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Factory committees in the Russian revolution

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The 'Decemist' Volodya Smirnov went further than the Workers' Group : "There never has been a proletarian revolution, nor a dictatorship of the proletariat in Russia, there has simply been a 'popular revolution' from below and a dictatorship from above. Lenin was never an ideologist of the proletariat. From beginning to end he was an ideologist of the intelligentsia." The workers in Russia in 1917 went further than Lenin intended in his schema of the stages the revolution ought to go through, so he held them back. He wanted the workers to supervise the capitalists who would still run the factories — a policy of class collaboration. But the real class struggle was fought out with owners sabotaging the economy and workers taking over the factories. Against the socialist aspirations of the factory committees Lenin and the Bolsheviks offered state capitalism. In destroying the factory committees the Bolsheviks ended all moves to socialism; in securing their unchallenged rule, they had to defeat the working class completely, and that they did. The fatal failing of the factory committees was that they left politics to the soviets and the Bolsheviks, concentrating their efforts on economics.

In Spring 1928 a Yugoslav railway man who'd been in Russia during the revolution said "The situation today is very different from what it was in my time; the manual worker is once more caught in the trap, the bureaucrats live as the bourgeois used to live and their wives play a corresponding part. What is needed is a new revolution," A skilled worker commented: "We live worse now than at the time of the capitalists. If we had to face such starvation, if our salaries had been so low in the days of our old masters, we would have gone on strike a thousand times. But what can we do now?" Finally, the comment of a textile worker, himself a foreign Communist: "Never in my life have I known such slavery as there is in my factory. If such a thing existed in a bourgeois country, I would have thrown a bomb at it a long time ago!"³⁷

³⁷ quotes from Ciliga, p280, p33, p108-9.

ing outside kept workers at their places, keeping wages down and conditions bad. The party ‘oppositions’ appealed to the workers but were ignored by them. “The workers seemed to say by their silence: it is all very well but what does it mean to us?”³⁶ From the workers’ point of view, what did the ‘struggle’ within the Party mean to them ? It wasn’t a question of ‘correct’ slogans or actions, but rather, who was carrying them out. The party could call for a ‘struggle against bureaucracy’ and the workers could ignore it while hating the bureaucrats none the less. The in-fighting at the top levels of the party was, nothing to do with socialism or workers, but with power, an imitation of bourgeois politics. Lenin’s ‘struggle against the bureaucracy’ was not for workers to tackle the bureaucracy, but rather for yet another bureaucratic organ to be set up to watch over bodies like itself.

Similarly Trotsky’s appeals and protests were directed to the party: when he was finally forced to turn to the workers, who all, along had been a mere object to him, there was no way they’d pay any attention to him. Trotsky was not against bureaucracy, nor against privileges or inequalities; but he wanted a ‘better’ bureaucracy less ‘exaggerated’ privileges, less ‘extreme’ inequalities. Everything he protested about was a consequence of a system he defended till he was killed. Trotskyism then was nothing but a Stalinism in opposition : it still is today. Unlike Trotsky, the Workers’ Group attacked the whole political and economic regime established by Lenin before the NEP: they traced the defeat of the revolution to Lenin’s whole approach. The basis of their program was the old but still valid slogan “The emancipation of the workers must be the task of the workers themselves”. They were against the dictatorship of the single party and the bureaucratic organisation of production. For them, socialism was the free creative act of the workers. In 1923 they produced a manifesto that attacked the ‘leader cult’, and led some of the strikes that took place that year.

³⁶ quoted in Ciliga, p21.

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The Revolution Defeated

In the debates over the role of the trade unions in a so-called 'workers' state' the party was talking to itself. The class lines had already been drawn with the emasculation of the factory committees and the soviets. On one side stood Lenin, the bureaucrats and state capitalism; on the other were the workers (both Bolshevik and non-party) and socialism. As Lenin took away the factories he gave the workers — the right to strike ! As if the revolution had been all for that. The crushing of the Kronstadt revolt in March 1921 consummated the counter-revolution in the open. For workers, Trotsky was not the Red Army hero but the bloody executioner of the Kronstadt soldiers and sailors. The end of the civil war in late 1920 and the introduction of the NEP (New Economic Policy, called the 'New Exploitation of the Proletariat' by the Workers' Opposition) led to unemployment. As industries were reorganised and rationalised, workers got the sack. The growing famine in the countryside kept these workers in the towns and cities: their dire poverty meant the state could now direct them without coercion. In September 1921 a decree declared that the wage system was "a fundamental factor in the development of industry", and further, that "any thought of egalitarianism must be excluded". Even to think of socialism was now out of the question. At the 5th All-Russian Congress of Trade Unions in September 1922 the bureaucrats rubbed in their victory. It was decided that if a worker failed to reach the set norm, their wage would be knocked down by a third, and that workers could be sacked without any compensation if they did not fulfill their contracts. Despite all this, there were wildcat strikes against managements and unions as late as July and August 1923.

In the, mid-1920s, workers were cheated by the 'NEP man' and the bureaucrat, paying high prices and getting low wages. The managers and the state employer drove them hard; they had no say at all in running the factories. The local trade union branch and the party cell were in with management, while the unemployed wait-

with it. First the party, and a poor last, the workers. By November 1920 only 12% of nationalised industries had any form of collective management. 1783 out of 2051 large enterprises under Vesenkha had one-man management. To overcome absenteeism and ‘inefficiency’ the government had introduced labour books for workers in Moscow and Petrograd (up till then they had only been issued to the old bourgeoisie for compulsory labour). ‘Communist Saturdays’ – that is, working for nothing – were instituted with Lenin’s enthusiastic approval. The massive drive for unpaid overtime, with Subbotniks working Saturday unpaid, and Voskresniks working Sunday unpaid, eventually collapsed. Workers were (quite inexplicably!) not too excited. Lenin did try to set an example: he actually worked a ‘Communist Saturday’ on May 1st 1920.

Latter-day Bolshevism’s other favourite, Trotsky, deserves to say a few words at this point. In January 1919 at a Trade Union Congress, he stressed that “At a time when the Trade Unions regulate wages and conditions of work, when the appointment of the Commissar for Labour also depends on our Congress, no strikes can take place in Soviet Russia. Let us put the dot on this i.” Having dotted that i, he proceeded to cross the t in the following year, recognising “the right of the workers’ state to send each working man and woman to the place where they are needed for the fulfilment of economic tasks”; and “the right of the state, the workers’ state, to punish the working man or woman who refuses to carry out the order of the state, who does not subordinate his will to the will of the working class and to its economic tasks (...)” Stripped of verbiage and rhetoric, Trotsky’s message to workers was ‘We, the Bolsheviks, are the bosses now; you, the workers – back to work!’ Trotsky’s call for a ‘militarisation of labour’ “in which every worker feels himself a soldier of labour, who cannot dispose of himself freely” was taken up by the party Central Committee, who only debated whether it should take a ‘healthy’ or a ‘bureaucratic’ form.

The success of the Bolsheviks in defeating the working class and crushing all hope of socialism is the other side of the story. Today’s supporters of Lenin and Trotsky still parade their writings and their politics as relevant to the working class and to socialism. It is still necessary then to expose how fundamentally capitalistic their political approach was when faced with a working class taking power where it mattered – in the workplace, through the factory committees, and in the community, through the local soviets. The negative side of this pamphlet is Bolshevism; the positive side is what workers achieved, and tried to achieve, even in defeat.

Introduction

“For the Russian workman to live meant simply not to die.”¹ Before February 1917, Russian workers endured military discipline in the work-place with compulsory overtime, a high death rate in industrial ‘accidents’ and hunger once they got home. In 1905 they had taken on the Tsarist monarchy and created something entirely new in that struggle – the soviet (or council). Twelve years later, after more than two years of war and on a growing wave of strikes, they were ready to overthrow Tsarism. In doing so, they once again created their own organisations – soviets and factory committees. As they destroyed the old, so they had to construct a new society. For the workers that meant changing the conditions of their lives, especially in their work. “For it is not machines nor factories, but human interrelationships that make the essence of socialism.”²

Alongside the Russian workers’ attempts to create socialism – not as some abstract far-off utopia in a political party program, but through confronting and changing the concrete reality of their everyday life – were the activities of socialist parties, supposedly sympathetic to working class aspirations. This pamphlet tells the

¹ The Russian Revolution of February 1917, Marc Ferro, p112.

