

Bolsheviks and the fight for power in Russia

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An analysis of the importance of the Bolsheviks in the Russian revolution and the centrality of the party in fighting with the class to take power

On the evening of 24 October 1917 (old style calendar), the forces of the Military Revolutionary Committee of the Petrograd Soviet were ordered into action against the Provisional Government of Alexander Kerensky.

Fearful of the independent organisation of the workers and soldiers in their democratic councils of delegates (Soviets), and aware of the threat of a rising, the bourgeois government ordered the arrest of the Military Revolutionary Committee (MRC) and the closure of the Bolshevik party's printshop. Troops and Red Guards loyal to the Soviet were dispatched to reopen the printshop, and throughout the night the revolutionary forces occupied railway stations, junctions, the telephone exchange and (having learnt from the failure of the Paris Commune to do so) the state bank.

The government cowered in the Winter Palace, bereft of any significant mass support. On the morning of 25 October soldiers, sailors and Red Guards loyal to the Soviet stormed the Winter Palace, virtually without having to fire a shot. That morning the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets voted to accept power from the Petrograd Soviet and the MRC. The first workers' state was born. Victory followed in towns and cities across Russia in the days and weeks to come.

The objective basis for the triumph of the revolution lay in the class dynamics of Russian society. The Tsarist monarchy, its bureaucracy and the remnants of the feudal nobility were rotting away. The exhaustion of their historical role in the face of the development of capitalism in Russia was accompanied by their political, intellectual and moral decay. As a ruling class, they were incapable of taking society forward.

Intervention

The industrialisation of Russia had taken place at an accelerated pace through the intervention of foreign European capital. The domestic industrial bourgeoisie, small, lacking roots in the mass of the people and thus politically weakened, faced a proletariat, which even though it constituted a relatively small proportion of the overall population was nevertheless highly concentrated in large scale manufacturing enterprises. Its very existence and concentration enabled it to lead the whole of society forward.

Alongside the workers existed a vast land-hungry peasantry. The fact that prior to the revolution a mere 30,000 private landlords owned as much land as 50 million peasants constituted, as Trotsky was later to remark, 'a ready-made programme of agrarian revolt'. Last, but by no means least, the revolutionary democratic character of the struggles of subject nationalities against Tsarist and Great Russian oppression added to the instability of the existing social order.

Major tasks of the bourgeois revolution remained unsolved in Russia in 1917. Yet the bourgeois class was

too weak to resolve them. The revolutionary overthrow of the Tsar in February 1917 did not lead to the consolidation of a stable bourgeois regime able to expand and develop the forces of production on a capitalist basis. It produced a prolonged period of instability, of dual power, in which only the working class was able to defend and extend the democratic and revolutionary gains.

Experience

Yet the maturity of the objective conditions for social revolution would not alone have been sufficient to resolve the crisis in the interests of the working class. The instrument of the October revolution was the Bolshevik party, a mass workers' party founded on scientific socialist principles. The positive experience of the October victory and the negative experience of subsequent revolutionary defeats from Germany and Spain through to Bolivia and Iran serve only to emphasise the indispensability of this subjective factor.

Not one critic of the role of Bolshevism in the revolution has ever been able to demonstrate, either in theory or in practice, how it is possible for the proletariat to take power without the leadership of a vanguard party armed with a clear conception of its aims and the political resources to achieve them.

Central to the Bolsheviks' success was the party's correct strategic understanding of the nature of the revolution that unfolded after February 1917. This understanding was forged through democratic debate within the party and through the living experience of struggle.

The initial response of the leading cadre of the party to the overthrow of the Tsar and the establishment of a bourgeois Provisional Government demonstrated their political confusion in the new situation. The editors of the Bolshevik paper Pravda – Kamenev, Muranov and Stalin – wrote on 7 March that the main aim of the revolution was the overthrow of the Tsarist autocracy and feudalism, not the overthrow of capitalism.

This task was relegated to the distant future. For this reason the paper argued that the Provisional Government should not be overthrown, and that it was, despite being staffed by bourgeois ministers of the conservative and liberal parties, a force for the defence of the revolutionary gains of February.

Among the Petrograd worker militants this line was deeply unpopular. Leaflets were issued proclaiming the urgent necessity of advancing towards the struggle for socialism. Likewise Lenin, deeply alarmed by the conservatism of the 'old Bolsheviks', argued against the Kamenev and Stalin line. He struggled to re-arm the party theoretically to face its revolutionary tasks.

