

1989: The Romanian Revolution and the fall of Ceausescu

IS statement Tue, 01/12/2009 - 12:30

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In December 1989, a revolution swept the hated regime of Nicolae Ceausescu from power. This resolution, written days after these events, explained what happened and what steps the working class had to take next to move towards socialism. Although capitalism was eventually restored in Romania, the revolutionary activity of the working class and youth showed the real potential for socialism to emerge after the downfall of Ceausescu

Eastern Europe's most repressive regime has fallen. Its most hated Stalinist dictator is dead. But the Romanian revolution is not over. Only its first phase is at an end. The most important tasks lie ahead.

The revolution and civil war between 16 and 25 December 1989 was the most courageous uprising against Stalinism since the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. From the mass demonstration in support of the persecuted pastor Laszlo Tokes to the formation of the Provisional Government of the National Salvation Front, these were indeed ten days that shook the world.

The hypocrisy of the imperialists' rejoicing at Ceausescu's downfall is staggering. Previously they had calculated that the Kremlin's enemy must be their friend. For decades, he was the West's favourite 'communist'. He was hosted by the President of France and knighted by the Queen of England. His wife was given honorary degrees for bogus scientific talents.

Since 1965, Ceausescu ruled Romania in an increasingly autocratic and brutal style. The internal security force (the Securitate) spied on, harassed and murdered its enemies, whether at home or abroad. No larger machine of terror per head of population existed in any eastern European country.

This level of repression flowed entirely from the 'Socialism in One Country' project of the Ceausescu-led caste. On the one side they eschewed military pacts with the USSR and fashioned a political independence from it. On the other, Ceausescu drew Romania back from its growing indebtedness to imperialism, fearing a reaction from the working class.

Consequently, Ceausescu embarked on a more autarkic path; cutting back debt and aiming for self-sufficiency. In a country of few resources, this inevitably involved a great increase in labour discipline and an even more heavy-handed attempt to steer agriculture towards export markets.

Ceausescu's assaults on the workers' standards of living undercut any support for him. His policies of forced destruction of villages and the creation of 'agro-industrial complexes' alienated the peasantry still further. The bureaucracy became an isolated caste relying on naked repression alone to rule.

In recent years, this was increasingly directed against sections of the bureaucracy itself. The inner clique

grew narrower with Ceausescu's family playing an ever more central role. They displayed all the traits of the Stalinism of the 1930s: cult of the personality and a failure to comprehend the reality around them.

Having vilified Gorbachev's process of bureaucratic reform after 1985, the Ceausescus went to the wall on Christmas Day, its indirect victims. Slowly, but steadily, the effects of glasnost in nurturing oppositional movements penetrated the borders of Romania. The efforts of the workers of the German Democratic Republic [East Germany] and Czechoslovakia in particular gave hope where none existed before.

The revolution starts

It was natural that the gathering storm should first appear in the border areas amongst ethnic Hungarians, a population with more grievances than many. The students of Timisoara played a vanguard role. Then the workers moved into action. Together, they made the first and heaviest sacrifice for the revolution. They rose in mass support for a local dissident pastor. The security apparatus moved in to quell the movement between the 16 and 18 December and the army joined the fray against the workers and students.

Soon the 500 on the streets turned to 5,000. The Securitate tried desperately to drown the rebellion in blood. But on the 19 and 20 December the workers in the factories around Timisoara went on strike, some threatening to destroy their factories. Some 80,000 took to the streets, stole their first few arms and stood firm.

Faced with this resolve, the first units of the mainly conscript army refused to shoot. Disaffection spread like a bushfire until Bucharest itself rose. Once again, the students initiated the action and led the storming of key installations.

Under pressure, army chiefs agitated for a return to barracks. They saw their own caste interests as lying in the ousting of the Ceausescu clique and making a pact with the process of 'reform'. Faced with the 'fight to the death' stance of the security services loyal to the clique, reforms could only materialise if the army chiefs sided with the revolution from below. On 22 December, Milea, the Defence Minister, agreed to withdraw troops from the fighting. The Securitate promptly murdered him.

This act finally provoked the bulk of the 140,000-strong army into open revolt, as they sided with the workers and peasants. Open civil war raged across Romania. Dual power was established, especially in the provincial towns and cities, where the workers and peasants set up armed revolutionary committees to fight alongside the army.

The final days of the civil war witnessed the most vengeful actions of the security services loyal to Ceausescu. As the leader and his inner clique fled the retribution of the proletariat, thousands died fighting the Securitate. Finally, Ceausescu was tried and executed by a military tribunal.

There was a new Provisional Government of the 'National Salvation Front' (NSF) under Ion Iliescu, a Minister under the old regime up to the mid-1980s but now a well-known Gorbachevite. The NSF had no existence prior to the uprising. It is a loose, politically incoherent coalition of purged bureaucrats, members of the bureaucracy outside the Ceausescu clique, workers and sections of the intelligentsia. Its reported aim is to establish a free market economy and multiparty (bourgeois) democracy out of the ruins of the Stalinist dictatorship.