² The Russian Enigma, Ante Ciliga, p13.

story of the Russian workers' struggle, in particular the efforts of the factory committees. The success of the Bolsheviks in defeating the working class and crushing all hope of socialism is the other side of the story. Today's supporters of Lenin and Trotsky still parade their writings and their politics as relevant to the working class and to socialism. It is still necessary then to expose how fundamentally capitalistic their political approach was when faced with a working class taking power where it mattered — in the workplace, through the factory committees, and in the community, through the local soviets. The negative side of this pamphlet is Bolshevism; the positive side is what workers achieved, and tried to achieve, even in defeat.

The February Revolution

It was the working class women of Petrograd who sparked off the revolution in February. After weeks of strikes with police attacks on factories, the most oppressed part of the working class, the women textile workers, took the initiative. Demands for bread and attacks on bakeries were superseded by a massive demonstration of women workers on International Women's Day. The women had ignored a local Bolshevik directive to wait until May Day! The early slogan of "Bread!" was quickly followed by "Down with the autocracy! Down with the war!" By February 24th, half of Petrograd was on strike. The workers did go to their factories, not to work, but to hold meetings, pass resolutions and then go out to demonstrate. The Vyborg committee of the Bolsheviks opposed the strikes: "(...) since the committee thought the time unripe for militant action — the party not strong enough and the workers having too few contacts with the soldiers — they decided not to call for strikes but to prepare for revolutionary action at some indefinite time in the future."³

³ History of the Russian Revolution, Leon Trotsky, p121.

itor to these centers and glavki who is personally acquainted with the former commercial and industrial world will be surprised to see the former owners of big leather factories sitting in Glavkozhs, big manufacturers in the central textile organisation, etc."³⁵ The willingness to use the Tsarist state machinery extended to a Sovnarkom (Council of People's Commissars) decree in January 1920 regretting that "the old police apparatus which had known how to register citizens not only in the towns, but in the country" had been destroyed by the revolution.

Despite this destructive act by the revolution, the mobility of labour was still achieved. A spokesman from Narkomtrud (the People's Commissariat of Labour) boasted: "We supplied labour according to plan and consequently without taking account of individual peculiarities or qualifications or of the wish of the worker to engage in this or that kind of work." He could have been talking about any commodity. The government's wages policy was based on incentives and piece-work; wages were in groups of scales, the highest by far being for technical and administrative people. At the 8th Party Congress in March 1919, the new program declared that "(...) the socialist method of production can be made secure only on the basis of the comradely discipline of the workers." To the unions fell the task of creating this new 'socialist discipline'. Disciplinary courts of labour in 1920 dealt with 945 recorded cases. About half of these cases related to punctuality; others were about not doing Saturday overtime, not obeying orders or union discipline, leaving work and agitating for a shorter working day. The 9th Party Congress in March 1920 not only fully accepted the principle of one-man management, but even came up with four different ways of instituting it.

The utter feebleness of the emerging 'opposition' inside the Bolshevik party was shown by Lutovinov of the "Workers' Opposition" saying they'd carry out one-man management while disagreeing

³⁵ quoted in Carr, p183.

capitalist combines had been set up in the leather, textile and sugar industries based on co-operation between the state and the old owners. The right-wing industrialist Mescherskii wanted to create a similar 'trust' in the metal industry, with the factories run by the old bourgeois owners. This was alright by Lenin and Trotsky, and officials of the Metalworkers Union supported the project. Workers were however very much against it. A conference of delegates from affected plants demanded an end to the scheme, and immediate nationalisation. As the Bolsheviks were not yet strong enough to crush this sort of thing, the pressure from below put an end to the project.

The civil war undoubtedly strengthened tendencies to central control and planning, involving one-man management and the use of highly-paid technical specialists. Centralisation of itself is not a bad thing: the question is, who's doing the centralising, and to what end? Again, using the talents of technical staffs was essential, but to what end would their abilities be directed? The peasants were angry that the old exploiters were taken on as managers of the Sovkhoz collective farms. The 'specialists' got high salaries, and the managers and directors lived in the luxury of the old landowners' houses: sometimes the old landowner himself was the director. Lenin's message to the peasants was "(...) if you yourselves do not know how to organise agriculture in the new way, we must take the old specialists into our service." While the Lenin of 'State and Revolution' said "Smash the bourgeois state", the Lenin of 'Will the Bolsheviks retain state power?' said "Use the bourgeois state, take it over." Thus Trotsky drew heavily on the Tsarist officer corps for the Red Army.

When Molotov analyzed the personnel of the *glavki* he found that 57% were definitely non-worker; the other 43% included representatives of the unions, mostly not workers either. He concluded in his report (given in December 1918) that those directing policy were "employers' representatives, technicians and specialists." A 'white' professor reported in autumn 1919 that "the unprepared vis-

Unaware of how 'unripe' the time was, the workers pressed on with the strike till 240,000 were out. Strikers and demonstrators clashed with armed police, and approached soldiers for support, above all for weapons. The Bolshevik Central Committee finally got round to calling for a general strike just as the already existing strike was becoming an armed uprising. By the evening of February 24th the Vyborg district of Petrograd was held by the revolutionaries: the police stations were wrecked, and the police kicked out altogether; prisoners were released, and contacts made with neighbouring districts. The following evening the 4th company of the Pavlovsky Regiment mutinied and opened fire on police. On the 27th workers 'visited' all the jails in Petrograd and released political prisoners. The soldiers had already come over to the revolution, when a single Bolshevik organisation produced an appeal to the army, which didn't even urge the soldiers to support the workers.

The speed and success of this revolution from below took all the socialists — who had been propagandizing for a revolution for years by surprise. "The leaders were watching the movement from above; they hesitated, they lagged — in other words, they did not lead. They dragged after the movement. The nearer one comes to the factories, the greater the decisiveness."⁴ Instead of talking and writing, the workers and soldiers just got on and did it. They started to set up their own organisations to meet their needs. The socialists now found the workers behaving in ways they hadn't expected. "The leaders of the Revolution also did not understand that, once they themselves had invited the people to take over local affairs, the people, who had had enough of being led and regimented, would eagerly respond to the idea of self-government through soviets, of ending the fighting; they would dream of a new life."⁵ The workers would now only accept decisions from

⁴ Trotsky, p131.

⁵ October 1917 — A Social History of the Russian Revolution, Marc Ferro, p3.

above if they agreed with them anyway. Faced with the ‘chaos’ of workers acting for themselves, calls for ‘discipline’ resounded from the Bolshevik Stalin, from the moderate socialist Gorky and from the patriotic anarchist Prince Kropotkin.

Similarly, the socialists did not listen to the demands rising up from the workers and peasants. The workers called for an eight hour day, an end to piecework, equal pay, an end to child labour, improvements in safety at work and politeness from management! These early demands were a reflection of the desire to humanise work and to give workers some dignity. The women workers likewise demanded equal wages and better conditions and hygiene at work. The new egalitarianism was also expressed in another way by workers: only the present was of importance; no one could claim any kind of superiority or priority by virtue of what they had done in the past. The slate was to be wiped clean: when Khrustalev-Nosav claimed a seat on the executive committee of the Petrograd Soviet on the basis that he had been President of the Soviet in 1905, he was rejected with boos.

The Establishment Of The Factory Committees

An industrialist called Auerbach complained that “the revolution was understood by the lower orders as something in the nature of an Easter carnival: servants, for example, disappeared for whole days, promenaded in red ribbons, took rides in automobiles, came home in the morning only long enough to wash up and again went out for fun.”⁶ While some set out to use the new freedom to see how the old ruling class had whiled away its time, others aimed at constructive tasks. Factory committees made their appearance: one of the first started on March 2nd when the Petrograd 1st Electricity

⁶ quoted in Trotsky, p256.

socialist social order, the order without political power.”) A decree on June 28th 1918 nationalised all major industry, making the state the main employer in Russia; labour was to be a form of service to society, and piece-rates were regarded as normal.³³ As the invasions by Allied Powers and the civil war had only just started, none of what had happened thus far can be blamed on those factors. The application of piece-rates and norms of production meant that workers were driving themselves to ill-health to get a survival wage. Yet at the end of the year, norms were raised throughout industry because the state machine considered wages to be “perniciously high”. In January 1919, the norms were raised by 150% in the metal industry.