Even before his return to Russia from exile, he wrote in his Letters from Afar that the Petrograd Soviet, far from endorsing and accepting the power of the Provisional Government, should regard itself as the basis for a new government counterposed to that of the bourgeoisie:

'Side by side with this government – which as regards the present war is but the agent of the billion-dollar firm – England and France – there has arisen the chief, unofficial, as yet undeveloped and comparatively weak workers' government, which expresses the interests of the proletariat and of the entire poor section of the urban and rural population. This is the Soviet of Workers' Deputies in Petrograd, which is seeking connections with the soldiers and peasants, and also with the agricultural workers, with the latter particularly and primarily, of course, more than with the peasants.'

He went on to write that anyone arguing that the workers should support the Provisional Government would be 'a traitor to the workers', because the government was bound hand and foot to imperialist capital, and therefore to the continuation of the war and the consolidation of the rule of the property owners, even through the restoration of the Tsarist monarchy if necessary.

Upon his return to Russia, Lenin submitted to the party his document Tasks of the Proletariat in the

Present Revolution, known as the April Theses. Realising the need for the embryonic organs of working class rule to be used for the purpose of smashing and supplanting the repressive apparatus of the capitalist state, he argued for the revolution to go forward to a second stage.

The dual power existing between the Soviets and the Provisional Government was to be terminated by the transfer of all power into the hands of the Soviets.

It took many weeks for Lenin to win the party to his strategic conception of the next stage through which the revolution must pass. When he first read the April Theses to party leaders he was greeted with stony silence, many muttering to each other that he had taken leave of his senses. Against him the schematic argument was raised by right wing Bolsheviks such as Kamenev, echoing the arguments of the Mensheviks, that the bourgeois democratic revolution must first be completed before the workers could pass on to the seizure of power.

Democracy

This argument has been since raised by 'Communist' parties in revolutionary crises the world over as an excuse for ceding power to the national bourgeoisie in the name of 'democracy' or 'national liberation'. Yet Lenin, in the April Theses, recognised that with the formation of Soviets the proletariat had developed organs of power that represented, for the workers, a higher form of democracy than any bourgeois parliament; and which could enable the working class to exercise its own dictatorship over the bourgeoisie. He wrote:

'Not a parliamentary republic ? to return to a parliamentary republic from the Soviet of Workers? Deputies would be a retrograde step ? but a Republic of Soviets of Workers?, Agricultural Labourers? and Peasants? Deputies throughout the country, from top to bottom. Abolition of the police, the army and the bureaucracy. The salaries of all officials, all of whom are elective and displaceable at any time, not to exceed the average wage of a competent worker.'

Eventually Lenin's strategy for advancing the revolution triumphed in the party. Without this triumph there would have been no October Revolution. But the Bolsheviks could not have come to power simply by virtue of having developed a correct strategy. When the Tsar was overthrown the Bolsheviks were the party of only a minority of the vanguard workers. Even in Petrograd at the end of March only 40 of the 3,000 delegates to the Soviets adhered to the Bolshevik fraction.

In order to win the majority within the Soviets for their assumption of power, the Bolsheviks adopted principled but flexible tactics, designed to force the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs) to cease equivocation and compromise and to expose them if they did not. Bolshevik slogans directed at these parties demanded they either form a workers' and peasants' government based on the Soviets, or make way for those who would. This adoption of correct tactics was the second condition for the Bolsheviks' success.

The bourgeoisie was unable to deal with mounting problems of war, land reform and national liberation struggles. Aware of the weakness of the Provisional Government, the openly bourgeois parties concluded a deal with the Menshevik and SR leaders of the Petrograd Soviet for the entry of Soviet representatives into the government. This 'popular front' was supposed to tie the workers to the bourgeois regime. But it had the opposite effect.

The Soviet 'compromisers' steadily undermined their own support in the working class and the peasantry. They continued support for the war and even prepared a deeply unpopular and costly offensive. They postponed calling elections to the Constituent Assembly and sought to limit the power and authority of the Soviets.

Sabotage

By making concessions to the bourgeois and feudal landowners the Mensheviks and SRs failed to satisfy peasant land hunger, which exploded yet again from the time of the harvest onwards in violent land seizures by the peasant masses. As the capitalists looked to sabotage the economy in order to break the organisation and militancy of the workers, factory committees asserted authority over the operation of management at a plant level.

Aware of the growing contradiction between the interests of the workers and peasants and the policies of their principal parties, the Mensheviks and SRs, the Bolsheviks utilised tactics which went far beyond mere denunciation and literary exposure of their opponents. They sought to exploit the disparity between the illusions that the masses entertained in their leaders and the concessions to the landowners and bourgeoisie that those same leaders were making.

