



In defence of October

Dave Stockton Wed, 30/09/1992 - 10:59

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Seventy-five years ago the Russian masses, organised in workers', peasants' and soldiers' councils, and led by the Bolshevik party, seized power. No sooner had they done so than they were under siege, both physically and politically.

The physical attack took the form of a terrible civil war which lasted three years, involved invasions by all the major imperialist powers and which left millions upon millions dead. Only the heroism of the Soviet masses, their determination to defend their revolution, enabled the Bolsheviks to hold state power.

The political attack lasted somewhat longer. Indeed, it continues up to this very day. In the imperialist countries, and perhaps more importantly, within the ex-USSR itself, every available journalist, historian and intellectual is being mustered for what the bourgeoisie think will be a final ideological attack on the legitimacy of the Bolshevik Revolution. February, most agree, was just and necessary. But October led directly to the triumph of Stalinism.

The most insidious of these attacks come from within the labour movement itself. Not primarily from the social democrats or indeed from the Stalinists, who openly proclaim their defence of capitalism, but from those who, in one form or another, claim to be socialists.

Anarchists and ultra-lefts have long argued that there was a direct continuity between Bolshevism and Stalinism and have attacked the Bolsheviks as being responsible for the decline in soviet democracy after 1917. Centrist 'Trotskyists' such as the United Secretariat of the Fourth International have adopted theses which emphasise the need for 'plurality' and which implicitly attack the Bolsheviks' record. All these arguments, plus many of those touted by bourgeois historians, have been re-hashed and are currently the centre of a debate on the centrist left.¹

At the heart of all these positions we find two inter-linked errors. Firstly, our armchair critics at the opposite end of the century find it all too easy to use a normative method: they describe what a workers' state should look like, compare it to the post-1917 reality and thus dismiss the Bolsheviks as laying the basis for Stalin's dictatorship.

This method leads to the second error: a tendency to ignore the terrible reality of the post-1917 soviet state. The civil war was not the Bolsheviks' doing, but it conditioned the subsequent development of the revolution. Without understanding the distortions produced by the imperialists' policy, we cannot understand the final and terrible rise of Stalinism, nor appreciate the qualitative break that existed between the party of Lenin and the party of Stalin.

One of the major criticisms levelled against the Bolsheviks concerns their attacks on the democratic rights of other political parties, such as the suppression of the Menshevik papers, the banning of their deputies from the soviets and the arrest of leaders, and the weakening of soviet democracy which resulted.

The legality of all soviet parties is an essential part of any full, healthy or stable proletarian democracy. Moreover, the Bolsheviks tried hard to preserve this in as far as it was possible to do so whilst defending soviet power. But the fact is that in the months after the October Revolution all the other parties refused to play the role of an opposition loyal to the undivided power of the soviets. They adamantly refused to recognise that the working class had expressed its confidence in the Bolsheviks.

At the October 1917 Congress of Soviets Martov's 'left' Menshevik led a walkout and subsequent boycott of the

leading Soviet bodies. Refusing to recognise the validity of the October Revolution he sought to subordinate the soviets to the reactionary Constituent Assembly. The Menshevik papers called for a struggle against Bolshevism during the period when the proletarian dictatorship was trying to consolidate soviet power. The Right Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs) and Right Mensheviks passed straight over to the side of the counter-revolution.

The Left SRs, led by Maria Spiridonova, were the most determined of the non-Bolshevik left and after a short hesitation did join the Soviet government. But even they demonstratively left the government after the signing of the Brest Litovsk Treaty in March 1918. In June 1918 they attempted an armed insurrection against the Council of People's Commissars, a government confirmed in office by two successive Soviet Congresses.

After a miserable failure they resorted to a campaign of individual terror against Bolshevik leaders, assassinating Volodarsky and Uritsky and severely wounding Lenin. This in a situation of civil war when the White counter-revolution was making giant strides forward.

The soviet is an organising centre of the class struggle, not an open forum of debate between the class enemy and its agents and the revolution. In conditions of insurrection and war that debate is conducted with rifles not with resolutions. Its democracy is not abstract and general, but militant and partisan.

Any class conscious trade unionist knows you do not let strike breakers attend strike committees or address mass meetings in the name of democracy. In war there is a price attached to working class democracy: it has to be clearly on the right side of the barricades.

Whilst Bolsheviks defended the fact of single party rule—a fact imposed on them by the treachery and vacillation of all the other parties—they never elevated it into a principle. On the contrary, they repeatedly attempted to draw the other parties back to the side of the revolution and thus back into the soviets.

Thus when in October 1918 Martov and the Menshevik Internationalists voted to recognise the October Revolution as 'historically necessary' and promised 'direct support to the Soviet government against foreign intervention', all their soviet rights were restored. The same applied to the Left SRs when a congress in Petrograd decisively rejected 'any attempt to overthrow the soviet power by any armed struggle'. This legalisation of their organisations and press lasted till the end of the civil war.

