

The Two Octobers

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The October of Workers and Peasants

The victorious workers' and peasants' revolution of 1917 has been defined as the October revolution in official parlance and in the Bolshevik calendar. There is an element of truth in this, but not the whole truth. In October 1917 Russia's workers and peasants overcame a colossal obstacle obstructing the development of their revolution. They abolished the nominal power of the capitalist class, but even before that, they had achieved something of no lesser revolutionary importance and perhaps something even more fundamental: in town, they had taken economic power away from the capitalist class – the right to free, unfettered work, if not total control over the factories and they had taken land from the large country landowners. Thus, it was well before October that the revolutionary workers destroyed the foundations of capitalism leaving only the superstructure.

If there had been no general expropriation of capitalists by workers, destroying the bourgeois state machine, the political revolution would not have had such success, and perhaps would have not succeeded at all, because without it owners' resistance would have been much greater. Furthermore, the objective of the social revolution in October was not limited to the overthrow of capitalism. A lengthy period of practical experience of social self-management and socialist reconstruction lay before workers, although this prospect shrivelled up in subsequent years. Thus, when one considers its development as a whole, October appears as one only of the phases, albeit a powerful and decisive phase, of the Russian socialist revolution. So, October on its own does not embody social revolution in its entirety. In thinking of the victorious days of October, one should consider the specific historical circumstances that determined the Russian social revolution.

Another peculiarity, no less important, is that October has two meanings: the meaning understood by the working' masses who participated in the social revolution, and with them the Anarchist-Communists; and the other meaning given it by the political party that captured power on the back of the desire for social revolution, using force to betray and stifle it, and all its further development.

An enormous gulf exists between these two interpretations of October. For the workers and peasants, October means the suppression of the power of the parasitic classes in the name of equality and self-management. For the Bolsheviks, October is the conquest of power by the party of the revolutionary intelligentsia and the installation of its state 'socialism' and of its 'socialist' methods of government of the masses.

The February revolution caught the different revolutionary parties in complete disarray and without any doubt they were considerably surprised when they apprehended the profound social character of the coming revolution. No one – other than the anarchists – wanted to believe in it at first. The Bolshevik Party, which always made out that it expressed the most radical aspirations of the working-class, did not foresee anything beyond the limits of a bourgeois revolution. Only at the April conference [1917] did the question arise of what was really happening in Russia: was it only Tsarism that was to be overthrown? or did this revolution have a greater ambition, was it looking forward to overthrowing capitalism? For the Bolsheviks, the latter possibility posed questions of tactics. Lenin became conscious before the other Bolsheviks of the social character of the revolution and foresaw the necessity of seizing power. In the movement of workers and peasants he saw a decisive force, a force that was progressively undermining the foundations of the industrial and rural bourgeoisie. Before October the party could not reach any unanimous agreement on such questions. Throughout this period, it manoeuvred between the social slogans

of the masses and the concept of Social-Democratic revolution from which it had been created and developed. While not opposing the slogan of the petty and big bourgeoisie for a Constituent Assembly, the party did its best to control the masses, striving to keep up with the gathering pace of the rushing crowd. In this period, after the overthrow of Tsarism, the workers marched on impetuously, with a new lease of life. They overcame enemies to the left and the right, they marched on in fighting mood toward victory.

Everywhere the big rural landowners began to evacuate the countryside. They fled from the insurgent peasantry, seeking protection in the towns for themselves and their wealth. The peasantry proceeded to a direct re-distribution of land, they did not want to hear of cohabitation or co-existence with landlords. And in the towns, a 'sudden reversal of relations' took place between the workers and business owners. Thanks to the effort and collective competence of the masses, workers' committees were formed in every workplace: factories, transport, mines... intervening firmly in production, disregarding owners' warnings and putting onto the agenda their elimination from production. So, in different parts of the country, workers began to socialise the workplace.

Simultaneously Russian revolutionary labour developed a vast network of workers' and peasants' soviets, which began to function as organs of self-management. They developed, defended, and extended the revolution. Nominally, capitalist rule and order still existed in the country, but alongside it a vast system of social and economic workers' self-management was born and developed. This regime of soviets and factory committees threatened to kill off the state system just by being there. Clearly the birth and development of the soviets and factory committees had nothing to do with the authoritarian principle. On the contrary – they were in the full sense of the word the masses' organs of social and economic self-management – and in no way organs of statist power. They set themselves up against a state machine which had the pretension to imagine that it could direct the masses, and they prepared for a decisive conflict against it. 'Factories to the workers! Land to the peasants!' – starting with these slogans the revolutionary masses of town and country worked to defeat the state machine of the wealthy classes. In the name of a new social system they founded the basic cells of factory committees and of economic and social soviets. These slogans travelled end to end through workers' Russia, thoroughly permeating workers' direct action [and setting it] against the bourgeois-socialist coalition government.