These developments started to cause dissent within the Bolshevik party, even amongst those who had never worked in their life. ‘Kommunist’ the journal of the ‘Left Communists’ contained an attack on Lenin by Osinsky. Among other criticisms, Osinsky argued that Lenin’s ‘discipline’ was exactly like that of the capitalists; that only the workers can emancipate themselves; that Lenin confused productivity improvements with working harder and faster, “Socialism and the socialist organisation of work will either be built by the proletariat itself, or it will not be built at all; but then something else will be erected, namely state capitalism.”³⁴ Lenin replied, as he always did when lost for an answer, with a tirade of abuse and nonsense: for instance, statements that the introduction of capitalist authority and labour discipline were an attack on workers’ self-organisation were “a terrible disgrace and imply the complete renunciation of communism in practice and complete desertion to the camp of the petty bourgeoisie.”

Workers were able to impose themselves occasionally against the growing monolith of Bolshevik state power. During 1918 state-

³³ “Piece-wages (...) the most fruitful source of reductions of wages and capitalistic cheating.” “(...) the form of wages most in harmony with the capitalist mode of production.” Capital, Volume 1, Karl Marx, p518, p521.

³⁴ quoted in Sirianni, p149.

The 7th Party Congress in March 1918 demanded “the most energetic, unsparingly decisive, draconian measures to raise the self-discipline and discipline of workers and peasants.” Milyutin, in a session of Vesenkha (the Supreme Council of National Economy), called for a ‘labour service’ not of course “the kind of labour service which has been applied in the west, not the kind of service which is thought of here by the masses and which says that all must be put to work, but labour service as a system of labour discipline and as a system of the organisation of labour in the interests of production.” Not in the interests of workers, evidently: this all required “iron self-discipline” on the part of workers. Vesenkha had underneath it a network of glavki (chief committees) and tsenry (centers). These were based on the Tsarist war committees for industry, and operated with help from managements. Larin, the admirer of German capitalism, and Milyutin were two of the leaders of Vesenkha, both of them enthusiastic planners. At the end of April, a Vesenkha decree outlawed ‘wildcat nationalisations’, but this, like an earlier decree in February was widely ignored. The factory committees did not respond to Vesenkha’s ‘authority’: for its part, the Central Council of Factory Committees operated without any official sanction.

The Bolshevik Bosses

In May 1918, when the All-Russian Congress of Councils of National Economy met in Moscow there were delegates from Vesenkha, its glavki and tsenry, and the trade unions, but not the factory committees. The door was shutting firmly on the workers, as the committees became mere local branches of a top-heavy union bureaucracy. The unions were subordinate to the state, as agreed at the first All-Russian Congress of Trade Unions. (One anarchist delegate described the unions as “living corpses”; another said that the factory committees were “cells of the coming

Works elected a 24 member council (including 10 Bolsheviks). By the end of March, similar councils and committees existed in nearly every plant in Petrograd and Moscow: they were especially strong in the metal works.

The Petrograd Soviet, then controlled by moderate socialists hostile to workers’ control, set March 5th as the day for a return to work (always the most important thing — get the workers working), while trying straightaway to steer the new factory committees into a ‘helpful’ role. On March 7th it stated: “For the control of factory and shop administration, for the proper organisation of work, factory and shop committees should be formed at once. They should see to it that the forces of labour are not wasted and look after working conditions in the plant.”⁷ The soviets did not fight for the eight hour day that workers were demanding until workers in Moscow and Petrograd simply stopped after eight hours and left the factories. On March 10th the Petrograd Owners Association capitulated over the eight hour day, and in an agreement with the Soviet, ‘permitted’ the formation of factory committees, while trying to limit them in every way. Moscow saw a longer struggle: when the local Soviet called for a return to work, the workers stayed out, forcing the Soviet to declare the eight hour day to be in force from March 21st, at which point the employers conceded. The Russian workers had won a first battle through their own efforts, no thanks to the socialist-dominated soviets. They now had more time to meet, discuss, read and — importantly — take rifle practice.

The factory committees themselves were able to cater for this newfound spare time: armed workers’ militias were established at factories, education classes got under way. The committees took on all sorts of tasks without waiting for any ‘permission’ from the soviets or the Provisional Government. Where no trade unions existed, they entered into wage bargaining and opened the books of the

⁷ quoted in *Workers’ Control and Socialist Democracy: The Soviet Experience*, Carmen Sirianni, p16.

firm. The committees supervised the hiring and firing of workers. Given the sabotage of employers, some of whom simply abandoned their enterprises, the committees aimed at first to keep production going, getting the materials, maintaining the machinery, fulfilling orders: in an atmosphere of growing economic collapse, it was the committees who were playing a constructive role, even if it was as yet a very partial form of workers' control. The distinction between control, which implies supervision and inspection of other people's decisions, and management, which implies decision-making, was not lost on the workers though. The factory committee of the massive Putilov works in Petrograd, elected by 90% of the workforce, stated in late April: "While the workers of the particular enterprises educate themselves in self-management, they prepare themselves for the moment when private ownership of the factories will be abolished and the means of production will be transferred into the hands of the working class. This great and important goal for which the workers are striving must be kept steadfastly in mind, even if we are carrying out only small details in the meantime."⁸

The factory committees recognised the need to co-ordinate their activities outside the confines of individual plants. Moves to centralise started when representatives from the committees of the twelve largest metal works met in Petrograd on March 13th, less than three weeks after the revolution. Although this meeting set up no permanent organisation, an early April conference of factory committees in Moscow, and similar ones in some provinces, set up co-coordinating centres to establish links between cities. A conference of workers in the factories of the Artillery and Naval Department approved the committees' role in hiring and firing, seeing the books and so on. Radical committees were ignoring the law and going their own way as circumstances demanded. The conference, held on April 15th, also planned a Chief Centre to co-ordinate the state sector factory committees. At the end of April, the Putilov

⁸ quoted in Sirianni, p26.

ductive source and basis of socialism — calls for unconditional and strict unity of the will which directs the simultaneous work of hundreds and thousands and tens of thousands of people (...) Unqualified submission to a single will is conditionally necessary for the success of the process of labour organised on the pattern of large-scale machine industry."³² Why workers should bother to fight and die for this is not explained,

In 1915 the then Menshevik Larin wrote an article enthusing over the German war-state: "Contemporary Germany has given the world a pattern of the centralised direction of the national economy as a single machine working according to plan." Lenin took up this theme with his observation that socialism had been realised politically in Russia and economically in Germany. By April 1918, Lenin exhorted "Yes, learn from the German! History proceeds by zigzags and crooked paths. It happens that it is the German who now, side by side with bestial imperialism, embodies the principles of discipline, of organisation, of solid working together, on the basis of the most modern machine industry, of strict accounting and control." That all this labour discipline might have anything to do with the 'bestial imperialism' did not enter Lenin's mind: for him, the only thing wrong with German state capitalism was that it was a bourgeois-imperialist state; add a 'proletarian state' and you have socialism. Capitalist methods of production can only create capitalism, but Lenin thought they could support 'socialism' too. To make his point firmly, Lenin referred admiringly to a Tsar. Russian socialists had to "study the state capitalism of the Germans, (...) adopt it with all possible strength, not to spare dictatorial methods in order to hasten its adoption even more than Peter hastened the adoption of Westernism by barbarous Russia, not shrinking from barbarous weapons to fight barbarism." For the workers this meant more work and harder work, and more organisation (by others).

³² quoted in Carr, p191. (Carr says this aroused "the most obstinate prejudices" !)

appointing officials from above, so that all unions would adopt Gastev's capitalist approach. Protests from workers about the lack of independence from the state of the unions grew in the spring of 1918. The factory committees still tried to be constructive. While answering the slanderous attacks made on them by the unions, the committees proposed unity with the trade unions, so as not to have two workers' organisations in conflict. The proposal had conditions attached: there should be compulsory membership so that all workers would be part of the decision-making process; the factory committees would act as local branches; the summit of the union would be a conference of factory committee delegates, which would then elect an executive to act like the Central Council of Factory Committees.

The Petrograd factory committees had been far in advance of anyone else in thinking of the centralised economy in August 1917 and had come up with plan after plan, all of them practical propositions, for workers to run the economy and move to socialism. Given the way Lenin ignored these attempts, it was a real nerve of him to say to the 3rd Congress of Soviets in January 1918: "In introducing workers' control, we knew that it would take much time before it spread to the whole of Russia, but we wanted to show that we recognise only one road — changes from below; we wanted the workers themselves, from below, to draw up the new basic economic principles..." In fact Lenin's state capitalism with a decorative bit of workers' control added was behind the workers' struggle. Workers had their own plans and a superior conception of socialism born of necessity: stripped bare of rhetoric, all Lenin had was 'Power to the Party'.

