

Factory committees in the Russian Revolution

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There are some who would say there is no point in discussing the Russian revolution today. It happened nearly 80 years ago, the world has moved on, capitalism has changed, and the situation in Russia in 1917 is simply too different, too far in the past to have lessons for us today. I would disagree, if for no other reason than that the Russian revolution was one of *the* defining moments for the left. Most groups on the left, whether consciously or not, have antecedents in the Russia of 1917, and all of us can find inspiration in the speed with which the working class pressed forward, and in the scale of the changes that occurred - or at least some of them.

This talk will concentrate on just one part - though an important part- of that change ; the question of workers control - the relations between the factory committees, the trade unions, and the various parties, and what workers control meant (if anything) for each of them. Also, to narrow the focus even further, I will deal mainly with the changes in this area only up to the outbreak of the civil war. Though Russia was far from calm up to that point, the civil war brought in even more complications, and besides, as we shall see, the question had largely been resolved by then.

The factory committees appeared in Petrograd and Moscow around February/March of 1917, and quickly spread. Elected directly by the workers in each enterprise, they appear initially to have formed in a response to threatened closures, and to press for the 8-hour day, though the scope of their demands would soon extend. On March 10th, the Petrograd Manufacturer's Association agreed to this demand in their enterprises, and recognised the committees - other employers were soon forced to grant the 8-hour day, though recognition of the committees was to take longer.

On April 2nd, the first exploratory conference of factory committees was held in Petrograd, made up of workers from the war industries. They declared that the responsibility of the factory committee included all areas of internal factory organisation (hours, wages, hiring and firing, and so on), that the whole administrative personnel (including management) could only be taken on with the consent of the committee, and that the committee controlled managerial activity in the administrative, economic and technical fields. Though, three weeks later, the government partially recognised the committees, their declarations were not exactly welcomed, and a campaign of vilification was launched in the press which was to last up to the revolution.

On May 29th, the Kharkov Conference of Factory Committees decided that "the Factory Committees must take over production, protect it, develop it. They must ... decree all internal factory regulations, and determine solutions to all conflicts" The Conference of Petrograd Committees, held over the following week, resolved that the objectives of the committees were the "creation of new conditions of work", "the organisation of thorough control by labour over production and distribution", and called for a "proletarian majority in all institutions having executive power". Over the next few weeks, the movement grew, in some cases ousting the management and taking over their plants.

At the Second conference of Petrograd Factory Committees in August, a financially independent Soviet of Factory Committees was set up, though many local committees had mixed feelings about it, and were reluctant to free their members for work there, partly because of the Bolshevik predominance, and partly because they felt it had been set up from above. Also at this conference, it was decided that the decrees of the factory committees were binding on the factory administration, that the committees were to meet regularly during working hours (paid for by the employer), had the right of hiring and firing over all administrative staff, and were to have their own press, to inform the workers of their resolutions.

These resolutions, of course, formed a platform, rather than indication of their real power, and at that time the committees on the railways were coming under attack from the provisional government. Kukel, vice-minister for the Navy, proposed the proclamation of martial law on the railways, and the dissolution of the committees. The committee movement continued to grow, though, with a wave of strikes from Moscow to the Donbas following in its wake.

At this point it's worth saying a few words about the attitudes towards the factory committees in other quarters.

The anarchists, naturally enough, supported the Factory committees, and allied with the Bolsheviks to stop them from being absorbed by the trade unions. *Golos Truda*, the journal of the Union of Anarcho-Syndicalists, called for the workers to take into their own hands "all the raw materials and all the instruments indispensable to your labour". At the All Russian Conference of Factory Committees, an anarchist speaker said that "the factory committees were cells of the future...They, not the state, should now administer"

The Mensheviks, and the Menshevik-dominated trade unions, were as hostile as the anarchists were supportive. At the 1st conference of Petrograd Committees, the Menshevik minister Skobelev said that "the regulation and control of industry was a task for the state", and that "The committees would best serve the workers' cause by becoming subordinate units in a statewide network of trade unions". This was a line they were to continue to follow, saying at a trade union conference in Petrograd that the committees should be elected from lists drawn up by the unions. In late August, Skobelev drew up circulars forbidding meetings of the factory committees during working hours, and saying that the committees did not have the right to hire and fire (though, interestingly, he said that they had the right to *control* over hiring and firing).

