



How the Russian revolution was won

Tue, 03/10/2006 - 08:14

Many myths surround the Russian revolution, the one most often told is that it was an undemocratic coup by a dictator-in-waiting called Lenin. This article dispels some of these myths and explains the mass character of the revolutionary movement amongst the workers and peasants. Importantly it outlines some of the lessons for revolutionaries today that fight for the victory of the working class over the bosses.

On 25 October 1917 the Second All Russian Congress of Soviets voted to take power and established the world's first soviet republic.

The year 1917 had begun very differently. Russia was a developing capitalist country with an autocratic Tsarist state. Large factories, with a small but highly concentrated working class, co-existed with a huge peasant population and an archaic state regime.

The contradictions within Russia were exacerbated by the war. By February opposition to the war and the economic crisis which ensued led to a massive general strike in the capital, Petrograd.

The spark that ignited the strike came from a strike of women workers on International Women's Day.

On the morning of 23 February women workers took to the streets demanding bread. They marched to neighbouring factories seeking support from male workers. By mid-morning ten factories were shut and 27,000 workers on strike, by the end of the day 61% of all factory workers in the Vyborg district, some 59,800 workers, were on strike.

In the following days the strike grew and the Tsar sent in troops to quell the workers. Women continued to play an important role as the revolution developed, here described by Trotsky:

"They go up to the cordons more boldly than men, take hold of the rifles, beseech, almost command: 'Put down your bayonets - join us!' the soldiers are excited, ashamed, exchange anxious glances, waver; someone makes up his mind first, and the bayonets rise guiltily above the shoulders of the advancing crowd. The barrier is opened, a joyous 'Hurrah!' shakes the air."

Soldiers deserted and mutinied. The Tsarist regime crumbled within days. It was replaced by the Provisional Government, made up of bourgeois politicians. But the workers who had made the revolution also built their own organisations: factory committees, workers' militia and the workers and soldiers' soviets.

The fall of Tsar Nicholas only served to deepen the contradictions at the level of state power. A situation of dual power began - that is, power was split between the bourgeoisie on the one hand and the working class on the other. This situation, a feature of revolutionary situations, could not last forever. Either the workers or the bosses would have to become the sole power in the land.

The majority of the delegates to the Petrograd Soviet including its Menshevik (reformist) leaders supported the provisional government. They saw the February uprising as a bourgeois democratic revolution which would logically result in a bourgeois government.

The soviets resolved to form an 'observation committee' to watch over the provisional government. They intended to establish strict control on behalf of the working masses who saw them as the voice of their struggles. The bourgeoisie meanwhile looked upon the provisional government as their bastion against those very same struggles.

For the working class to triumph they could not merely rely on the maturity of the objective situation, nor could they rely solely on the spontaneous struggle of the masses as had been proved by the failed revolution of 1905. A victorious socialist revolution requires a subjective force; in the subsequent October revolution that force was the Bolshevik party.

The Bolsheviks showed an ability to develop a strategically correct understanding of the February revolution and what followed. This was not automatic, it was forged through democratic debate within the party and through the experience of the living struggle.

Initially many leading Bolsheviks shared a view similar to that of the leaders of the Petrograd Soviet. These included the editorial board of Pravda, made up of Stalin, Muranov and Kamenev. They wrote:

"As far as we are concerned what matters now is not the overthrow of capitalism but the overthrow of autocracy and feudalism."

It was Lenin, at the time still in exile, who led the fight against this schematic line of thought. He saw the Russian Revolution as a component part of the international revolution against capitalism itself. In the soviets, militia and factory committees he saw the embryo of a state of an entirely new sort.

In his 'Letters from Afar' he wrote that the Petrograd Soviet should regard itself as the basis of a new government counterposed to the provisional government. Anyone arguing that the workers should support the provisional government would be 'a traitor to the working class', said Lenin.

On his return from exile Lenin codified his position in his 'April Theses' arguing that with the formation of the soviets the proletariat had attained a higher form of democracy than could ever be achieved under a parliamentary democracy.

The soviets were representative of all the exploited and oppressed groups. They were based on the principle of direct elections, recallability and the abolition of bureaucratic privilege. Lenin described going back to a parliamentary republic from the Soviet of Workers Deputies as a 'retrograde step'.

The 'April Theses' called for the 'abolition of the police, the army and the bureaucracy', and for all of these functions to pass to the whole armed people.

Lenin's allies within the party were the largely proletarian left wing. After three weeks of fierce debate and bitter criticism they eventually won out. The importance of this victory cannot be underestimated. Because of it the Bolsheviks were now armed with a programme with which they could win the masses to the goal of soviet power.

The mass of workers were deeply distrustful of the Provisional Government. Workers resolutions were sent direct to the soviets. Disenchantment with the war was leading more and more soldiers to join the soviets.

By June more than 20 million workers, soldiers and peasants were represented in the first All Russian Soviet Congress. The leaders of the soviets however, still gave support to the Provisional Government. It was in these circumstances that the Bolsheviks raised the slogan of 'All Power to the Soviets!'