It did not take long for Lenin to state clearly the capitalist content of his socialism. In March 1918, he demanded 'one-man management' on the railways: for him, collective self-management was rudimentary, and had to be superseded by one-man management. In 'The Current Tasks of the Soviet Power', Lenin wrote "Any large-scale machine industry — and this is precisely the material pro-

works committee called for a more broadly-based conference. On May 29th a factory committee conference in Kharkov passed a resolution that the committees should be "organs of insurrection" and that they should seize the factories and manage production. Clearly some workers were thinking ahead and had a clearer notion of what would be required for their aspirations to be satisfied.

By May, the hopes of February were wearing thin: the new government was a failure as far as workers were concerned, and strikes were being met by lay-offs. Workers and factory committees found themselves forced to take over factories because of the management's actions, rather than any commitment to socialism or self-management as such. The 'First Conference of the Factory Committees of Petrograd and its Environs', the one called for by the Putilov workers, met from May 30th-June 5th. It had delegates from 367 factory committees representing 337,464 workers in Petrograd (out of a total of some 400,000). The main debate was over who was to run industry: the moderate socialists wanted state control by the government; the workers wanted workers' control, and in this they were supported by the anarcho-syndicalists and the Bolsheviks, recent converts to the idea. But while workers tended to imagine that 'workers' control' meant they would run things, the Bolsheviks' conception was rather different. Lenin (no use asking which factory committee he was on) spoke at the conference, and had this to say: "(...) a majority of workers should enter all responsible institutions and (...) the administration should render an account of its actions to all the most authoritative workers' organisations."⁹ Clearly here there is an administration on one side, and the workers on the other: the division as in any class society. In the Bolshevik resolution that was passed, factory committees were to be "allowed to participate" in control along with the soviets, the unions and representatives of political parties!

⁹ quoted in *The Bolshevik Revolution*, Volume 2, E H Carr, pp 67-8

A Central Council of Factory Committees for Petrograd was formed with 25 members. Its jobs included getting fuel, materials and machinery, distributing information and setting up a committee to organise aid for the peasants. It was able to help the weaker committees in their struggles, and from then on it was in more or less permanent session. The Petrograd Central Council also sent delegates to other cities. By the end of June there were 25 similar Factory Committee Centres in cities and districts; by October, 65 such centres existed and there had been over a hundred conferences discussing the problems facing the factory committees. The report of the Petrograd conference noted that "(...) at the moment, committees are forced to intervene in the economic functioning of businesses, otherwise they would have stopped working."¹⁰

At the end of June the factory committee at the Brenner factory stated explicitly "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."¹¹ The extreme hostility of the employers to the committees was encouraging an economic collapse, which could only be staved off by the committees linking up locally, regionally and nationally. The Provisional Government, the trade unions and the soviets (under the control of moderate socialists were definitely not sympathetic to the factory committees. The workers had initially identified with the Petrograd Soviet: its weakness and inability or refusal to take up workers' demands strengthened the committees. As the committees co-ordinated up to a national level, they came into conflict with the trade unions; as they started to act politically, they came up against the 'socialist' soviets. The committees had allies in the district committees, set up throughout Petrograd, partly to defend the city. Their authority and effectiveness was such that people

¹⁰ quoted in Ferro (October), p153.

¹¹ quoted in Ferro (October), p151.

The trade unions saw as their major task increasing production through more organised and disciplined labour. They were eager to help set piece-rates, norms and bonuses, to raise productivity and impose discipline. In this they were supporting Lenin. In September 1917 he called for "universal labour service" (presumably not so universal as to include himself and other top Bolsheviks); in January 1918 in an unpublished article he wrote that "workers who slack at their work" should be "put in prison". For Lenin only "the declassed petty bourgeois intelligentsia (...) does not understand that the chief difficulty for socialism consists in guaranteeing the discipline of labour (...)"~~the~~ socialism's 'chief difficulty' thus appears to be the same as capitalism's! Lenin's solution was the same as capitalism's:

"Piece-rates must be put on the agenda, applied in practice and tried out; we must apply much that is scientific and progressive in the Taylor system (...)"³¹ Lenin, not the workers, decides what is put 'on the agenda', but the workers, not Lenin, will try out the piece-rates.

This attitude was reflected at the 1st All-Russian Trade Union Congress held in January 1918. The factory committees were attacked for not being organised, or disciplined or experienced enough. Members of the Central Council of Factory Committees were not there to argue their case. The Bolshevik Gastev proposed a resolution that was passed almost unanimously which argued for the industrial reconstruction of Russia with foreign capital, for the implementation of Taylorism (piece-rates, time and motion studies etc), for the raising of productivity and discipline, for workers to be moved as required, and for private ownership to remain. This approach was agreed in March at the 4th Conference of Trade Unions.

The Bolsheviks proceeded to Bolshevise the non-Bolshevik trade unions by breaking up meetings, setting up rival unions and

³¹ quoted in Carr, p116.

tendencies, as the government would not let the committees obtain credit early on: as a result, committees often had to sell machinery and stock to pay workers and to keep any production going at all.

The decree on nationalisation made on December 14th 1917 was part of the move against self-management. New boards were to take over firms, and the old management and the factory committee would be represented on them. While workers who called for nationalisation, often expropriating the owners before getting 'official' approval, thought they would run the firms, the Bolshevik conception was quite different: indeed, the Bolsheviks were often reluctant nationalisers. Once nationalised though "(...) decisions concerning management and the activity of the industry belong to management. The control commission (of the factory committee) will not take any part in this management, and will not be responsible for its functioning, which remains a managerial matter."³⁰ In the Urals most firms were taken over by workers and nationalised.

A conference in Petrograd on January 7th 1918 of delegates from 300,000 workers laid out a scheme for a nationalised mining industry. Every mine would elect a managing council of 25–60 members, including representatives of technical and administrative staff: this would set up an executive of 3–15. There would be direct elections to regional bodies leading up to a Central Mining Council. The right of recall by workers who elected a delegate to any council at whatever level was spelt out clearly, and trade union and state bodies were excluded. Again we can see the constructive attempts of workers to develop practical structures that gave them control, as against the government's plans. In their attitude to the technical staffs, workers were not usually hostile, even though the technicians wanted a strong state control to guarantee their position and were against workers' control. Many though were willing to work with the committees, who needed to make use of their abilities.

³⁰ quoted in Ferro (October), p177.

turned to them to get things done. They set up canteens, creches, cultural centres; they tackled alcoholism and gambling; they took over empty houses, and tried to organise food supply.

In the large factories the factory committee's were subdivided into commissions for each part of the plant's productive activity. For example, the Mednoprokatny metal works had nine such commissions, covering fuel purchase, orders, working conditions, employment and dismissal, a library, demobilisation (i.e., the change from wartime to peacetime production), metal recovery, co-ordination, control. Undoubtedly it was the skilled workers who tended to dominate in the committee movement as a whole, and in the individual work-places. They knew how the plants operated, they were more literate and used to organizing themselves through the long years of Tsarist repression. However this is not to understate the role of the less skilled. Petrograd's workforce had doubled during the war, and the recent peasant intake was often more radical, being anti-Tsarist and immediately anti-capitalist. It was these workers who pressed for wage equalisation — and many skilled militants took up the call.

The committees leaned towards the Bolsheviks because they were a good deal more radical than the moderate socialist Mensheviks, and because they 'supported' the factory committees. In fact it was the factory committees, at the sharp end of the struggle with the employers, which were the first workers' organisations to 'go Bolshevik'. A Bolshevik resolution at the June conference won 335 out of 421 votes. However, it was the workers and not the politicians who were left to sort out the real, practical problems, such as, how to react to the employers' increasing use of lockouts. One worker, fed up with the endless talking of the political militants, addressed himself to the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks together at a conference: "I've had enough of all your talking. You never answer our questions — what are we to do if a boss threatens he'll close down? You're always ready with proclamations and words, but no one will ever tell us what to do in a real case (...)

what do we do if the factory shuts down? We are here to decide that, and we've been sent here for that, and if you don't tell us, we'll go ahead on our own."¹²

Soviets, Parties and Unions

The Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks were fighting for the leadership of the working class, not to solve workers' problems. The workers themselves tended to pay little attention to the differences between the various left-wing groups and parties, differences which mattered a great deal to the socialists themselves. Rank-and-file Bolsheviks and Mensheviks had often united in the early days after the February Revolution anyway: as the moderate socialists discredited themselves, the Bolsheviks were able to win more support as the uncompromising party. February had given workers the freedom to combine, and they were able to force concessions from employers and government on the eight hour day, better working conditions, social insurance and so on. When, out of necessity, the move to self-management started, it was not only something alien to the workers' original demands, but also to every socialist organisation, and to the trade unions. By May there were some 2,000 unions with 1.5 million members; by October, two million members. Some of the unions existed in name only, with paper membership; others did nothing. The active trade unions wanted the factory committees to be local branches of the unions and little else.

