All power to the Soviets
Sun, 30/09/2007 - 19:00

The October Revolution in Russia was carried through by the Bolshevik Party under the slogan 'All Power to the Soviets'. In the course of the 1905 and, decisively, in the 1917 revolutions, Lenin, Trotsky and the Bolsheviks had come to understand the historic significance of the soviet form of organisation. The soviet, a council representing all of the exploited and oppressed groups, basing itself on the principle of direct elections, recallability and the abolition of bureaucratic privilege, was rightly seen by the Bolsheviks as the best possible organisational expression of the power of the proletariat and its allies. It was the best possible basis for the dictatorship of the proletariat the soviet state. In 1938 Trotsky wrote in the Transitional Programme that: 'The slogan of soviets, therefore, crowns the programme of transitional demands,' He explained that in the struggle for power soviets were the means for uniting all of the forces struggling against capitalism. In Lenin and Trotsky's view there was no substitute for soviets as organs of working class power. What led them to this view was the actual nature of the soviets themselves.

Soviet representation

The soviet form of organisation directly elected councils arises at the point where the day to day struggles of the masses take place in the context of a revolutionary crisis. Soviets are an extraordinary form of organisation to deal with the extraordinary problems posed by a revolutionary situation. Precisely because of this, they are more immediately sensitive and responsive to the needs and wishes of the masses than the established, often bureaucratic, forms of organisation. They are representative of workers and their allies in struggle. A participant in the local (Rajon) Soviet in Vyborg in 1917 gives a flavour of this truly representative characteristic of the soviet form: '...the masses of the Rajon (Vyborg) brought all their needs and expectations to the Soviet, for them it was the meaningful and accessible organ of power. From morning to night workers, youth, soldiers, came with various problems. None went away without an answer.'

Compare this proximity of the soviet to the rank and file with the distance the TUC bureaucrats place between themselves and their six and a half million members! By virtue of representing the masses in struggle the soviet develops another characteristics It is uniquely suited to serve as an instrument for revolutionary struggle. Because it is truly representative of these masses it can all the more easily and effectively, call them to arms. In 1905 and 1917 the Petrograd Soviet was able to mobilise tens of thousands across industries in strike action to secure the eight hour day. Its job was to co ordinate and direct the struggle of those to whom it was accountable. Of the 1905 Soviet in Petrograd, Trotsky commented that it resembled a 'council of war, more than a parliament'.

This very feature was what made Trotsky optimistic in 1917 that the soviets were susceptible to Bolshevik influence. The test of action could not be easily delayed by a cumbersome bureaucratic machine. Every passing hour posed a new problem for the soviets to resolve in practice. The programme of revolutionary action can, quickly and often dramatically, reveal its superiority to the masses. The programme of delay and compromise of reformism is not protected by the million and one delaying mechanisms of the parliamentary talking shop. Trotsky noted:
Of all the forms of revolutionary representation, the soviet is the most flexible, immediate and transparent. But it is still only a form. It cannot give more than the masses are capable of putting into it at a given moment. Beyond that it can only assist the masses in understanding the mistakes they have made and correcting them. In this function of the soviets lie one of the most important guarantees of the development of the revolution.

The third vital element of the soviet form that led Lenin and Trotsky to value it so highly for the purposes of revolution, was that it was an embryonic organ of power, of workers' power. This was revealed in both 1905 and 1917. The soviets developed out of strikes but took on the functions of administration, of organising supplies and of organising a proletarian militia. In the strikes of 1905 the soviet was born in Russia. The first one developed in Ivanovo Voznesenek, in May. During a strike by 40,000 workers in this textile town, 110 deputies elected by the strikers met on the river bank. The significance of this meeting was that it united all the workers of the district on a city wide basis, irrespective of trade or skill.

The Petrograd proletariat the vanguard in 1905 as it was in 1917 was quick to emulate its brothers and sisters in Ivanovo Voznesenek. During the October general strike 40 delegates met in the Technological Institute and established a soviet to organise the strike, but also to do more. It declared:

A 'second government'
This was no mere strike committee. By November it had 562 delegates. It issued Izvestia as a daily bulletin occupying the printing presses of the bourgeois papers to ensure it was regularly and professionally produced. Under Trotsky's leadership it advanced a programme of political demands aimed against the power of the Tsarist autocracy. It forbade the distribution of papers that were censored by the state. Only those bearing an 'uncensored' stamp from the Soviet were distributed. Most significantly, it continued its existence and its struggles after the strike was terminated. The St Petersburg chief of police was so worried about the Soviet that he warned, prophetically, that it was threatening to become a 'second government'. Its potential as an organ of workers' power revealed itself in October 1905. This potential was realised in October 1917.