The aim of this slogan was to force the soviet leaders, who were still mostly Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries (SRs), to fight for a workers' and peasants' government based on the soviets, and to end their compromises with the Provisional Government.

The slogan was in no way an indication that the Bolsheviks had illusions in the soviet leaders. Rather it was aimed at breaking the mass of people from their continued support for the reformist leaders.

It worked, Bolshevik support continued to grow. In the naval port of Kronstadt they, along with the Left SRs, had a majority in the soviet and declared themselves the sole power in the city. Fearful of the growing feeling amongst the masses the Provisional Government invited leaders of the Petrograd Soviet to join them.

In accepting this offer the soviet 'compromisers' steadily lost support amongst the workers and peasants. The Bolsheviks continued to exploit the contradiction of the reformists position, raising the slogan 'Down with the ten capitalist ministers' against those who had joined the government.

The Bolsheviks were gaining support in Petrograd but they were not as strong in the provinces. Lenin realised this but some on the far left of the party didn't. They raised the call for an insurrection.

Lenin argued against it, stating, 'if we're now able to seize power, it is naive to think that we would be able to hold it'. The basis of any form of revolutionary government would have to be the soviets, in which the Bolsheviks were still a minority.

Despite these warnings the soldiers, workers and sailors could not be restrained. The Bolsheviks were eventually proved right as the ill-timed insurgency led to a serious tactical defeat.

The defeat of the 'July Days' ushered in a period of counter-revolutionary repression. Workers and soldiers were beaten up and thrown into the canals. The presses of Pravda were smashed up and the Bolshevik headquarters were ransacked and seized. Many leading Bolsheviks were arrested and others were forced underground.

The victory against the workers led to a growing mood of confidence amongst the bourgeoisie. Brusilov the Commander-in-Chief of the army demanded the complete and total restoration of military discipline. Kerensky, the leader of the government whose own survival depended on his ability to balance the interests of the bourgeoisie with those of the soviets, played for time by dismissing him. The resulting right-wing revolt led to an attempted coup by General Kornilov.

At the same time support for the Bolsheviks amongst the workers began to recover. The Bolsheviks won majorities in elections in the working class districts of Petrograd. Of the delegates to the All Russian Factory Committees Conference held in August 82 per cent were Bolsheviks.

As Kornilov's forces marched on Petrograd soviets and factory committees across the city vowed to defend the revolution. The workers demanded arms and Kerensky had little option but to hand them over. The Bolsheviks utilised the united front tactic fighting alongside Kerensky against Kornilov, while keeping up a relentless critique of him and his Menshevik supporters.

These tactics proved a huge success. In September the Petrograd Soviet voted overwhelmingly for a Bolshevik resolution calling for a revolutionary workers' and peasants' government. They steadily won control of the majority of soviets across Russia.

The party had become the national party of the Russian working class. The slogan 'All Power to the Soviets!' could now only mean a Bolshevik led seizure of power.

Kerensky tried to shore up his failing regime, proposing a totally undemocratic five person directorate. Meanwhile he looked for an opportunity to move against the Bolsheviks.

At the beginning of October he attempted to move the garrison out of Petrograd, removing soldiers who were increasingly influenced by the Bolsheviks. The move caused an outcry. A meeting of the Egorsky Guards Regiment on 12 October called for soviet power and stated:

"The pulling out of the revolutionary garrison from Petrograd is needed only by the privileged bourgeoisie as a means of stifling the revolution."

On 21 October the Military Revolutionary Committee (MRC) established by the Petrograd Soviet to defend the revolution announced that no order should be considered valid unless countersigned by the MRC.

On 24 October Kerensky ordered the arrest of the MRC and the Bolshevik leaders, and the closure of the Bolshevik

press. By the early hours of 25 October the order had been countermanded and the presses were running again. The MRC had done more than just countermand Kerensky.

They ordered the insurrection that was to result in the creation of the first workers' state. The MRC's forces took control of the railway stations, junctions, the telephone exchange and the state bank. The provisional government of Alexander Kerensky had been overthrown.

Later that day Red Guards and sailors stormed the Winter Palace. Over the coming days and weeks victory was won throughout the towns and cities of Russia followed.

Such was the mass support of the Bolshevik-led revolution in Petrograd that hardly a shot was fired during the insurrection. Although there was a greater level of fighting in some other cities, across Russia as a whole it was precisely this majority support that enabled the Bolsheviks not only to launch a successful insurrection but usher in a workers' state able to withstand the terrible onslaught launched by the Russian bourgeoisie and its imperialist allies in the civil war that followed.

The Bolsheviks had resolved, in practice, the question that had so vexed the Russian Marxist movement in the preceding decades - namely what kind of revolution would overthrow the Tsar. The answer given by the Bolsheviks was clear - a workers', socialist revolution as part of a world revolution.

Source URL: <https://fifthinternational.org/content/how-russian-revolution-was-won>