The demand 'Down with the Ten Capitalist Ministers' was designed to force the Mensheviks and SRs to break their coalition with the openly bourgeois parties. As Trotsky was later to explain this in no way reflected Bolshevik illusions in the role of the Mensheviks and SRs, but was a method of exposing them:

'When the Petersburg masses, led by our party, raised the slogan: 'Down with the Ten Capitalist Ministers!' they thereby demanded that the posts of these ministers be filled by Mensheviks and Narodniks [SRs]. 'Messrs Bourgeois Democrats, kick the Cadets out! Take power into your own hands! Put in the government twelve (or as many as you have) Peshekhonovs, and we promise you, so far as it is possible, to remove you 'peacefully' from your posts when the hour will strike ' which should be very soon!'

Programme

Similarly the demand 'All Power to the Soviets!' was both a call on the existing Soviet leaders to assume full power independently of the bourgeoisie, and a programme for the proletarian revolution itself. Through its tactics, which were carried into life during every crisis of the regime, through its daily agitation on every issue confronting the workers, peasants and soldiers, the Bolsheviks gained ever more support in the ranks of the masses. On the eve of the October insurrection they had secured a clear majority in the Soviets for their policies. They embarked upon the insurrection as a genuine mass revolutionary party of the working class.

The accusation that the October insurrection was not a workers' revolution but a mere Bolshevik coup is as old as the revolution itself. It was raised immediately after the insurrection at the Second Congress of Soviets on 25 October by Martov, the leader of the Menshevik Internationalists. It has been the stock-in-trade of imperialist propaganda ever since.

In reality Lenin and the Bolshevik leaders were, throughout 1917, careful to distinguish between a seizure of power based on a majority in the Soviets and a mere conspiratorial putsch in the tradition of Auguste Blanqui. In July 1917 the Bolsheviks sought to avoid being provoked into a premature rising in view of the lack of support throughout Russia for the assumption of power by the Soviets.

On 20 July Lenin argued that if the Petrograd Bolsheviks were to utilise mass discontent against the war and disenchantment with the Provisional Government in order to seize power, they would be unable to hold it. His words should be imprinted on the memory of every revolutionary socialist who has ever faced the lie that October was no more than a coup:

'We have said more than once that the only possible form of revolutionary government was a soviet of workers', soldiers' and peasants' deputies. What is the exact weight of our fraction in the Soviet? Even in the Soviets of both capitals, not to speak of others, we are an insignificant minority.'

The Bolshevik leaders attempted to restrain soldiers, workers and sailors who were carried away by an insurrectionary mood in July, encouraged by anarchists and the adventurist majority in the Bolshevik military organisation who had opposed Lenin's arguments. Unable to prevent an ill-timed insurgency, the Bolsheviks rightly placed themselves at its head, seeking to ensure the maximum discipline. Yet the July rising led to a serious tactical defeat and the temporary imposition of counter-revolutionary repression.

It was in the aftermath of the reactionary revolt of General Kornilov in August that the Bolsheviks regained and greatly increased their influence and prestige. Calling on the Soviet leadership to arm the workers in defence of the revolution, the Bolsheviks again utilised a form of the united front tactic, combining unity in action with supporters of the Soviet leadership with a relentless critique of the SR leader Kerensky for his vacillation and cowardice.

Vanguard

The result of this policy was that in September the Petrograd Soviet voted overwhelmingly for a Bolshevik resolution calling for a revolutionary workers' and peasants' government. As the masses lost patience with the compromisers and conciliators of the Menshevik and SR parties, the Bolshevik party steadily took over the leading political role in the majority of Soviets across Russia. It was as the party of the majority of the industrial working class that Bolshevism led the October insurrection. As Lenin put it:

[In July] we still lacked the support of the class which is the vanguard of the revolution. We still did not have a majority among the workers and soldiers of Petrograd and Moscow. Now we have a majority in both Soviets. It was created solely by the history of July and August, by the experience of the ruthless treatment meted out to the Bolsheviks and by the experience of the Kornilov revolt . . . We have the majority of a class, the vanguard of the revolution, the vanguard of the people, which is capable of carrying the masses with it.

This was not the voice of Blanquist putschism, but of the workers' revolution. To the various critics of Bolshevism and of Lenin's party in 1917, present day revolutionaries must give a clear response. In history no class has ever taken power other than through its vanguard. The October Revolution had the support of a clear majority of the working class, due to the tireless campaign of the Bolshevik party to raise the political consciousness of the Russian proletariat to the level of its historic tasks.

Without the Bolshevik party, its intransigent insistence on the strategic aim of Soviet power and its tactical flexibility, there would have been no October and no assumption of power by the working class.

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