Lenin's high hopes of 1917—full multi-party soviet democracy, direct self-administration, an end to most if not all bureaucracy—proved unrealisable in the extreme conditions of civil war and economic collapse, which also terribly weakened soviet democracy.

The soviets suffered the effects of mobilising the maximum, number of experienced and class conscious workers to administer and defend the workers' state. Soviets are executive, not just deliberative bodies. Their size, the frequency and duration of their meetings, the effective use of the mechanism for recalling deputies were all affected. But the soviets were not the only instruments of proletarian power or democracy: both factory committees and the party itself played this role.

Of course, the proletarian dictatorship is not only a dictatorship, it is also the widest extension of democracy to the toiling masses. That this democracy will be qualitatively superior to bourgeois democracy is true in terms of the whole transitional period, but it is not necessarily an accurate picture of an isolated proletarian dictatorship, struggling to survive. The 1917 Revolution was built on the prospect of international revolution. But in the meantime the soviets had to maintain power, and the Bolsheviks, as the elected government, had to do all in their power to prevent the triumph of the counter-revolution.

In September 1918, as the civil war gathered pace, the Red Terror was launched. Overwhelmingly it fell on the bourgeoisie, the landowners, the rich peasants, the grain hoarders and on their dupes and agents as well as on lumpen and criminal elements who sought to exploit the masses and disorganise the war effort. The appalling situation inside the country posed the Bolsheviks with the key question: what measures are justified in order to ensure the survival of

the revolution?

Faced with the unbridled savagery of the counter-revolutionary forces, it was legitimate and necessary to strike back with crushing force. The alternative would have been to open the road to the White Terror. This happened in Finland, where tens of thousands died, and in the Ukraine in 1919, where hundreds of thousands were killed. But today such acts of barbarity are conveniently 'forgotten'.

It is a cruel and terrible fact that in war there is little or no time for police investigations, gathering and sifting evidence or prolonged trials. Conditions at the allied front during the imperialist war of 1914-1917 proved this beyond all doubt! The Bolsheviks did want to introduce such legality?they abolished the death penalty in October?but faced with the imperialist counter-offensive, such measures proved to be premature.

Faced with White terror, with bloody civil war, with hundreds of thousands of foreign troops on Soviet soil, the secret police or Cheka was formed, in order to carry out repressive measures against those acting against the revolution. The Bolsheviks never for one minute glorified these measures. They clearly recognised and stressed their exceptional, extraordinary character. Hence the very name of the Cheka, the Extraordinary Commission which was seen as a necessary expression of the dictatorship of the proletariat in times of civil war, and over which the party exerted as much vigilance as possible.

Sometimes the Cheka committed excesses. Some of its members proved to be criminals or sadists. Capital punishment of Chekists took place. The cruel work broke the nerves and morale of many of its members. As soon as the civil war ended the Cheka's powers of summary arrest and execution were removed. There was no methodological continuity between the revolutionary Cheka and Stalin's GPU. The first acted to defend the fledgling revolution; the second to extend the bureaucratic counter-revolution.

Today's critics hold that it is impermissible in principle to apply repression to whole categories of people, bourgeois as bourgeois, officers as officers, members of parties because of what their party is engaged in. They make a categorical imperative of the norms of bourgeois right (innocence until proven guilty, habeas corpus, etc).

But as every workers' insurrection shows, from the Paris Commune 1871 to Bucharest 1989, the ruling class or caste does not lie down the day after they lose state power. They launch what Marx called a 'slaveholders' rebellion'. To crush this requires a real dictatorship, or as Lenin termed it, a power 'unrestrained by any law'. To do otherwise would be to accept defeat. The revolution would be doomed before it had taken place.

After the revolution the Bolsheviks initially wanted to carry out a policy of 'state capitalism' under workers' control. Lenin thought that it would be possible for the factory committees to act as agents of this control, for the consumers' co-operatives and the trade unions to work together under a Supreme Economic Council. This proved utopian following the outbreak of economic crisis and civil war after March 1918.

The workers, responding to mounting capitalist sabotage of production, took over the enterprises and demanded that they should be nationalised. These nationalisations, which completed the expropriation of the bourgeoisie, were a prime conquest of the October Revolution.

This embryonic workers' control did not co-ordinate production on a national scale; instead each enterprise tended to function as an autonomous unit, selling, exchanging raw materials or machinery vital to continued production. In conditions of acute economic shortage and developing civil war this was not at all in the interests of the survival of the proletarian state.

The committees all too often acted like private owners, concerned before everything to make a profit, to compete, to survive. The anarchists and the left Communists saw nothing amiss with this 'creativity'. But in fact it was the short road to hell, to the collapse of the soviet dictatorship.