Initially in 1905 the Bolsheviks were suspicious of the Soviet. They saw it as a Menshevik ploy to set up a rival non party body, through which they could then outmanoeuvre the Bolsheviks. This suspicion stemmed from the Soviet's refusal to confine itself to purely trade union questions. A leading Bolshevik agitator, P Mendelev, declared:

Menshevik intentions
The suspicions that the Bolsheviks felt towards the Soviet, more precisely to the Mensheviks who they believed were behind the Soviet, were far from groundless. The Mensheviks were enthusiastic to build soviets as 'workers' congresses'. These congresses could, in Martynov's words, serve as the means of 'exerting revolutionary pressure on the will of the liberal and radical bourgeoisie'. The Mensheviks believed the role of the proletariat was to encourage the bourgeoisie forward during the democratic revolution. The soviet, as a form of local government and workers' congress was seen, not as an organ of power, but a pressure point on the bourgeoisie. Moreover, the Mensheviks believed that it was within such a forum that
a mass party of the working class one which would encompass multifarious political trends - could be built. Thus for Martynov the soviet was 'abnormal', but could be used to achieve the norm of international Social Democracy, a mass party:

?...that is wide enough to include or render superfluous organisations on the pattern of the soviets of workers' deputies.?

Lenin perceived the real essence of the soviets - their representative nature, their capacity for revolutionary struggle and their potential as organs of power despite the influence of Menshevism within them. By posing the soviets, not as an alternative to the Bolsheviks, but as the organisational means of fulfilling the Bolshevik's governmental slogan - the Provisional Revolutionary Government Lenin won the Party to the need for the struggle for leadership within the soviets. For him the soviets were both 'instruments of insurrection' and 'cells of the new revolutionary power'. In 1906 he wrote of the Petrograd Soviet

?That was the face of the new power or rather its germinal form, since the victory of the old power destroyed the young shoots very early on.?

In February 1917, following the overthrow of the autocracy, the young shoots sprouted once again. This time the Bolsheviks, after Lenin's return and the triumph of his April Theses which placed socialist revolution and the creation of a soviet government as a workers' and peasants' government on the immediate agenda, waged a struggle to make the soviets the sole organs of power throughout Russia. The Mensheviks, bound hand and foot to the bourgeoisie, sought to contain the soviets to a monitoring and advisory role over the capitalist Provisional Government. In fact, after February power was split between the bourgeoisie and the soviets, a situation of dual power prevailed.

Workers' and soldiers' delegations
In the afternoon of 27 February 1917, in the Tauride Palace, a group of Petrograd workers' leaders set up the Provisional Executive Committee of the Soviet of Workers' Deputies. It agreed to elect deputies on the basis of one per 1000 workers. When it met in the evening there were between 40 and 50 deputies present. At the meeting of the soviet soldiers, as well as workers, were represented. Deputies elected from the army companies that had joined the revolution were instrumental in turning the Petrograd Soviet into an organisation of workers and soldiers.

The significance of this was immense. Not only did it bring military support and arms to the soviet, it brought the peasantry for the soldiers were, for the most part, 'peasants in greatcoats' into contact with the proletariat. It helped forge the alliance that was eventually to be consummated in the revolutionary workers' and peasants' government after October.

After the evening meeting of 27 February the Soviet went from strength to strength. In Petrograd eleven major (local) soviets were set up by late March. The central Petrograd Soviet grew, through March, to a body of 3000 delegates. Throughout the length and breadth of the old empire, soviets sprang up. There were 400 by May, 900 by October. At the first All Russian Soviet Congress in June 1917 1090 delegates representing 20 million workers, soldiers and peasants assembled in the capital.

The Soviets developed in more than just a numerical sense. To the consternation of their initial Menshevik leaders they constantly intruded into government business. In the naval base town of Kronstadt where the Bolsheviks and Left SRs were in a majority from the outset, the Soviet declared in May:

?The sole power in the city of Kronstadt is the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, which acts with the Petrograd Soviet in government matters.?
The Soviet dismissed the Provisional Government's representative in the city and even declared a republic.

This struck terror into the hearts of the compromisers in the Petrograd Executive Committee, Tsereteli and Skobelev were dispatched to persuade the Kronstadters to desist from such actions. But these compromisers were like Canute before the advancing tide helpless to prevent it. Everywhere, the dynamic of the Soviets was pushing them in a similar direction to Kronstadt. In the Bolshevik stronghold of Vyborg in Petrograd, home of the major factories, the Soviet oversaw workers' control in the factories and took over the prison bakery at Kresty to ensure that the workers got bread.