For their part, the committees, which had been far quicker to organise and take up grievances, were in favor of co-operating with the unions, but certainly not of being subordinate to them.

The unions were dominated politically by the Mensheviks. For them, the revolution was a bourgeois-democratic one, ushering in a period of straightforward capitalism: thus the task was to establish

¹² quoted in Ferro (October), p166.

that instructions are elaborated which arise from below to envelop all branches of industry; these are the instructions of the workplace, of life, and hence are the only instructions which can have any value. They show what the factory committees are capable of, and, therefore, they should dominate everything which concerns workers' control."²⁷

Disciplining The Workers

Trade union Bolsheviks begged to differ, and the verbal attacks on the workers started. For Tomsy, "productivity has fallen so low that workers are producing less in value than they get as a wage." Gostiev referred to "economic sabotage, no longer solely by the bourgeoisie, (...) but by the whole nation, the working class."²⁸ Shlyapnikov, the Commissar of Labour and future leader of the so-called "Workers' Opposition", complained about the workers and the factory committees in March 1918: "In a word, things are in the hands of a crowd that, due to its ignorance and lack of interest in production, is literally putting a brake on all work."²⁹ In the face of these sorts of comments and the withholding of wages by banks and employers, it's no wonder that many workers felt — why work when the Bolsheviks keep the old owners in place and defend the profit motive? Despite the accusations, productivity rose steadily in fact from the low point of January 1918. The workers were still aiming to build a new society, and a miserable diet wasn't going to stop them. Given the chaos they operated in, it is hardly surprising if many factory committees put their own interests first and concentrated on trying to resolve their particular problems. Accusations were then made that the committees were 'parochial' and 'particularistic'. The accusers were themselves responsible for these

²⁷ quoted in Sirianni, pp 99–100.

²⁸ quoted in Ferro (October), p176.

²⁹ quoted in Sirianni, p106-7.

The majority of factory committees approved of the Central Council's proposals and rejected the Bolshevik All-Russian Council of Workers' Control. Factory committees in the metal industry complained that the 'Counter-Manual' "shackled the hands of the workers" while the 'Practical Manual' "allowed the workers great room for self-activity and made them the practical rulers of the factories."²⁶ In the period following the October Revolution, greatly increased factory committee activity was necessary to face the employers' tactics of sabotage, closures and refusal to pay wages. Hundreds of firms were taken over by workers who had no alternative if they were to protect their livelihood. The Bolshevik government and the trade unions were against such seizures by workers: incredibly, the Supreme Economic Council threatened to cut off funds to such firms. Many such workplaces were managed by collegial boards of workers, technicians and administrators, all under the watchful eye of the factory committee. By mid-1918, factory committees were involved in the management boards of some three-fifths of all plants, and in areas such as the Urals and the Donetz basin it was more.

The committees were facing enormous difficulties in a period of economic collapse that was not of the workers' making. The committees made any number of constructive efforts to overcome the chaos. The Central Council of Petrograd committees co-ordinated work to organise deliveries of drugs, yarn, machine oil etc to the provinces and Finland. Just before the October Revolution, the first All-Russian Conference of Factory Committees had called for a plan to change wartime production over to peacetime purposes: the Central Council set up demobilisation commissions to do this. Politically, the committees were clarifying their attitudes. A Bolshevik worker, Matvei Zhivkov, who was chairman of the factory committee at the 1886 power station in Petrograd, said: "(...) it is where we are, in the factory committees,

²⁶ quoted in Sirianni, p101.

trade unions as in Western Europe to organise and defend workers. They were for state control over the economy, in which there was to be no room for factory committees or workers' control. As the Menshevik Dalin put, it: "The factory committees must see only that production continues but they should not take production and the factories into their own hands (...) If the owner discards the enterprise, it must pass not into the hands of the workers but to the jurisdiction of the city or central government."¹³ Either the capitalists or the bourgeois state were to run industry, never the workers.

A directly contrary view was taken by the anarcho-syndicalists, for whom the factory committees were the beginnings of the future socialist society. Maksimov and the 'Golos Truda' group called for "total workers' control" over the process of production itself. Their critical attitude towards the unions and solid support for the committees gave the anarcho-syndicalists some influence on workers, particularly in Vyborg and Kronstadt. However their antipathy to centralisation left them vague about how the factory committees should link up across the country.

The Bolsheviks occupied what appeared to be an ambiguous position, shifting their emphasis from the committees to the unions, from workers' control to state control. This was partly a reflection of the differences between the party leadership, which (apart from Lenin) was unsure as to what it wanted at first, and the rank-and-file members, who, many of them being workers, were active in the factory committees. Lenin's April Theses set the tone for his line of thought: "Not the 'introduction' of socialism as our immediate task, but immediate transition merely to control by the Soviet of Workers' Deputies over the social production and distribution of products." In 'Pravda' on June 4th Lenin was to repeat that workers' control would be carried out by the soviets: the factory committees didn't rate a mention. For Lenin, workers' control was a form of accountancy, and socialism merely state control of production. Many

¹³ quoted in Sirianni, p50.

militants in the party thought a decisive transformation of society was at stake. Navimov, a Bolshevik worker on the Central Council of Factory Committees, said at the first conference of Petrograd factory committees; “Control must be created from below and not from above, created democratically and not bureaucratically, and I call upon you to take this mission upon yourselves. Only we workers can achieve what is necessary for our future existence.”¹⁴

The Bolsheviks had helped set up the Central Council of Factory Committees, but were using the committees in the struggle to win control of the trade unions from the Mensheviks. At the All-Russian Trade Union Conference in June, Milyutin, the Bolshevik representative, said that the committees should be union cells, and workers’ control would be exercised by the unions and the soviets. It has to be said that before February no Bolshevik had given any thought to workers’ control and the problems attached to it: however their basic political assumptions were already starting to drive them against the real workers’ movement. As the committees themselves were not always united, and were unclear over their relationships with other institutions and workers’ organisations, the conflict did not assume a concrete form until after October.

In 1905, the Soviet of Workers’ Deputies had risen out of a general strike. In 1917 this creation was resurrected, but with a difference: socialists set up a Provisional Executive Committee of the Soviet both independently of and in advance of the workers. A leadership established itself that had no workers in it. These first Soviet leaders were moderate socialists, who hoped in fact to phase out the soviets as the apparatus of a bourgeois-democratic republic was created. Some minor soviet elections occurred as early as February 24th; city-wide elections were held on the 28th in Petrograd, the day after the Provisional Executive Committee was formed. These elections allowed for one deputy per thousand voters, or one per small

¹⁴ quoted in Sirianni, P55 (from *The Russian Revolution and the Factory Committees*, Paul Avrich, pp 69–70).

running and functioning of enterprises remains in the hands of the owners.”

The Central Council of Factory Committees distributed a “Practical Manual for the Implementation of Workers’ Control” in late November 1917. This advocated that each factory should have commissions to organise production, to handle the conversion of production from war to peace, to get supplies of fuel and raw materials and so on. Such commissions would in all probability use the knowledge and abilities of technicians and specialists, but these would have no power of decision at all; this was in marked contrast to Lenin’s schema. The factory committees should unite upwards: in local, regional and national federations, thus posing a direct challenge to the Bolshevik state. Then the Central Council drew up a Model Statute for factory committees as a direct response to the Bolsheviks’ “Counter-Manual” and draft instructions. This envisaged that the committees would be integrated into an economic council system, with People’s Economic Councils in every district, city and region. These councils would be elected at conferences of factory committees, and their members would all have to be from a factory committee.