As has been explained above, workers and peasants had been working towards a complete reconstruction of the industrial and agrarian system in Russia before October 1917. The agrarian question was virtually settled by the poor peasants from June to September 1917. For their part, urban workers put in place organs of social and economic self-management depriving both the state and the owners of their role organising production. During the October revolution the workers overthrew the last and the greatest obstacle to their revolution: the state power of the wealthy classes, which they had already battered and disorganised. The latter development opened vast opportunities for completing the social revolution – it put it on a creative path of socialist social reconstruction – a path workers had already chosen months earlier.

This was the October of the workers and peasants. For the super-exploited manual workers, it signified their huge accomplishment – their wholesale destruction of the foundations of capitalist society. A [new] society of workers was to be set up, one based on the principles of equality, independence, and self-management by the proletariat of the towns and the countryside. This October did not reach its natural conclusion. It was violently interrupted by Bolsheviks' October, which progressively spread its dictatorship over the whole country.

The Bolshevik October

The statist parties – including the Bolsheviks – all restricted the goal of the Russian Revolution to installing a Social-Democratic regime. It was only when workers and peasants from all over Russia began to seriously shake the agro-bourgeois order, only when the social revolution was evidently an irreversible historical fact, that the Bolsheviks began to discuss the social character of the revolution and the consequent necessity of modifying their tactics. There was no unanimity in the party on questions of the character and orientation of the events that had taken place, even up to October. Furthermore, the party's central committee was divided into two opposing tendencies both during the October revolution and throughout subsequent events. While part of the central committee, led by Lenin, foresaw the inevitable social revolution and proposed preparations to seize power, another tendency, led by Zinoviev and Kamenev, denounced working for a social revolution as adventurism. They went no further than calling for a Constituent Assembly in which the Bolsheviks would take up the seats on the far left (see Trotsky, *Lessons of October*). Lenin's point of view prevailed, and the party began to mobilise its forces for a decisive mass struggle against the provisional government. The party threw itself into swamping factory committees and soviets of workers' deputies, doing its best to obtain the greatest possible number of positions in these, as yet immature organs of self-management – so that they could manage their activities. Moreover, the Bolshevik Party concept of, and approach to, the soviets and factory committees was fundamentally different to that of the masses. While the mass of workers viewed the soviets and factory committees that they had created as organs of social and economic self-management, the Bolshevik party looked on them only as a means by which it was possible to snatch power from the damned bourgeoisie, thereafter power was to be wielded in line with party doctrine.

The enormous difference of conception and perspective concerning the October of the revolutionary masses and that of the Bolshevik party was revealed in this way. For the former, it was the question of overthrowing power to reinforce and enlarge organs of workers' and peasants' self-management that were already in being. For the latter, it was the question of using the leverage of these organs to seize power and subordinating all revolutionary forces to the party. There was, as we have seen, an enormous divergence, one that was to grow in time in, with dire consequences for all the future development in the Russian revolution. The Bolsheviks' success in the October revolution, that is to say, the fact that they found themselves in power and then subordinated the revolution as a whole to their party, is to be explained by the sleight of hand that substituted the idea of soviet power for the idea of social revolution and mass social emancipation. At first sight these two ideas might appear non-contradictory. One could understand soviet power as the power of the soviets, and this facilitated the substitution of the idea of soviet power for the idea of revolution. Nevertheless, in real life and in subsequent experience these ideas were in violent conflict with each other. The concept of soviet power incarnated by the Bolshevik state, was transformed into an entirely traditional bourgeois power concentrated in a handful of individuals, wanting to subordinate to their authority all that was fundamental and most powerful in the lives of the people – the social revolution in this particular instance.

