

Looking Back At Red October

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The Russian Revolution began 80 years ago this autumn. Looking back now it would be easy to concentrate on the eventual outcome and the defeat of the Revolution. But to concentrate on this alone would be a mistake. The Russian Revolution was an incredible breakthrough in ways that are often not appreciated. A seemingly all-powerful and repressive state that most Russians saw as 'permanent and unchangeable' fell away in a few short months.

Massive demonstrations by workers (the first by women workers on International Women's Day in 1917) gave many Russians a view of what their own power and strength would be if they joined together. As a number of commentators have noted since, these early examples of collective power and success broke an important barrier. One mainstream historian noted, "The new found freedoms of 1917 caused a tremendous upsurge in ordinary people's capacity to organise themselves". As early successes were built upon, "a multiplicity of organisations" were created from below. The sense of collective power grew and grew. Alongside this people's horizons and aspirations also expanded rapidly.

For one of the first times in history, a grassroots democracy emerged that transformed the workplace and abolished the typical lot of all workers everywhere: having to obey orders, having to accept an authoritarian workplace. Workers and peasants saw that democracy should not be limited to just a parliament and politicians. Instead they saw themselves and their own areas and places of work as the primary locations of democracy. This was where they started the revolution and this was a first in world history - an enormous achievement by ordinary people who had hitherto been confined to the most passive and backward of roles.

A glimpse of the possible

Prior to the Russian Revolution, there had been some examples of workers taking over their places of work and their own communities. In the Paris Commune (1871) there had been some early attempts at this - however the Commune only lasted for a short period of time and offered only 'a glimpse' of the real potential. Similarly with the 1905 Revolution in Russia. Other than this there had been a number of 'Utopian' efforts - though these remained strictly within the confines of a capitalist world - that is they never called into question the entire running of the economy.

The Russian Revolution was a major break with all of this. Power and 'the right to manage' was taken by workers into their own hands at their own places of work. The entire system of exploitation (what is known still as 'working for a wage') began to collapse - to be replaced with a new egalitarian system in which workers played a key role.

The revolutionary movement that emerged in Russia throughout 1917 surprised many observers - not least those in Russian society who always maintain 'that they know best'. Imagine the surprise of the boss at the Brenner factory in Petrograd (now St Petersburg) in June of 1917 when the workers wrote in reply to an attempt at a lockout: 'In view of the management's refusal to go on with production, the workers' committee has decided in general assembly to fulfil the orders and to carry on working.' Instead of complying and going meekly back to their place, the workers locked out the management and began running the establishment themselves!

If you are wondering if this was an aberration, the short answer is no. Factory committees of workers sprang up throughout Russia over the months between February and December of 1917.

Within a very short period factories, trams and trains, schools and food distribution were being run by workers. On the land, peasants quickly took over and did what they had always dreamed of doing: planting the land without having to be at the beck and call of any overseer. As one peasant resolution in the region of Samara province put it: 'The land must belong to those who work it with their hands, to those whose sweat flows.'

Many people today think that revolution is an impossible idea. But looking back at the beginning of the Russian Revolution, it is important to remember that at times a revolution can appear as a very distant aim, even though it may only be a decade or two away. A casual observer in 1900 in Russia would have said 'I don't think a revolution will ever happen here - not among this lot'. Yet 17 years later on, what would she or he have thought?

If we knew our power

Ireland today is also an example of how limited the horizons appears to be. Workers are locked into the Partnership 2000 deal that offers minuscule pay increases over the next three years - this despite the huge growth in bosses' profits. Yet what is the reality? Is that all there is? When we are prevented from seeing our collective strength, even the smallest improvements seem impossible or hopeless. As workers, we are often divided by the most minor of things, into different sections in our unions, into different unions, into different grades, into different types (public sector versus private sector, for example).

Division, in fact, is one of the more obvious features in our class today. Not surprisingly, this is done for a good reason. It suits all the vested interests (and they are many) that we think of our divisions first and everything else second. To prevent us from seeing our own power as a collective body, and to prevent us having expectations larger and more radical than Partnership 2000 - this is a major achievement for those who benefit from today's capitalist system.

If we look back at the Russian Revolution from this distance of 80 years then one of the more important lessons that we could learn from it is how powerful we are when we act as a collective body. Divisions often appear large and insurmountable when we are unaware of or have forgotten our collective power. But when collective strength re-emerges (as it will in time) our divisions won't quite disappear (do they ever?) but they will become insignificant against the wider possibilities that will open out.

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Part of a series being done by Workers Solidarity that will examine and analyse some of the many lessons that can be learned from the Russian Revolution.

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