This plan was fully developed and drawn up in December. The local councils would unite the factory committees, transport workers and those in commerce and agriculture. The regional councils would each year elect a Supreme Economic Council. Each People’s Economic Council would deal with all the economic activity in its locality. This flood of ideas and plans from the workers in the factories showed that the workers knew that socialism would be empty and meaningless if it was anything other than their own activity. They were trying concretely to tackle the massive problems facing Russia; so too were the Bolsheviks, but from a different class viewpoint. A much modified version of the Economic Councils idea was introduced in such a way as to weaken the factory committees by gradually establishing a centralised top-down control and strangling local initiative.

ideas were standing still: "It was assumed without question that the employers and technical staffs would continue to operate their enterprises under the vigilant eye of 'workers' control."²⁴ In late October a Bolshevik trade union spokesman, Lozovsky, said "It is necessary to make an absolutely clear and categorical reservation that the workers in each enterprise should not get the impression that the enterprise belongs to them."²⁵ However for the workers, the revolution meant that the productive forces of the country were now theirs.

The draft decree on Workers' Control published in November set up an All-Russian Soviet for Workers' Control. However this only had five representatives from the factory committees, who thus became a tiny minority. Workers' control was to be carried out by elected bodies, either factory committees alongside management or general assemblies of all workers: these bodies would have access to the firm's accounts and other information (which a lot of factory committees already had), and their decisions would be binding. There were, though, two enormous 'buts' in the proposals. Firstly, the trade unions centrally could overrule any factory committee decisions, and secondly, in any enterprise "important to the state", the committees were answerable to state bodies for keeping order and doing as instructed. These two things negated any positive aspects of the decree. More detailed instructions to supplement the decree were drawn up by a small committee of three Bolsheviks and two left Social-Revolutionaries: 'every cook to govern' indeed! Eventually the new government produced its "General Instructions on Workers' Control", which came to be known as the "Counter-Manual". Its overall intention was to turn the factory committees into powerless local union branches. Its standpoint is captured in Article 7: "(...) the right to issue orders relating to the management,

²⁴ Carr, p73.

²⁵ quoted in Carr, p74.

factory, with one per company of soldiers (usually 250 men). Thus the large factories containing some 87% of workers had 424 delegates, the small factories with the remaining 13% had 422, and the soldiers had some 2,000, by mid-March. Not only did the soldiers have an excessive influence in the Soviet, but also the workers' delegates were frequently not workers, but middle class radicals of one sort or another.

The Petrograd Provisional Executive Committee started with 42 members: this initially included seven workers and eight soldiers who were all soon ousted. The Bolshevik Shlyapnikov had successfully proposed that each socialist party should have two seats automatically on the Executive. In the event, all parties, large trade unions and co-operatives were allowed to send two delegates. Thus Stalin and Kamenev of the Bolsheviks, both well-known Petrograd workers, got onto the committee unelected. At the first Congress of Soviets there were 57 executive officers, including just four workers, one sailor and one soldier. No soldier or worker spoke throughout the whole proceedings: all speeches were made by party members, not one of them working class.

The dominating role of the Mensheviks and the Social Revolutionaries, another moderate socialist party, was reflected in the way that the Petrograd Soviet urged a return to work in March before the Provisional Government conceded the eight hour day, or made any move towards peace and a settlement of the land question. It was mass action and the threat of a general strike that had gained workers the shorter working day. The Soviet similarly tried to limit workers' control by setting up 'Labour Mediation Boards' to settle disputes. It tried to restrain anti-war demonstrations. The moderate socialists were after all looking to the bourgeoisie to institute western-style capitalism, not to the workers to create socialism. Despite that, the Provisional Executive Committee found itself under intense pressure from the workers. It was forced to take over the State Bank, the Treasury, Mint and Printing Office; post and telegraph offices, railway stations and other printing works

were also seized. As early as March 6th, meetings of militant workers were demanding that the Soviet take power. However these early demands for “all power to the soviets” were opposed by many workers, most soldiers and overwhelmingly by the socialist leaders of the Soviet itself. The Bolsheviks at this stage supported the idea of the Soviet supporting the Provisional Government.

By June there were 519 soviets, 28 of which were working class alone, 101 were workers’ and soldiers’, 305 were workers’, soldiers’ and peasants’, the rest being all-class. The majority of these soviets were run by non-working class party activists. Once party militants got into these higher soviets, they controlled the other posts. For instance, Anisimov, the chairman of the soviet of district committees was not elected to any district committee at all — he had been selected by his Menshevik colleagues. In the view of these socialists, clearly some were destined to rule, others to be ruled. The Bolsheviks too were happy to build up majorities for themselves by similar methods. For workers though these city soviets tended to be too slow to help tackle their pressing problems. The local soviets and factory committees acted on their own account without approval from above to get things done. Sometimes they merged at this local district level. Here workers were able to conduct affairs, leaving the intellectuals to speech-making in the city soviets. The local soviets took on economic, political and social problems: food, housing, justice and culture all came within their orbit. They guarded their local autonomy, but were prepared to unite — from below — and an inter-district conference was held in Petrograd. This brought them into conflict with the executive committee of the city Soviet. Similarly in Moscow, the local soviets were much more radical than the Menshevik-run city Soviet.

tivities and centralise. The very day after the October Revolution, representatives from the Central Council of Factory Committees met Lenin and some Trade Union leaders to propose a Provisional All-Russian People’s Economic Council. Here was a genuine plan from elements of the real working class vanguard. They suggested that this Council should have as two-thirds of its members, workers’ representatives from the factory committees, trade unions and the Soviet’s Central Executive Committee, and one-third drawn from the owners and technicians. The Council would have separate divisions corresponding to different parts of the economy, each division to be overseen by control commissions composed only of workers, these forming a control commission over the whole Council. The Council would regulate industry, transport and agriculture, and would be able to take over private firms. This constructive attempt to grapple with the problems of the economy, thought out by those most affected, was turned down flat by Lenin, who had his own “workers’ plan” in the form of a draft decree which accepted economic conditions and relations that the factory committees were trying to go beyond. His decree in effect intended the committees to be subordinate to the unions. Lenin also refused to let the committees borrow money: the effect of this is looked at further on. On day one of Bolshevik rule, the workers’ own plan was rejected.

Undeterred, the Central Council tried another plan on November 3rd, this time to set up an All-Russian Council for the Regulation of Industry. This plan differed from the earlier one: it excluded the unions, whose leaders had stood with Lenin. The Central Council’s leaders saw that the unions were too remote from the workers, that they were unable to counteract the employers’ attempts to sabotage factories. Similarly, the plan now left employers out of consideration and tried to ensure that the factory committees could not be integrated into the state. The Central Council was already drawing well away from Lenin’s conceptions, and moving rapidly to the realisation that the workers alone had to run industry, Lenin’s

Chicherin, to the bureaucratic, like Lenin and Kollontai, via the landed bourgeois (Smilga), the commercial bourgeois (Yoffe) and the higher industrial bourgeois (Pyatakov). These were the sort of people used to being a ruling class.

It was the Red Guard who peremptorily closed down the Constituent Assembly, the Western-style parliament. While the Assembly members and the socialists (including some Bolsheviks) were shocked, the population as a whole was completely indifferent to the end of another talking-shop. The Red Guardist Trifonov had wanted to turn the Red Guard into a militia under the control of the factory committees that all workers would pass through. But after October the Bolsheviks did not trust the Red Guard, as it was an armed force independent of the party, and Lenin said that “the place for the best workers is the factory.” The workers in general used the Bolshevik slogans, except the call for nationalisation, where workers were for control by the factory committees. Even at the moment of revolution, when the Bolsheviks were able to ride the waves, the conflict between them and the workers was there in potential. In some other ways the workers went further than the Bolsheviks. It was workers who were insistent on the closure of all bourgeois papers, and compulsory labour or expulsion for the bourgeois. But the party won the day: in 1916 the constitution of the new state was ratified with the words “the party leads and dominates the entire apparatus of state.” The workers, for all their efforts, remained workers.

The Practical Manual and The Counter-Manual

In his pamphlet ‘State & Revolution’ written before October, but not published till 1918, Lenin had called for ‘every cook to govern’, for workers to plan the socialist society. The militant activists in the factory committees were aware of the need to co-ordinate their ac-

The Peasants Take The Land

While the workers and soldiers were issuing demands for others to meet, and slowly realising that only they themselves could attain their ends, the peasants were taking direct action. Peasant risings and land seizures were widespread. The peasants carried out their own agrarian reform measures and ignored the Provisional Government which was set against the seizure of land. Peasant committees were formed at the village, volost, uezd (district) and guberniya (regional) levels. Decisions tended to flow upwards: those coming down were only obeyed if they were agreed with. The arguments within the Social Revolutionaries, the peasant party, were no longer of real concern to the peasants. What mattered to them was that the decisions they were taking and the regulations they were adopting on the land issue should be irreversible.