Finally, the Bolsheviks. Though the Bolsheviks called for workers control, they were not very specific about what exactly this meant, or how it was to be achieved, and they were active in both the trade unions and the factory committees. Though they defended the autonomy of the committees from the trade unions, this was to a large extent due to their greater strength in the committees, and there seemed to be no agreed policy concerning which was to be primary. Lenin, when asked at the party's conference in April if workers control was to be enterprise-centred or state-centred, replied that the question had not yet been settled, and that 'living practice' would provide the answer.

Examining the work of Lenin, however, we can find the signs of things to come. In his address to the Conference of Petrograd factory committees in June, he said that workers control meant that "the administration should render an account of its actions to the most authoritative workers' organisations", the clear implication being that the workers themselves weren't the administration. In "Can the Bolsheviks retain State power", he says "If it is a proletarian state we are referring to then workers' control can become a national, all-embracing, extremely precise and extremely scrupulous *accounting* of the production and distribution of goods." Finally, in "State and Revolution", he says that "it is quite possible, after the overthrow of the capitalists and bureaucrats, to proceed immediately, overnight, to replace them in the *control* over production and distribution, in the work of *keeping account* of labour and products, by the armed workers, by the whole of the armed population."

AFTER OCTOBER

The months after the revolution were to see this policy being put into place, and 'living practice' did indeed show where workers control was to be based. Lenin's draft decree on workers control said that "the decisions of the elected delegates of the workers and employees were legally binding upon the owners of enterprises", but that they could be annulled by trade unions and congresses. Also, the committees were to be answerable to the state in all enterprises of state importance. The full decree subordinated the committees to the Russian Council of Workers Control - on which the All-Russian Council of Factory Committees would have only 5 out of 21 seats.

In December, the Supreme Economic Council - Vesenka - was set up to direct the economy, subordinating all other agencies. Under the Vesenka would be regional councils -Sovnarkhozy - which could set up more local offices, incorporating the factory committees where these had set up. At the First All-Russian Council of Trade Unions, and again at the First All-Russian Congress of Textile Workers (both in January), it was declared that workers control was "the instrument by which the universal economic plan must be put into effect locally", and that the Factory Committees were just the lowest cells of the union, "whose obligation consists of putting into effect, in a given enterprise, all the decrees of the union."

March saw a decree from Vesenka saying that "in nationalised enterprises workers control is exercised by submitting all declarations and decisions of the factory or shop committee, or of the control commission, to the Economic Administrative Council for approval... Not more than half the members of the Administrative Council should be workers or employees". Also in March, control of the railways was centralised, placed under the control of the Commisariat, which was granted "dictatorial" powers. The same decree stressed the need for "iron labour discipline" and "individual management".

In April, the first issue of 'Kommunist', a left Bolshevik journal, was produced. It criticised the introduction of piece rates and the lengthening of the working day, and warned of bureaucratic centralisation, the loss of independence for local soviets, and "in practice, the rejection of the type of state-commune administered from below". The Leningrad party conference, at the urging of Lenin, demanded that the adherents of Kommunist cease their separate organisational existence.

Also in April, Lenin's article on "The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government" was published in *Isvestiya*. As well as calling for the introduction of Taylorism, he said that "The irrefutable experience of history has shown that...the dictatorship of individual persons was very often the vehicle, the channel of the dictatorship of the revolutionary classes" and "Today the Revolution demands, in the interests of socialism, that the masses unquestioningly obey the single will of the leaders of the labour process."

REASONS

While there is no doubt that production in Russia was in disarray after the revolution, and that there was a great need for co-ordination of supply, the approach the Bolsheviks took to this problem is instructive. Rather than supporting the efforts of the factory committees to federate, which they had taken steps towards, even before the revolution, they almost immediately set about subordinating the committees to other bodies - first the trade unions, then Council of Workers Control, and then the Vesenka. Less than a year before, they had fought to keep the

committees independent from the unions, now workers power was to come from even more distant organs.