The imperialist powers are seeking to develop political leverage within the NSF by swift recognition of this unelected government and the deployment of their aid agencies. The Kremlin, by contrast, was cautious in the midst of the storm. In order to prove itself to Washington and Europe, it observed its 'non interference pact' even in its own 'backyard'. It was willing to risk the possibility of a Ceausescu victory. Either way,

the Kremlin and the White House can agree: the Romanian revolution must end.

The new government's final physiognomy is not yet decided. Although all factions are keen to end the remaining elements of dual power and to disarm the workers and students, it is likely that the most pro-capitalist elements will seek to strengthen their position via the manipulation of popular protests.

The Romanian workers must not be deprived of the fruits of their sacrifice. They must stop the bourgeois-democratic counter-revolution in its tracks. The second phase of the revolution, the proletarian political revolution must now begin.

The revolutionary committees must refuse to give up arms to the forces of 'law and order'. The armed power of the workers is the only guarantee of further success: of implementing the promised reforms; of rooting out every last agent of the security services now in hiding. The workers must ensure the distribution of arms to the revolutionary committees and form their own militias.

It is urgent that democratic soldiers' committees are built with the right to elect their own officers, to investigate and punish the misdeeds of the previous officers. Arms in hand, the workers must continue the unfinished business of their revolution: the crimes of the old regime must be brought fully to light!

No one will grieve over the summary trial and execution of Ceausescu and his wife. But there are many in the army and NSF who hope that the Ceausescus will carry their secrets to the grave. The workers and poor peasants must not let the crimes of the bureaucracy be buried with the bodies of its leaders!

The revolutionary committees in every town and village must establish elected tribunals to investigate the activities of party bosses and local bureaucrats. People's courts need to deliberate and judge any charges.

After many years of savage repression, new parties and programmes are emerging. None of them has a strategy to lead the workers and poor peasants to power. The workers, having achieved so much, must not stand aside and let the intelligentsia and discredited Communist Party bosses form the political parties of reconciliation, pro-imperialism and social counter-revolution. The working class needs a revolutionary communist (Trotskyist) party that can consolidate the gains already won and establish proletarian power in Romania.

How to proceed

Already there are signs that the Romanian workers are taking the talk of democracy seriously. While the NSF appoints a government to speak for the people and promises elections next April, the workers in the factories are beginning to oust hated managers and elect new factory committees. Once again, the workers of Timisoara are in the vanguard.

It is essential that the urban workers lead the revolution in the countryside. The workers must help organise the peasants into revolutionary committees with their own militia in alliance with the workers and soldiers. The peasants' own organisations must be won to the drawing up of a plan for the modernisation of the villages and of agriculture itself. This plan must be integrated into a workers' plan for the entire national economy.

Factory-based workers' organisations must now be linked up with the local revolutionary committees at town, regional and national level. That is the key to further progress in the proletarian political revolution. Workers' and poor peasants' councils must be built in every village and town. Do not leave politics to the politicians, do not entrust the running of the economy to the 'professional administrators'. The Romanian workers must hold full power; for a government not of the NSF or National Christian Peasant Party but of the sovereign workers' and poor peasants' councils. No support for the Provisional Government!

While this government remains in office, the revolutionary committees must demand that it recognises their authority and organise an election for a government based on these committees. The government must submit itself to the will of the workers and peasants. It must immediately repeal all the hated laws of the old regime. It must take measures to improve the position of women who, amongst many features of oppression, have been subject to the death penalty for abortion. Romanian women must have full access to free contraception and abortion; for the right to choose!

Ceausescu tried to eliminate religion by bulldozing churches. The only effect was to ensure its survival in the workers' and peasants' homes. Socialists must insist on the full freedom of religious observation, but without any privileges or subsidies by the government for any religious institution. For the strict separation of church and state.

The rural and urban workers must seize control of the factories, offices, banks and means of communication. There must be no privatisation of industry, no sell-offs to imperialists or exiled Romanian bourgeois.

The workers must take control of the central planning organisations. They must draw up a new workers' plan to meet the consumption needs of the masses, to increase equality and open the road to genuine socialism and communism.

The Romanian degenerate workers' state came into existence without the participation of the workers themselves. National minorities (Germans, Hungarians) were imprisoned inside its borders while ethnic Romanians were forcibly incorporated within the USSR in 1940. The political revolution in Romania has had a major effect on all these groups. Their legitimate grievances of many years are finally coming to the surface.

Romanian workers must immediately grant autonomous status to the oppressed nationalities and recognise the right of all oppressed nations to self-determination. For the right of areas in the USSR (Moldavia) with a Romanian majority to unity with the Romanian nation if they so wish.

The heroic actions of the Romanian workers and peasants have shown the path for all republics of the USSR. Not fratricide between national groups but unity against the hated Stalinist bureaucracy. Such must be the lesson for all the peoples of Eastern Europe and the USSR.

Resolution of the International Secretariat of the League for a Revolutionary Communist International (forerunner of the L5!) 29 December 1989

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