The image of the peasants as a mass of ignorant anti-socialists, in a sea of which Russia’s workers would drown, is quite wrong. They set to running their own affairs with enthusiasm: illiteracy was no bar to their abilities. The 45 elected members of the Peasant Committee of Novochastky uezd said they would “organise the new society”. The Peasant Convention of Penza on May 15th was composed of illiterate peasants with a single literate teacher to take down their resolutions. They called on owners “to apply its decisions and freely give their property to the (volost) land committee so as to avoid illegal occupation by individual peasants”¹⁵ The convention set out to control rents, sort out the amounts of land each person or family unit could have, supervise the harvests and ensure an efficient utilisation of the land. The peasant assembly of Samara showed the peasants’ great impatience with the politicians over the land question. A peasant shouted at a Menshevik “We always have to wait, you ass, don’t play the fool with us.” They paid scant regard to the ‘legality’ of their actions — “That bunch of lawyers

¹⁵ quoted in Ferro (October), p118.

again,” said one, “saying they’re on our side, but we know different; they’ll betray us.”¹⁶ Lenin’s Decree on Land could do no more than recognise a fait accompli: 65 out of 70 peasant soviets had already divided the land.

The peasants were quick to throw off the shackles of religion. A priest moaned: “My parishioners will nowadays only go to meetings of the soviet, and when I remind them about the church, they tell me they have no time.”¹⁷ A peasant told a priest straight to his face why: “For centuries a few nobles and landowners subjected millions of poor people, bled and sweated them — and you priests said it was right, chanting in chorus ‘Long life to the Tsars and our leaders’; yet, now that the people has power and is trying to establish equality, you, the ‘Holy men’ will not recognise us.”¹⁸

The workers knew the importance of the peasantry for the success of the revolution. The Petrograd conference of factory committees debated the agrarian issue with a view to sealing relations with the peasants. The Petrograd workers created special commissions in the factories to gather scrap metals and damaged pieces for a project they called ‘Worker to Peasant’, making agricultural tools for the peasant committees. Delegates were sent into the countryside to negotiate directly, worker to peasant, over grain deliveries. There is no reason to suppose that workers and peasants could not have developed a workable relationship: workers’ self-management was no threat to the peasants.

The July Days

June saw strikes among the most exploited workers — dyers, clerks, laundry workers, and the unskilled. A combination of inflation, lock-outs and frustration with the government and soviets

¹⁶ quoted in Ferro (October), p120.

¹⁷ quoted in Ferro (October), p62.

¹⁸ quoted in Ferro (October), p65.

Russian Soviet of Factory Committees amongst others. The factory committees rallied to the Bolsheviks because the latter appeared to support the workers’ aspirations. The committees had been active in the July Days, had helped organise armed guards, and were involved in the Military-Revolutionary Committee. Skrypnik, a Bolshevik on the Central Council of Factory Committees had told the party’s Central Committee that the workers were ready for a revolution, and if there wasn’t one soon, the committees would swing to the anarcho-syndicalists. Mass meetings in Petrograd called for the Second All-Russian Congress of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies to form a government. This was a clear ratification of the seizure of power. If October was ‘easy’, it was because all the work had been done beforehand. The Provisional Government was utterly discredited, and Bolshevism’s reactionary aspect had not been revealed.

Despite the mass of workers and soldiers thronging the Soviet Congress on October 25th, the presidium was elected on the basis of 14 Bolsheviks, 7 Social-Revolutionaries, three Mensheviks and one Internationalist. The Bolsheviks then trooped out their worker-candidates Lenin, Trotsky, Kamenev, Zinoviev and so on. When it came to forming a government, Kamenev read out a Bolshevik Central Committee proposal for a Soviet of People’s Commissars, whereby “control over the activities of the government is vested in the Congress of Soviets and its Central Executive Committee”. Seven Bolsheviks from the party’s central committee were nominated, and thus Lenin and Trotsky came to sit at the top, never having done a day’s work in their lives. The “workers’ government” was now composed of middle-class professional revolutionaries.

The Bolshevik party leadership at that time was composed of well-educated militants, generally in their mid-thirties on average. Most had some personal means, and thus no need to work, either sustained by family wealth or party funds. Some took jobs to ‘get into industry’ (an updating of the old Narodnik idea of going to the people: this is still much copied by today’s imitation Bolsheviks). In their origins, the Bolsheviks ranged from the aristocratic, like

worthwhile weapons. After the abortive Kornilov coup, workers kept rifles constantly by their side at work. Working women set up Red Cross divisions in the plants and lectures were arranged on the care of the wounded. Factory committees gradually got material together for makeshift hospitals and ambulances. The Vyborg factory committees had their own military-revolutionary committee. This set up patrols of the district, got keys for all the drawbridges' and studied the weak points in the districts defence.

The arming of the workers was too extensive for the authorities to do anything about it. At the time of Kornilov's attempted coup, they had to rely on the workers. Railwaymen tore up tracks to stop Kornilov's men, and armed themselves; postal clerks held up communications; soviets in large stations misdirected trains and regiments. The pressure from below rebuilt local soviets to face the reactionaries. The workers' militias and Red Guards were close to the factory committees and local soviets. Service in them was worked out by lots, so that all workers spent at least some time in them. Factories worked extra hours to produce arms and ammunition. While those with arms drilled in the handling of weapons, the unarmed learned other useful military skills such as building fortifications. The 40,000 strong Red Guards kept order in the working class districts, stopping theft, protecting strikers and demonstrators, supporting and defending the factory committees physically.

October 1917

The insurrection that gave power to the Bolsheviks was strictly speaking the work of the Military-Revolutionary Committee of the Petrograd Soviet. Although only small numbers were actively involved initially, the total lack of opposition to them, the absence of support for the Provisional Government meant they could not be described as a minority. Support for the action came rushing in after the event from the Soviet of Petrograd Trade Unions and the All-

was raising the temperature. A demonstration on June 18th saw a striking slogan on a banner from one factory — "The right to life is higher than the rights of Private Property". This stood out amongst the morass of party slogans, which were basically 'Down with the Government'. It was the workers who saw the issue in more fundamental terms. With the Putilov works coming out on strike, the skilled metal workers were now joining the movement. The Bolsheviks urged restraint. Lenin was moved to say in 'Pravda' on June 21st: "We understand your bitterness, we understand the excitement of the Petersburg workers, but we say to them: Comrades, an immediate attack would be inexpedient." Many rank-and-file worker Bolsheviks complained at this, not liking having to play "the part of the fire hose". At a meeting at the Putilov works a Bolshevik said workers should wait for the Party to state whether a demonstration was opportune or not, and got a sharp reply: "Again you want to postpone things. We can't live that way any longer (...)"¹⁹ In weighing up the Bolshevik attitude, workers bore in mind that the February strikes had been against the 'leaders' advice, and that action from below had won the eight hour day.

In early July, the factories came out and the Red Guards were armed and ready. On July 3rd, the Bolsheviks did all they could to hold back the machine-gun regiments, and Tomsy complained at a Bolshevik conference "The regiments which have come out have acted in an uncomradely manner, not having invited the Central Committee of our party to consider the question of a manifestation." He urged the issue of an appeal to hold back 'the masses'. Lenin spoke to demonstrators on the morning of the 4th, stressing the need for a peaceful march, to the amazement of the armed sailors, who were looking for an endorsement of action. The march was purely a working class affair, thousands pouring out of the poor districts of Petrograd, with the demand "All power to the soviets!" But the Soviet wasn't so keen: a worker had to shout at Cher-

¹⁹ quoted in Trotsky, p528.

nov, one of the moderate socialist leaders of the Soviet — “Take power, you stupid bastard, it’s being handed to you on a plate.”

Instead of taking power, the Soviet leaders and their socialist allies in the Provisional Government organised loyal troops to put down the advocates of such a course! Some 400 workers and soldiers were killed to allow the moderate socialists to appear respectable to the bourgeoisie. As the party untainted by this and similar events, the Bolsheviks were bound to attract workers’ support. Having successfully reduced the July movement to a demonstration, the Bolsheviks got on with ‘organizing’. At the height of the July Days, Kamenev said “Our present task is to give the movement an organised character.” Winning votes and positions was the parallel of this approach. When the Bolsheviks won control of the workers’ section of the Petrograd Soviet, in Trotsky’s estimation this was on a par with achieving socialism itself: “From the lips of the Bolshevik orators the demonstrators learned of the victory just won in the workers’ section, and that fact gave them as palpable a satisfaction as would an entrance upon the epoch of soviet power.”²⁰

Despite their restraining influence, the Bolsheviks found themselves subject to repression at the hands of the socialists, who banned their papers and arrested leading party militants where they could. The moderate socialists doubtless believed their own propaganda, that it was ‘agitators’ that had stirred up trouble in the workers. Their own failure to meet the people’s demands was left out of account. The theme of the repression was well expressed by the White General, Kornilov, at the end of July: “We need three armies — in the trenches, one in the factories or the rear, and one in the railways to link them (...) all three must be as disciplined as the front-line one.” Before long, Trotsky would be saying the same thing.