Hence, using the idea of 'Soviet Power', in which the Bolsheviks would pick up most of the jobs, they arrived effectively at total power and could proclaim their dictatorship throughout the revolutionary territory. This furnished them with the opportunity to strangle all workers' revolutionary currents who disagreed with their doctrine, mangling the entire course of the Russian

revolution making the revolution adopt a multitude of measures contrary to its real meaning. In the years of war communism one of these measures was the militarisation of labour¹ – while millions of swindlers and parasites could live in peace, luxury and idleness. Another measure was the war between town and country, provoked by the party policy that considered the countryside as an unreliable element foreign to the revolution. So, this ended up with libertarian thinking being strangled, and along with it the anarchist movement, whose social ideas and slogans had inspired the vitality of the Russian revolution had turned it towards social revolution. Other measures – aimed at workers – included the banning of the independent workers’ movement and the strangulation of freedom, both workers’ freedom of expression and the freedom of the workers’ press. Everything depended on the [one] centre, all instructions about workers’ activities, thinking and way of life came from there.

This was the Bolshevik October. The revolutionary socialist intelligentsia incarnated its ideals, and decades of its subsequent development. Now such things are finally accomplished, through the monopoly dictatorship of the Pan-Russian Communist Party. These ideals satisfy the ruling intelligentsia, notwithstanding the catastrophic consequences that they have on workers. This is what they now celebrate with such pomp, after ten years of power.

The Anarchists

Revolutionary anarchism was the only politico-social current promoting ideas of social revolution among workers and peasants, both in the 1905 revolution and in the first days of the 1917 revolution. Indeed, as with the methods of struggle employed by the masses themselves, it could have taken on an enormous role. Likewise, no other politico-social theory could have blended so harmoniously with the spirit and course of the revolution. In 1917 workers listened to anarchist orators’ speeches with rare trust and attention. It may have appeared that the revolutionary potential of the united workers and peasants, and the power of anarchism’s ideology and tactics would together become an irresistible force. Unhappily no such fusion took place. Occasionally some isolated anarchists led intense revolutionary activity among workers, but – except for the *Nabat* Confederation and the Makhnovists in Ukraine – there was no anarchist organisation of any great size to lead more continuous and co-ordinated actions. Only such an organisation could have united anarchists and millions of workers. Yet despite such an important and propitious revolutionary period, anarchists for the most part remained inside the shell of their small groups rather than directing themselves towards mass political demands and action. They preferred to drown themselves in the sea of their internal quarrels, not attempting even once to tackle and resolve the problem of a common anarchist politics and tactics. By this deficiency, they condemned themselves to inaction and sterility throughout most important revolutionary events.

The causes of this catastrophic state of affairs lie indubitably in the anarchist movement’s dispersion; disorganisation and absence of collective tactics, matters which have nearly always have been raised into principles among anarchists, preventing them taking a single organisational step towards setting out a strategy for social revolution. There is no advantage now in denouncing those who, by their demagogy, thoughtlessness, and irresponsibility, helped to create this real situation. But the tragic experience that led the working masses to defeat and anarchism to the

¹ Such measures included transforming units of the Red Army into labour armies and placing enterprises under military administration.

edge of the abyss needs now to be recognised. One must confront with disdain, and pitilessly ridicule, whoever, one way or another, helps to perpetuate chaos and confusion in anarchism, whoever obstructs organisation or development, that is to say, the struggle of the movement for the emancipation of labour and the creation of an anarchist-communist society. The working masses understand and are instinctively attracted to anarchism, but they will not work with the anarchist movement until they are convinced of its theoretical and organisational coherence. All of us must try our best to achieve this coherence.

Conclusions and Perspectives

Bolshevik practice over the last ten years clearly shows the path taken by those in power. Every year it reduces workers' social and political rights a little further and removes all that they conquered in the revolution. There is no doubt that the 'historic mission' of the Bolshevik Party has become meaningless and that it will try to lead the Russian revolution to their final objective: a state capitalism of wage slavery, or in other words, the reinforcing of the power of exploiters and the increasing the misery of the exploited.

In speaking of the Bolshevik party as a party of the socialist intelligentsia, exercising its power over the working masses of town and country, we focus on its central directing core. Its origins, education, and life-style have nothing in common with the working class, and despite that, it rules over life in every detail, both in the party and for the masses. This nucleus will try its best to stay *above the proletariat*. Workers *can expect nothing from it*.

There may be other possibilities for rank-and-file party militants, including the Communist youth. This mass has participated passively in the negative and counter-revolutionary policies of the Party, but having come from the heart of working-class, it may end up recognising and meeting the real October of workers and peasants. We do not doubt that many will emerge from this mass to fight for the workers' October. Let us hope that they assimilate very quickly the anarchist character of October, and that they come to its aid. On our side, let us do our best to demonstrate its true nature, thereby helping the masses to re-conquer and retain the significant achievements conquered in the revolution.

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