an executive cabinet, and if relations between the Soviets had been established on the basis of consistent federalism, then the Soviets would have been working bodies where workers came together to make decisions and implement them directly, without coercion or hierarchy. The Factory Committees would have been able to take over inside the workplace, being the basic organs of workers’ self-management.

A third lesson is that political parties cannot be trusted. The capitalist parties and the moderate workers’ parties discredited themselves well before October, leading to their eclipse by the Bolsheviks. The Bolshevik Party played a vital role in the period between the February and October Revolutions, but after the October Revolution it acted consistently to draw power from the Soviets unto itself. It considered itself the vanguard of the proletariat, possessed of a better and more reliable revolutionary consciousness than the mass of the workers. When it had the opportunity to substitute its judgement for that of the workers, it did. The Civil War provided

a high pressure context in which many of those decisions were made and could be sold to the Soviets, but the authoritarianism began before the Civil War and continued afterwards.

The final, and to many the most surprising, lesson is that the Russian Revolution proved that, on the question of the party, Lenin was wrong and Anarchist communists are right. It is well known that the February Revolution started because of an International Women's Day demonstration that took a militant turn. It is occasionally pointed out that Bolshevik women textile workers organised this demonstration and its militant tactics. It is seldom remembered, though, that these women were acting on their own initiative. They were organised revolutionaries who debated and discussed amongst themselves, but they weren't acting on instructions from the Bolshevik Central Committee. This was to be expected, since the Bolsheviks were illegal at that point and Central Committee members were either underground or in exile. Much latitude was necessarily given to local branches and factory cells.

This process played out on a larger scale through 1917. Before the October Revolution, the Bolshevik Party acted in a very decentralised way, and party discipline was much weaker. The social turmoil and the rapid growth of the Party prevented the establishment of thorough centralism. It was only after October that the Bolsheviks could begin working consistently in the way that Lenin had fought for since 1903. Before October, Right Bolsheviks like Kamenev and Zinoviev engaged in open freelancing against the Party line. They even publicly opposed the Soviets taking power after the Central Committee had committed to the insurrection. An even more telling example is Lenin's famous speech at the Finland Station when he returned from exile in April. His call for the overthrow of the Provisional Government, and for the Soviets to take power, was against Party policy! Lenin had to fight tooth and nail after this speech in order to get the Bolsheviks to adopt his position. If he had kept to Party discipline, he may never have won the argument and the Russian Revolution may have taken a vastly different course. Centralisation has a conservatising effect on organisations and, in a political party, cuts it off from radical shifts in public consciousness.

Anarchist communists accept that we need to be better organised than in 1917. Revolutionary working class activists need to organise themselves in specific revolutionary bodies, in addition to being members of the mass organisations of the working class. Where we differ from Leninists is on the role and structure of the specific revolutionary organisations. We believe the role of revolutionary organisations is to urge the working class to take power itself and not to take power on behalf of the workers. Our activists need to be exemplary militants rather than leaders. They need to inspire workers to act for themselves rather than to follow leaders, however revolutionary. As the old Wobbly saying goes, whoever can lead you into paradise can just as easily lead you out again. The role of Anarchist organisations, important at any time, will be irreplaceable in revolutionary periods, since Anarchists in the mass organs of workers' power will have a message that all parties, including the Leninists, will oppose – that these mass workers' organs are the very substance of the revolution and must not surrender power to anyone, whether it be a parliament, a constituent assembly, or a Council of People's Commissars.

The structure of Anarchist communist organisations must reflect their function. We believe workers' power must operate on the basis of consistent federalism, where power rests at the bottom and the higher bodies exist to co-ordinate without coercion. Anarchist communist political organisations that are large enough to have more than one constituent group must also organise in this way. Since we believe the mass workers' organs must operate with mandated, recallable

delegates and limited tenure of office, so must Anarchist communist political organisations operate.

And since we believe that workers can only exercise real power if they are able to hear all arguments on a given topic, we believe that Anarchists should not attempt to form a single organisation to present a monolithic opinion to the working class. The inevitable differences of opinion within the Anarchist movement (let alone between Anarchists and state socialists) should not be resolved artificially behind closed doors, but presented to the working class for judgement. If any one organisation, even an Anarchist one, gains an enduring majority in the mass workers' organs, the danger of usurpation will arise. Anarchists need to guard against this by ensuring that Anarchist communist organisations preserve pluralism. They must reject the artificial unity that comes from papering over political differences.

Conclusion

The October Revolution in Russia was a momentous event and the Melbourne Anarchist Communist Group celebrates its centenary. The Soviets and the Factory Committees were great achievements of the working class and taking power was an even greater achievement. We are angered by the betrayal of the Revolution by Lenin and its total perversion by Stalin, but we are not disillusioned. Rather, we have learned lessons and work in the confident expectation that, if capitalism doesn't destroy us in the meantime, there will be another revolution, and it will be worldwide. Unlike last time, workers won't get taken in by the siren song of leaders who tell us fairy tales about a workers' state. We won't be fooled again.

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