There are a number of reasons for this. First of all, as was indicated earlier, the Bolshevik definition of workers control was very different from the common interpretation. As Lenin defined it, control meant supervision, accounting. The workers had control over a factory if they had access to its accounts, and were informed about all decisions taken by management. On the other hand, most workers thought of control as management, and didn't hesitate to take over the running of factories where they could, and reserved for themselves the right to hire and fire.

The difference is most apparent when we compare two pamphlets on workers control issued in December 1917. The Central Council of the Petrograd Factory Committees issued a 'Practical manual for the implementation of Workers Control' which quite explicitly moves beyond stock-taking, and into *real* control of production, calling on each committee to set up control commissions for the various aspects of production (including the supply of raw materials and fuel), which commissions were entitled to invite the attendance of technicians in a consultative capacity. Shortly afterwards, *Izvestiya* published the 'General Instructions on Workers Control in Conformity with the Decree of November'. This manual also talks of commissions, but says that the only role they should play in management is making sure that the central governments directives are followed through. The factory committees are expressly forbidden from taking over enterprises, though they may raise the matter with the government. Plus, of course, the commissions were to be the executive organ of the local trade union, their activities made to conform with the decisions of the latter.

If not the factory committees, who was to have the final say in the running of the factories? The tendency from the very beginning was to centralise all production decisions into the organs of the state. Decisions, rather than rising from the factory committees would be handed down from central government, in the shape of *Vesenka*, and ultimately, *Sovnarkom*. Here the Bolsheviks were following the Mensheviks, when they said in 1917 that "the regulation and control of industry was a task for the state" - the factory committees were to be (at best) the local administration and accountants of the state.

To understand this change, we have to look at Lenin's concept of socialism. In "Can the Bolsheviks retain State power?", he says that a state bank is nine tenths of socialism, and that general state book-keeping, general state accounting would be the skeleton of a socialist society. This points to a conception of socialism that is primarily economic, that criticises capitalism as much for its chaos and waste as anything else. Apparently, one of the most important characteristics of a socialist state is its efficiency. This would explain the need for a state-run, top-down regulation of production. The factory committees were on their way to co-ordinating production, and sorting out their supply problems, but such a set-up does not really allow centralised, uniform economy, of the type Lenin thought was essential.

Of course, the Bolsheviks thought there was more to socialism than that. As well as being planned, the economy was to be run, to coin a phrase, "by the proletariat, of the proletariat, and for the proletariat". The proletariat was to take the place of the bourgeoisie at every level of the administration. The fundamental difference between Russian state capitalism, and any western state capitalism was the class background of the rulers and administrators. (This emphasis on class could also be seen in the legal system, where often the most important thing was the class of the accused).

The difficulty with this is that ignores the fundamental question of how the workers would actually govern, or, in this case, how production would be organised. The factory committees were under the direct control of the workers, and an economic system that build on this base could have stayed under their control. When they were overruled and ignored by the government, it was the voice of the workers that was being overruled, the workers that were being ignored. Yes, the government was made up of workers, but the situation was not so much the dictatorship of the proletariat, as the dictatorship of some proletarians.

CONCLUSION

While the events outlined in this talk were occurring, revolutionary Russia was going through many changes. The dissolution of the Constituent Assembly, the signing of the treaty of Brest-Litovsk, the beginnings of the repression of other left-wing parties, the setting-up of the Cheka, changes which seem to overshadow the demise of the factory committees, and the rise of the centrally-planned economy. But the direct control of workers over the conditions of their work, through the management of their workplaces is surely a key issue for any revolutionary, and the stance of the Bolsheviks on this issue is echoed in many other areas. As anarchists, we say that workers control must mean real control, over all aspects of their lives, and that the only way to ensure that this control remains in their hands is through building from the bottom up, working through the organs which are closest to the workers, and organising those systems which can be controlled from below. The state is none of these, and seizing state power means ruling out any real democracy, leading to a dictatorship, however benign, not of the class, but of a minority.

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