²⁰ Trotsky, p528.

Soldiers, Militias & Red Guards

When the soldiers heard the news of the February Revolution “All the soldiers said, ‘Thank God! Maybe now we will have Peace’”, as a delegate to a conference of soviets in March reported. As army discipline collapsed, the soldiers’ demands were for dignity and respect, to be treated as humans, not insulted by their officers or addressed in the familiar form reserved for pets and children, not to have to salute, and for the same political and civil rights as any private citizen. Above all, they wanted an end to the war. They elected soldiers’ committees which controlled arms, and sent representatives to soviets. One million soldiers simply deserted the front to get back home and take their share of the land. After April, the soldiers started to back the workers; some took part in the July Days. After that, attempts were made by the authorities to restore discipline in the army. However, the soldiers’ distrust of their officers had gone too far by then. As the future creator of the Red Army — and future employer of Tsarist officers — noted: “The workers on the other hand, along with the ‘dark’ rank-and-file, saw every possible danger exactly in the ranks of those brilliant officers.” The soldiers’ committees started to demand land for the peasants, the abolition of private property, the setting up of workers’ militias, and workers’ control. Bolshevik popularity increased amongst them because the soldiers thought they too wanted peace.

In the early days of the revolution, in February and March, 30,000 revolvers and 40,000 rifles disappeared from military stores, and many found their way into the hands of workers. The first workers’ militias were started by printers. Usually set up by non-party workers in some secrecy, they were intended to defend the factories. The Workers’ Guards in the plants gave factory committees the power to enforce their decisions on reluctant employers and managers. Red Guards also acted to prevent sabotage by the bosses and their agents. When attempts were made after the July Days to disarm workers, they surrendered useless rubbish and kept the

actually in the factory (...) they are always ready to compromise (...) the committees hold the key to the future.”

The trade unions were in the main Menshevik controlled and against the October Revolution. The factory committees on the other hand called for the soviets to take power. During October, power was more and more shifting into the hands of the workers, soldiers and peasants. Printing workers took action to stop any counterrevolutionary propaganda; arsenal workers and clerical employees controlled the release of arms and ammunition; the Petrograd lighting station factory committee liaised with other committees to get coal and grease for turbines to get round the employers’ sabotage; a conference of artillery factory workers called for a soviet government, and set up a group to study the transition to peaceful production.

Meanwhile, Lenin was writing on the evening of October 24th — “Who is to seize the power? That is now of no importance. Let the Military Revolutionary Committee take it, or ‘some other institution’, which will declare that it will surrender the power only to the genuine representatives of the interests of the people.”²² Not ‘the people’, not even ‘representatives of the people’, but ‘representatives of the interests of the people’: that is, the Bolshevik Party led by Lenin. Lenin’s program for revolution adopted the demands of the mass movement — replace the existing government with a soviet system, end the war, give the land to the peasants, establish workers’ control — only to dilute the demands and hold back the movement. Workers’ control, for instance, was to be nothing more than “a national, all-embracing, omnipresent, most exact and most conscientious accounting of production and distribution of goods,” and the existing state machinery would be taken over for this.²³

²² quoted in Trotsky, p1132.

²³ see Carr, pp 71–2.

Building Up To October

The repression after the abortive July Days was aimed primarily at the workers, as capitalists and bourgeois politicians alike demanded an end to ‘anarchy’ in the factories. There were attacks on the right of factory committees to meet in working hours; the Committee of United Industrialists proposed that committee members get no pay for time spent on committee business; some employers stopped paying workers for the hours they were on militia duty; some refused to let the factory committees meet on the firm’s premises. Plants closed down, partly because of the owners’ deliberate policy, but also because of fuel and other shortages as the country’s railway system reached breaking-point. Orders were turned down by bosses, lock-outs used, and some employers tried moving their plant and machinery to less radical areas to start afresh. The Petrograd Manufacturers’ Association campaigned for piece-wages and ‘open shops’. All this was part of the attempt to suppress the committees and workers’ control. The motto of the bourgeois appeared to be: “May the country perish if it no longer belongs to me.”

Some local soviets were forced to take over organizing the supply of goods and essentials, as commerce collapsed. They did not find the socialists in the government either helpful or sympathetic. Skobelev, the Menshevik Minister of Labour, who had already put out a circular at the end of August that said that any meeting in working hours was illegal, circulated a notice from industrialists in the Urals which condemned “any interference by the factory committees in the management of an enterprise (...).” In the face of the attacks made on them, workers noted the ineffectiveness of the higher soviets and the trade unions. Increasingly, they were having to look to themselves.

The most effective way to do this was through the factory committees. In August, the second conference of the Factory Committees of Petrograd and its Environs met. This did much to regularise

the way the committees were organised. The General Assembly of all the workers in a factory was the highest organ and the backbone of the movement. From this was elected the factory committee. A General Assembly could only be overruled by the Central Council of Factory Committees, a body built up from all the factories. The General Assembly had the right to recall and re-elect the committee at any time. For a factory committee to be a valid one, 50% of the workforce had to vote. Sub-committees were to exist for the different departments within a factory, or to carry out specific tasks. "The factory and shop committees are not created out of temporary meetings. The masses elect to these committees those who at home in the everyday life of the factory have demonstrated their firmness, their business-like character and their devotion to the interests of the workers."²¹ At this conference, it was the Bolsheviks who again said that the job of the committees was to supervise, not to initiate decisions; the anarchists defended the idea of self-management. The Petrograd factory committees were faced with the problem of keeping production going to stop the economy disintegrating: the owners' sabotage was forcing workers to take over. Pressure was growing for seizing the factories, for enterprises to be nationalised, for workers' control.

During August, workers responded with increasing effect to the bosses' July offensive. As the vanguard of metal workers took a cautious attitude, new layers of workers took up the battle. There was a one-day strike in Moscow on August 12th. An observer commented "There were no lights, no tramcars; the factories and shops were closed and the railroad yards and stations; even the waiters in the restaurants had gone on strike." Some 400,000 were out. Other large towns such as Kiev also had strikes. Moscow leather-workers also struck for the right of their factory committees to hire and fire. In some places committees took to arresting the managers. Although there was a revival of activity among the soviets from the

²¹ Trotsky, p799.

bottom up, the leading role of the committees was clear. Even Lenin recognised that, briefly, in August: "We must swing over the centre of gravity to the factory and shop committees. (They) must become the organs of insurrection." This rash of enthusiasm for the workers' organisations did not last long. On August 31st, the Bolsheviks won a majority in the Petrograd Soviet, and five days later took the Moscow Soviet. Now the call from Lenin and Trotsky was "All power to the Bolshevik soviets!"

The Bolsheviks were also winning over some trade unions, who had always opposed the factory committees. The centralised unions wanted the committees to supervise affairs locally and nothing more; against this was the loose network of committees who stood for collective management at the factory, city and national levels. But the committees were getting organised nationally. On October 15th they published their own journal 'Novy Put' ('New Path'). From the 17th-22nd October they held the first All-Russian Conference of Factory Committees with 137 representatives from 49 industrial centres, 66 of the delegates being Bolshevik. The conference voted to set up an All-Russian Council, and discussed the problems of the Central Council of Factory Committees. As local committees had kept their best activists, the resulting vacancies were being filled by representatives from Soviets, trade unions and political parties. The conference stated that "The workers are more interested than the owners in the correct and uninterrupted operation of the plants." Workers' control was "in the interest of the whole country and ought to be supported by the revolutionary peasantry and the revolutionary army." The Bolshevik Milyutin argued that a soviet take-over was needed for workers' control. His comrade, Larin, touched on a theme that was to become a favorite of Lenin's: "Germany has set up a national economic program, but it has been conceived in the interests of the ruling class: we must do the same, only in the workers' interest." An anarchist, Pistrkovsky, attacked the unions: "the unions are trying to throttle us (...) their members are not