The Vyborg factories were at the forefront of the struggle for Soviet power from early on. In April, the bourgeois minister Milyukov was forced out of the Provisional Government following the publication of his note to the allies declaring Russian fidelity to the Tsar's war aims. In response Vyborg issued the loudest calls for an end to dual power. The resolution of the Optico Machine Construction factory typified the Vyborg mood:

"...Therefore, we find the Milyukov Guchkov Co. not corresponding to their appointment and recognise that the only power in the country must be the Soviets of workers' soldiers and peasants' deputies, which we will defend with our lives."

**Contradictions of dual power**

Until June Vyborg and Kronstadt were relatively isolated in calling for the resolution of the dual power. The bourgeoisie was well aware of the problem it faced, having to co-exist with the power of the Soviets, Guchkov expressed his grasp of that problem as early as 9 March:

"The Provisional Government has no real power. Its orders are endorsed only by the Soviets of workers' and soldiers' deputies. Stated bluntly, the Provisional Government exists only by the Soviets' permission."

The point about the dual power situation was that until September the Executive Committee of the Petrograd Soviet looked to throughout Russia for leadership granted that permission. The Executive concluded a deal with the bourgeois has-beens of the State Duma Committee and then told the workers and soldiers:

"As long as the agreement between the Petrograd Workers and Soldiers' Soviet and the Provisional Government is not breached, the Provisional Government must be regarded as the sole legal government for all Russia."

After the departure of Guchkov and Milyukov and the entry of Soviet representatives into the Provisional Government Tsereteli drew the logical conclusion from the Mensheviks/Right SR point of view and argued:

"Now, all power would be yielded [by the Soviet WP] to the Provisional Government... [the Soviet must] not meddle in administrative business. We should not hinder national government, but sound the alarm in case of mistakes."

Why were the compromisers able to insist on deference to the Provisional Government by the mass of workers and peasants for so many months? In the first place, it was because the Mensheviks and Right SRs were stronger than the Bolsheviks within Russia at the outbreak of the February Revolution. They were better placed than the Bolsheviks to rapidly assume positions of leadership in the Soviets. As such they were able to play on the genuine fears workers had of counter revolution, to limit the role of the Soviets to monitoring the government. Remembering the persecution that followed 1905 many workers were not prepared to assume sole responsibility for the fate of the revolution. The Menshevik thesis of
leaving government to the bourgeoisie fitted in with such fears. As a delegate to the April City Conference of Bolsheviks ruefully put it;

?When the proletariat still feared to take power into its hands, at that time the bourgeoisie made its way to the Duma and began to issue proclamations and elect deputies. Our best workers, fearing counter-revolution, facilitated the accidental composition of the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies.?

**Critical support for government**

But it was not only fear that played a part. Until Lenin's return no party of the revolution was, or had ever, advocated constructing soviet power as the immediate objective of the revolution. The Bolshevik formula was for a revolutionary provisional government. Even leading figures in the party like Kamenev, advocated critical support for the Provisional Government created in February. It is not surprising, therefore, that the mass of the working class and army saw their job as keeping the government on the democratic straight and narrow. Typical of this outlook was the resolution of the Baltic Shipbuilding Factory, which proclaimed:

?...full confidence in the Soviet, and we are sure that the Soviet, basing itself upon our trust and the support of organised revolutionary democracy, will be able to force the Provisional Government to take into account the wishes of the revolutionary army and people.?

From the end of April to July the Bolsheviks, initially a weak fraction within most soviets (40 out of 3,000 deputies in Petrograd at the end of March), hammered away at the slogan 'All Power to the Soviets'. Their aim was to escape the pro-bourgeois politics of the compromisers and win leadership in a soviet republic established if possible, by peaceful means. By June they were beginning to make considerable headway.

**Workers blame capitalists**

The Provisional Government was incapable of solving the great problems of economic production of the land question or of the war. More and more the workers came to blame the capitalists for obstructing the solution of these burning problems. More and more they looked to their own organisations to do the job for them. When the Soviet leadership banned a Bolshevik demonstration out of fear in June, they were obliged to call an official march to let off steam. The march was over 400,000 strong and was made up of workers and soldiers. The rest of 'democracy' cowered in the cafes and salons. Despite the 'official' character of this march, its moods and slogans reflected the fast growing influence of Bolshevism. Eyewitness to the march, Sukhanov, noted:

?And again, and again, as the insistent call from the very bowels of the revolutionary capital, as destiny itself, like the fateful Burnham Wood, they came toward us: 'All power to the Soviets!', 'Down with the ten capitalist ministers!'?

The drive to counter revolution after the July Days (see Chapter 5) caused the Bolsheviks to debate a change of slogans with regard to the soviets. The illegalisation of the Bolshevik Party, the arrest of many of its leaders and the repression against the most advanced workers and soldiers, all measures backed by the Soviet leadership, the SRs and the Mensheviks, led the Bolsheviks to drop the slogan 'All power to the Soviets'. The Bolsheviks hopes for a peaceful development of the revolution evaporated.

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