From March 1918 onwards Lenin began to advocate a return to 'one man management', piece rates and the use of

bourgeois specialists. He clearly recognised this as a defeat for the Bolshevik programme. He called it 'some kind of departure from the principles of socialism?', 'a retreat from the principles of the Paris Commune?' and 'a step backward?' which could not be hidden from the people?.²

In early June 1918 the first All-Russian Congress of Economic Councils set up a troika system of management, composed of a factory manager, a technician and a commissar appointed by the soviet government. An advisory committee was elected on an equal tri-partite basis between production workers, employees and trade union representatives.

The factory committee still continued to have important powers but it lost its absolute control and the factory thus lost the 'autonomy' beloved of the anarchists and the libertarian communists. This collegial system lasted until early 1920 when food shortages grew dramatically and Denikin's White army approached Moscow.

At this point the factory committees were deprived of all power to obstruct or veto production decisions emanating from management of the Supreme Economic Council. Harsh measures were also taken against the peasants. They were taken to ensure that the workers did not starve and to prevent the bloody carnage that would result if the Whites were to take any of the large industrial centres.

The crude measures of 'War Communism' (above all grain requisitioning), which were designed to feed the cities and their terribly depleted proletariat, were quite simply unavoidable. 'Market forces' are of no use when the workers' factories are producing no goods to exchange with the rural population and when the country is being criss-crossed by fighting armies.

The Bolshevik party was not only the party of the insurrection, it was also the party of the revolution after October. As such, it formed an integral part of the system of workers' democracy which flowered after 1917 and which suffered during the Civil War years.

Not even the most rabid opponents of Bolshevism claim that the party was 'monolithic' between 1917 and 1923. The industrial working class was about 30% of its pre-war size; many of these workers were fresh from the countryside or were the least class conscious. The proletarian dictatorship and proletarian democracy, became largely identified with the mass party of the proletarian vanguard.

Tragically, the party was forced to neglect its work in the ravaged factories. Its best members were on the far-flung fronts of the civil war or involved in the administration of the soviet state. Its factory cells became small, often composed of administrators and managers.

When the civil war was over and the party turned to the task of restoring and raising production, it found that it could not lead the shrunken, hungry and demoralised industrial proletariat by voluntary means.

The party as a whole, with Trotsky as its most passionate advocate, turned to the 'militarisation of labour?', introducing labour conscription and military style discipline into the factories. This was dangerously wrong, as was the continuation and intensification of grain requisitioning. The Petrograd strike wave, the peasant uprisings and finally the Kronstadt revolt in 1921 all testified to this. It forced the great retreat of the New Economic Policy (NEP).

War Communism and NEP were far from embodying the programmatic norm or the general character of the proletarian dictatorship for the entire transition period. In the last year of his active life Lenin recognised the dangerous bureaucratisation that NEP had unleashed in the party itself. He set out to elaborate a policy of reform for both state and party. As early as 1921 he realised that the soviet state had grave bureaucratic deformations.

It was nevertheless still the dictatorship of the pro-letariat, with specific distortions caused by the fact that it was a workers' state in a backward country, forced into a long term alliance with the small-property owning peasantry, ravaged and distorted by civil war and isolation.

The health and internal democracy of the Bolshevik party were a prerequisite for restoring flourishing democracy in the soviets, the trade unions and in the factory committees. What other party could have carried out this task?

To enable the Soviet masses to rediscover the revolutionary road, the party itself had to be saved. This not only involved purging the burgeoning bureaucracy from state and party apparatus, but also required the political renovation of the party. The internationalist outlook of 1917 had to be reforged. The centrist deviations within both the party and the Comintern had to be challenged and defeated. Bureaucratism had to be uprooted.

This was the task the Trotskyists set themselves. The first revolutionary opponents of Stalin were also those who saw the clearest the origins of the growing bureaucratic dictatorship and how to defeat it. Whilst the anarchists and social democrats cried that 1917 had all been a big mistake, the Trotskyists realised that only a return to the politics the Bolshevik party had been built around would enable the revolution to be saved.

We claim that tradition as our own. We are not blind to the mistakes the Bolsheviks may have committed, nor do we glorify the necessary acts of dictatorship which the imperialist civil war forced upon the young soviet state. But we do accept and endorse the overall policy of the Bolsheviks.

For the exploiters everywhere October 1917 cast a long shadow over the whole twentieth century; for the exploited it lit up the path of liberation. Its effect will continue to be felt into the next century, until class exploitation has been destroyed.

The downfall of Stalinism is not the last chapter in a now closed book. On the contrary, Stalinism's demise has historically vindicated the struggle of Trotskyism, forged as it was in the struggle to defend the political, economic and social gains of October against Stalinist dictatorship. The challenge is to turn it into an organising centre of the vanguard and through this a mass force. Our understanding of the defence of the revolution after 1917 and the measures it necessitated is an integral part of that struggle.

NOTES

1 See S Farber, Before Stalinism (Polity Press 1990) and International Socialism 52 and 55

2 E H Carr, Bolshevik Revolution Vol 1 p180

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